



Q&A with Hajj Abdalhamid Evans Senior Analyst at [Imarat Consultants](#)

You attended [MIHAS](#) and the [World Halal Forum](#), which you help to found in 2006. How did you find these events this year in Kuala Lumpur?

Both these events have really set the benchmark for Halal industry trade events, and 2008 was no exception. Coming in this year as a visitor to WHF, I was able to see so many friends, colleagues and industry professionals from all over the world, make new contacts and get all kinds of new ideas. This is what trade events are for. And Mihas of course generates hundreds of millions in trade deals every year. You can get an accurate snapshot of the Halal market at these events.

What were the significant highlights of the World Halal Forum for you?

The most significant event in the WHF was the appearance of Sheikh Saleh Kamel as the new WHF Chairman, and the Malaysian Prime Minister's endorsement of the International Halal Integrity Alliance, with RM15 Million funding over three years. We have yet to see what the outcome of these moves will be, but this potentially kicks the whole thing up into another gear.

Last year there were comments that the WHF, and the Halal industry in general needed the participation of our Arab brothers to take things forward to the next phase, and so these new moves are perhaps the beginning of this important step.

As president of the International Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ICCI) under the OIC, Saleh Kamel has the potential to a) inject funds, and b) to bring Arab stakeholders and c) to raise international awareness of the importance of the Halal market for the Muslim Ummah.

I would not be surprised to see the next WHF in Jeddah, for example, and that would certainly shift the centre of gravity in an interesting way. After all, the GCC is the biggest Halal consumer market in the world.

Some people have said that WHF was more political this year, in terms of speakers and themes. How do you see this?

Yes, the WHF had a more political slant to it. At first I was slightly critical of this, as the WHF was intended from the start to be a much-needed industry forum. But on reflection, I understood why the organisers took this route, and I recognise how important political goodwill and involvement is for the Halal movement, and I think they did an excellent job of yet again raising the overall profile of the industry.

Halal is an important political platform for Muslim politicians - anywhere in the world - and creating legal frameworks and trade regulations are all in the political arena, and we need our politicians to understand why the Halal sector is strategically important, for the public and for industry...for the economy.

You were involved in the formation of the Halal Industry Development Corporation in Malaysia in 2006-7. What is your view of the HDC now that it is formed?

The idea of the HDC was to give Malaysia's Halal industry more focus and direction, and to create one agency that was able to lead the many ministries and agencies that are involved in Halal. The reality is of course that there is a great deal of internal politics to deal with - perhaps more than I originally anticipated. This has made things difficult for the HDC directors, and I believe that they have a real challenge in front of them.

So progress has been slow, and maybe there has been too much talk, too many MOU's and not enough real action. In any case, now that their Halal Masterplan has been completed, we shall see how HDC tackles the very real challenges that face Malaysia's Halal sector.

HDC have announced that they are taking over certification from Jakim, and this could really go either way; it may be a good move, and it may be a real disaster. Jakim were slow, and there were certain criticisms of how they operated, but they are a Government agency, and that gave Malaysia's Halal certification a certain credibility. If HDC can retain the benefit of Jakim's good reputation, but improve on aspects like speed and transparency, they will have success. But this is a very real challenge, and having announced their intention, they really cannot afford to fail.

Now that you are not so involved in Malaysia, what kind of projects are you working on?

In many ways, the events in the Halal sector in Malaysia over the last few years sent ripples around the world, and we are seeing incredible activity in the Halal markets all over the world. So we made a conscious decision to be available for projects in other parts of the world. We are engaged in a project with the Brunei Darussalam Government at present, and are also involved to varying degrees with projects in the North America and Europe.

Tell us a bit about your activities in Brunei

Brunei Darussalam is a very interesting place, and despite its small size, Brunei has the capacity to play a very important role in the Halal market. Halal - while it is for everyone - is at its core an Islamic matter, and the leadership has to come from the Muslims, and in this respect Brunei is significant. As a Malay Islamic Monarchy ruled by a Sultan, Brunei is to some extent a small model Islamic nation; it still has a traditional Islamic structure in place.

Brunei's recent decision to diversify the economy away from an over-dependence on oil and gas has led to a greater focus on Halal, Islamic Finance and the Eco-tourism sectors. I find this significant, because all three of these are Halal-related, and they actually create a basis for a model Halal Market Economy.

Brunei have developed their own Halal standards as part of their Brunei Halal brand. Can you tell us a bit about this?

Part of Brunei's strategy in the Halal sector has been to develop world-class Halal standards, and they have done an excellent job in this respect, I would say they are probably the best in the world. Their standards not only cover slaughter and food preparation and handling, but they have also developed standards for auditing, accreditation and certification procedures, making them the most comprehensive Halal standards available anywhere in the world.

The Mufti's department has also published an excellent book of fatwas on Halal industry-related issues that is essential reading for anyone involved in the Halal industry. All of these publications will of course be available at the Brunei International Halal Market Conference and Expo in August.

Imarat Consultants are involved in Brunei's [International Halal Market Conference](#) this year; what have you got in store for us at [IHMC 2008](#)?

We of course attend a lot of Halal conferences around the world, and we are making an effort to ensure that the content at [IHMC 2008](#) is really relevant to the industry stakeholders attending. As most of the industry is made up of SME's we are bringing speakers who have real insight into how to succeed as a small enterprise in the Halal sector.

Plus we are focussing on the emerging new sectors such as pharma, ICT and tourism that are all now really part of the Halal market. We view Halal as a really expanding market, and see that opportunities are appearing way outside the food industry, and this is really encouraging. We want to open up awareness of the scope for expansion in non-traditional areas as well as the mainstream food-related sectors.

We are bringing several researchers and consultants as speakers, as well as producers. We want to avoid the scenario where the speaker is really giving you his marketing brochure disguised as a presentation! So we have chosen the speakers very carefully.

Can you tell us a bit about some of the speakers?

Well, we have invited Ahmad Adam, CEO of [Crescent Foods](#) in Chicago. He understands, from his own experience, what is needed to build a quality Halal chicken business, having built Crescent from scratch over the last 15 years.

He recognises the importance of going for quality, rather than quantity, as one cannot ever compete with the big producers in terms of quantity, so you have to find another route to success, and with Crescent he has really achieved this.

Halal is really all about quality, safety, health and balance, and Ahmad has a knowledge built up from experience over the years that is very valuable, especially to anyone - be they an SME or a government - wanting to get into the chicken business.

Ahmad Adam is also the driving force behind the newly-formed American Halal Association, an industry association whose aim is to build a strong foundation for the Halal producers, certifiers and other stakeholders in the USA.

Who else is lined up to speak at IHMC?

Selma Djukic, President of [White Owl Global Services](#), is a Bosnian Canadian pharma specialist with 20 years experience. She will be looking at the development of the Halal pharmaceutical sector, which is going to be one of the major industry developments in the next few years.

David Smith from [Global Futures and Foresight](#), who wrote the recent report on the phenomenal rise in Islamic tourism will be talking about the Halal hospitality sector, also set to be a major development in the coming years.

Saleh Lootah from [Al Islami](#) will be there, talking about how they have developed their brand from food production through retail and food service into restaurant chains and also Halal hotels. This is a significant exercise of brand development across neighbouring Halal sub-sectors.

Marco Tiemen from [LBB Teams](#), a Halal Cluster specialist will be looking at how the cluster approach is essential when designing Halal industrial parks, and how to go about creating an effective Halal cluster.

There are more individual speakers, but we are also having 2 open interactive sessions. The first will be to hear short success stories from regional SME's who have achieved a certain degree of success in both food and personal care sectors. It is really important to bring inspiration to small SME's starting out, and to build an good entrepreneurial spirit. There is so much opportunity, and so many obstacles for young entrepreneurs and they really need to be encouraged. Hearing about someone else's success and how they achieved it can be inspiring.

There is always talk about bringing together Shariah Scholars, scientists and industry professionals, and the need for this. Have you looked at this at all for IHMC 2008?

Yes, and this is perhaps the most exciting aspect of the IHMC this year. With the cooperation of the Mufti's department of Brunei Darussalam, we will be bringing leading Ulema with relevant knowledge of the Halal market to join with scientists and industry professionals to discuss, with the audience, some of the current issues in the Halal market.

I agree that it is essential to build this atmosphere of collaboration and inter-disciplinary openness in order to move the industry forward. There are many issues that really need this integrated approach to arrive at sound judgements that the market is really waiting for, all over the world.

We are actually very keen for Brunei to take a lead in this respect, and we believe that they are well suited to do so. Dr Farouk Gad, one of the world's leading Halal research scientists in the field of biomolecular and DNA applications for the Halal market is now based in Brunei, so this is a good start! And we hope that we can help to develop interest in this integrated approach.

The Conference is themed "The Emergence of the Halal Market Economy". Can you comment on why you chose this title?

We try to take a global perspective of the Halal market, and we have been following the overall development of this phenomenon for about 5 years now. We can see that there has been an evolution in terms of awareness and perception of Halal.

When we first started the [Halal Journal](#) at [KaschDia](#) in 2004, there was really no concept of a Halal market. I believe that part of our achievement at the Halal Journal was to create an awareness and also a language for the business evolution of the Halal market that brought a global recognition of the size and potential power of this market.

When we initiated the first WHF in 2006, it became clear that the Halal Industry was a very real entity. We brought the world's largest food manufacturer, the largest retailer and the largest restaurant chain together to talk about their involvement and commitment to Halal - and that was just the first morning!

This certainly sent a signal to the world that Halal is not just some minority sub-sector catering to religious preferences of the Muslims.

So now, looking ahead to what we see as the next stage of development - taking in the entire value chain of the Halal market, including Islamic Finance - you can see that a Halal Market Economy is an emerging reality of significant proportions.

So we are using the IHMC as an arena to bring a new level of perception to the market, that this is not just a market, it is really a new economic paradigm. We believe that this will be one of the most powerful market forces of the coming 10 to 20 years.

The Muslim population is so huge, almost 2 billion, and we are growing and developing fast, and the cross-over potential is so vast, that the full impact of Halal on the markets is going to be profound. The time has come.

I will be discussing some of these themes in my own presentation at IHMC, so to hear more, you will have to attend!

Brunei is a long way to go for a conference...

Well, that depends where you are starting from! It does require an effort to get there, I agree, but it is really worth it from several perspectives. In addition to the IHMC, there is the International Halal Products Expo that should have around 300 booths this year - it has doubled each year for the last two years, so we expect it to be a serious expo this year. 300 booths makes it the second largest in the world after Mihas.

But Brunei is really worth a visit anyway. It is a beautiful, peaceful place with a delightful climate and refreshingly clean air. It is the Switzerland of South east Asia!

How about projects in other parts of the world. We heard that you had been in the US and Canada?

Yes, there is significant interest and movement in the Halal sectors in both North American countries. The Canadian government actually have done some of the most comprehensive studies on the Halal market, both domestic and overseas, and they are seriously looking at the Halal market as an avenue to get Canadian beef back into the export market.

The Canadian Halal Exporters Association was formed last year, under David Hunter, and we expect to see some things moving there in the near future.

In the States, we are working closely with Ahmad Adam at Crescent Foods. He is really the driving force behind the American Halal Association, a project to provide a common platform for the various stakeholders in the industry.

It is of course not an easy task, and the first challenge is to bring the main players to the table to get a strong common agreement on how to proceed. The potential for the Halal industry expansion in the US is huge, but it really requires the stakeholders to tackle certain issues to let that expansion happen.

What are some of the major issues in the North American Halal scene?

I think the main issue, in terms of immediacy, is the question of awareness. There are of course many other matters, such as certification and other integrity issues, but all of these will be easier to tackle if there is greater awareness.

I always say that there are 5 key elements to drive the Halal sector forward; government, industry, certification, finance and the public. Awareness is needed across all of these zones, and when there is greater awareness, we can start to focus on a convergence of common interest. This is what really makes things move.

When there is a convergence of diverse elements, with a common interest to see the sector develop, then results start to come thick and fast - relatively speaking! This is what we saw in Malaysia, and we recognise that wherever you can get that same kind of convergence, you are going to see interesting developments happening.

Do you see this kind of convergence happening in the US?

We can certainly see the potential for it. The US Halal market is significant, even though it is relatively small, because what happens in the US always has an impact globally, whether its good or bad.

There are around 9 million Muslims in the US, and they make up an interesting demographic. Compared to the average American, the Muslims earn more, spend more on food, are better educated, younger, and more involved in local politics than average. Wayne State University did a good report on all of this, I am sure its on HalalFocus.com, and the figures are significant.

There is also a growing awareness that the advertisers are not targeting the Muslim consumer, and this is surely going to

change. Any group who collectively spend USD 170 billion a year are not going to be ignored by advertisers forever...whatever the international politics.

[A T Kearney's](#) recent report on '[Addressing the Muslim Market - can you afford not to?](#)' really brought home to me that this is all going mainstream in a big way. The report concludes that '**since the Muslims are the fastest growing consumer segment in the world, any company that is not considering how to serve them is missing a significant opportunity to affect both its top- and bottom-line growth.**'

While we have been saying this for some years, it is significant to us that this should come from A T Kearney, and we have no doubt that their conclusions are accurate.

So for us the North American Halal market is an interesting one, and we look forward to being more involved in the future, on both sides of the border.

And how about in Europe?

Europe is more complex, both geographically and culturally. The Muslim community is divided of course across the different EU countries, as well as being different in the country of origin, so the equation is more complex. But the market is of course huge, there are 30, 40, 50 million Muslims in Europe, depending on how you draw the boundaries.

The most interesting aspect of Europe is perhaps the potential in Eastern Europe, from the Balkans, Hungary, Poland and even Russia. There is a huge native European Muslim population in these relatively undeveloped economies, and there is enormous potential for growth.

I was recently at the [European Muslim Union](#) convention in Potsdam, and the presence of the indigenous European Muslims is clearly important and will play a significant role in the future of Europe. That is before we even talk about Turkey! And that is a whole other topic, one that we will leave till another day.

Any final thoughts?

I think that really the season for Halal is here, taken on a macro-level. There will be growth and development in the Halal market for a long time, and I strongly suggest, especially to the Muslims, to pay greater attention to it as an economic force that can change the world. Really.

Thank you!

You are welcome, and any feedback, questions and comments from readers is can be directed to me at info@imaratconsultants.com, we are always happy to talk more about these matters, it is our passion!