

Islamic Councils - Who are they?

Islamic Councils are bodies that can advice or administer laws pertaining to Muslims or Islam within the civil laws of that country. The roles of Islamic councils are to see that the many and varied interests of the nation's Muslim community are looked after. Such organisations give practical shape and expression to the ties of faith and community that naturally bring Muslims of all social and cultural backgrounds together.

On a whole, Islamic councils represent Muslims in that particular country through consultation and cooperation with the government, other faith communities, service providers, the media, and the general public. They also promote an accurate, informed and positive understanding of Islam, Muslims and issues important to Muslims. Besides this, Islamic councils seek to promote understanding, cooperation, tolerance and respect between all faiths. Socially, such bodies hope to empower and encourage the Muslim community to continue to be actively, responsibly and positively integrated into the mainstream society of that nation. These are a list of services that may be provided by Islamic councils.

Prayers and Places of Worship

As part of their services, Islamic councils facilitate in the administration of the mosques or Islamic education system conducted within the mosque premises and may provide facilities for Islamic worship, including Friday and Eid prayers. Committees within the councils may circulate recommended guidelines for the sermons to be recited during the Friday prayers.

Education

Some Islamic councils work closely with madrasah (Islamic religious schools) to contextualise the Islamic sciences for the young following a recommended syllabus set by the education committee. Services such as liaising with international Islamic universities for student matriculation matters are also offered.

Logistics for Hajj (The Greater Islamic Pilgrimage) Pilgrims

The logistical demands of educating and taking care of Hajj pilgrims may be offered by some Islamic councils. In Singapore, registration for Hajj is mandatory, a system based on advanced registration and on firstcome first-served basis. monitored by MUIS (The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore)

Zakah (Distribution of Alms) system

Islamic councils may or may not provide special services to improve the welfare of disadvantaged groups in the Muslim community, through the Zakah system. Zakah is the 3rd pillar of Islam and is the determined share of wealth prescribed by Allah to be

distributed to the eight categories entitled to receive it. It is a symbol of Islamic social justice as Islam believes Zakah to be a form of worship which cleanses the soul, purifies and increases the wealth, while eradicating poverty. Islamic councils may or may not have campaigns to encourage Muslims to pay their Zakah through the councils' appointed representatives. From the collected Zakah, the Islamic councils would then distribute the gathered charities to the disadvantaged Muslims.

Halal Product Certification Systems

Some Islamic councils offer halal (food that is permissible for consumption in Islam) product certifications to parties who wish to enter the local or global halal market. A halal certificate is a document issued by an Islamic organization, usually the country's Islamic body, certifying that the products listed on it meet Islamic dietary guidelines, as defined by that certifying agency. Councils such as IFANCA (Islamic Food and Nutrition

Council of America) is internationally recognized as a halal certifying organization, staffed by qualified scholars, technical staff and administrators. It is registered as a not-for-profit organization in Illinois and is recognized by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and is approved by several halal regulatory agencies in countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and the UAE. Any food company (e.g. slaughter houses, eating outlets, bakeries) who wishes to be halal certified must meet the requirements of the halal certifying body of that country through preparedness, checks, recommendations and audits.

Some pseudo-councils such as zabihah.com have taken a step further by collating and informing the public of their halal certified directory of eating establishments and other companies who have set foot in the global halal industry, locally in the US and internationally, though the list may not be exhaustive. Such councils serves as public portals and directories to Muslims who are observant in their dietary laws. These councils also may or may not conduct regular audits to check the consistency of the halal standards required of the food company. In cases where the halal standards are compromised, it may be the responsibility of the council to announce (either in written or electronic media) of any new information of progress to the general Muslim public.

Some Islamic councils have departments that conduct many projects, programs, and activities which are designed to help in the process of molding the individual and reforming society at large and to offer humanitarian aid to neighbouring countries in times of disaster. This helps to strengthen the bond of humanity by serving all those in need anywhere in the world.

As a conclusion, Islamic councils are intended to be a vibrant coalition of grassroot Muslim activities and projects and institutions and individual talent and skills that make a positive and constructive contribution to meet the needs and the aspirations of the Muslim community in a period of recurring crises and anxious optimism within their beloved nation.