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Business

Mideast War Pushes Companies to Extend Diversity Programs to Faith Groups

Workers are asking employers to respond to rising Islamophobia and antisemitism. But office discussions about religion are complicated.

By EMMA GOLDBERG

When Nabeela Elsayed was speaking at a corporate conference several years ago and explained that she would miss the group dinner because she was fasting for Ramadan, she recalls, her manager responded: "Just don't fast." Ms. Elsayed, an executive coach who was previously chief operating officer for Walmart Canada, said she had heard many such slights when stepping away during the workday to pray.

For years, she told business leaders that their diversity, equity and inclusion programming should teach workers about anti-Muslim hate, antisemitism and other threats to religious groups, but rarely got meaningful responses. In recent weeks — since the start of the Israel-Hamas war — Ms. Elsayed has noticed a surge of interest from them on the issue.

Executives are facing mounting calls from their workers to talk about faith in diversity programs. They're scrambling to ensure the safety of Jewish and Muslim employees, while also trying to foster a sense of belonging across religious groups. As a result, they're confronting longstanding challenges in talking about religion as a part of workplace diversity — at a time when corporate commitments to diversity programming more broadly seem on shaky ground.

"In the 16 years I've been here, I have not seen before the kind of outreach we've received from companies trying to respond to their employees' needs," said the Rev. Mark Fowler, the head of Tanenbaum, a nonprofit that focuses on interreligious understanding.

Across the corporate world, invest-

ment in diversity, equity and inclusion ballooned after the killing of George Floyd in 2020 and subsequent protests. Openings for D.E.I. positions increased 174 percent between June and August 2020, according to data from Glassdoor, the jobs listing site.

The growth was short-lived. Layoffs and attrition since 2020 have hit D.E.I. roles at higher rates than other roles, according to a study of more than 600 companies by Revelio Labs released this year. Chief diversity officers were the only C-suite positions that experienced hiring declines last year, according to a report from LinkedIn.

Even when enthusiasm for D.E.I. work was swelling, companies were skittish about engaging faith groups in their diversity programming. The principle that church and state should be separate — as well as civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion — has encouraged some business leaders to separate church from the office as well. Many have left workers to facilitate conversations among themselves through employee resource groups, typically informal communities that gather for holiday celebrations or brown bag lunches.

"The U.S. has always had issues dealing with faith in any setting, whether we're talking about education or workplaces," said Stephanie Creary, an assistant professor of management at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. She noted that companies had even struggled with whether to label certain office areas "prayer rooms," "meditation rooms" or "wellness spaces," because they wondered: Should prayer be explicitly welcomed into the office?

Because executives tend to avoid addressing faith-related issues directly, they haven't developed expertise about what terms to use and what not to, or about the specific needs that faith groups have.

"When it comes to antisemitic and anti-Muslim language, we have less experience of what's OK and what's not OK to say," Ms. Creary said. But now that some business leaders are weighing in with statements on threats to religious groups, she hopes a revival in D.E.I. programming more broadly can follow.

"We are seeing many many Jewish leaders who perhaps weren't as engaged in race-related issues really wanting to understand how the issues affecting the Jewish community can become incorporated into D.E.I. practices," she said. "There's an opportunity there."

Take Ivan Kaufman, the chief executive of Arbor Realty Trust. Mr. Kaufman, who is Jewish, never used to consider it a priority to speak out about antisemitism in the workplace, he said, but in recent weeks his own worries about anti-Jewish hate have grown. He heard from friends who had taken down their mezuzot at home so as not to be openly identified as Jewish, or who wondered aloud whether they were safe going to synagogue.

"I can't tell you how many calls I get — 'Are you going to go to shul?'" he said.

That angst has cemented Mr. Kaufman's belief that his company should be vocally condemning antisemitism, including by signing on to the Anti-Defamation League's "Workplace Pledge to Fight Antisemitism," which the Jewish advocacy group started in the summer and circulated widely in the wake of the Hamas attacks on Oct. 7.

"Antisemitism is something I really

haven't spoken about that much because it's been in the shadows," Mr. Kaufman said. "Clearly now we speak out about it."

For many Muslim leaders, too, the wave of hate in recent weeks has prompted personal responses.

"As a person of Muslim faith, there's always experiences you go through — a lot of us after Sept. 11 went through experiences where we explained to everybody that not all two billion Muslims are bad," said Armughan Ahmad, the chief executive of Appen, an artificial intelligence company with roughly 1,000 employees. "How do you explain that discrimination in the workplace?"

In recent weeks, though, conversations about faith groups — particularly about the threat of antisemitism and Islamophobia — have come up more and more for Mr. Ahmad and his D.E.I. team. Appen put out a statement about the Israel-Hamas war, reminded staff about mental health support programs and signed the "Pledge to Listen" from the Coalition of Innovation Leaders Against Racism, which Mr. Ahmad co-founded in 2020.

At Massachusetts General Hospital in recent weeks, several dozen Jewish and Israeli health care workers and staff members shared their emotional responses to the war and antisemitism in a series of listening sessions. Dr. Mark Poznansky, a physician, and Elyse Park, a psychologist, planned the sessions as part of a Jewish employee resource group formed this year. They said they had been worrying about the well-being of their own Jewish families and felt isolated from some colleagues and friends, who they felt had not reached out to check in.

"It starts with the silence," said Dr. Park, who directs the research program in health promotion and resiliency intervention at the hospital. "It starts with the not checking in, the lack of understanding and the connectivity about how this impacts us greatly."

Their sense of isolation made the two doctors wonder: Why hadn't their workplace's extensive D.E.I. programming focused on faith groups?

"There was really no place, and it needed to be created," Dr. Park said.

The Anti-Defamation League pledge has more than 200 signatories, newly including J. Crew, Creative Artists Agency, Google, Apollo Global Management and the PGA Tour. The pledge asks companies to address antisemitism in their D.E.I. programming, speak out against hate on social media, provide religious accommodations and support Jewish employees by creating affinity groups.

Diversity programming often focuses on groups that are underrepresented in the corporate world, said Adam Neufeld, the Anti-Defamation League's chief impact officer, and that hasn't been a problem recently for Jews in many industries.

"There's a general lack of understanding of antisemitism because it operates so differently from other kinds of bias," Mr. Neufeld said, adding that the ADL also saw a spike of interest in its workplace programming after Kanye West's antisemitic posts on X in October 2022.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations has fielded over 2,000 of reports of anti-Muslim hate, including in workplaces, since early October. The swell of Islamophobic incidents has reminded some, including Ms. Elsayed, of what Muslims experienced at work after the Sept. 11 attacks, a wave of hate that she felt business leaders largely ignored.

"What we're seeing demonstrates we haven't made as much progress as I thought," she said. "It's difficult to hold tension in workplaces, but we should have enough compassion to listen to people's experiences and say, 'How can I help?'"

Ms. Elsayed, though, feels that many business leaders have been quieter about anti-Muslim incidents than about anti-Jewish hate. This month, she asked 11 chief executives whether their organizations had spoken out about recent waves of hate and found that "in most cases they either haven't responded at all, or they responded specifically around antisemitism."

Goldman Sachs announced in October that it would expand its employee resource group focused on "religion and culture," which is open to people of diverse religious backgrounds. The group was previously open only to employees

in Europe, the Middle East and Africa; now it will include employees in American offices because of new interest.

"We think that bias or hate against anyone is unacceptable, whether it's antisemitism, whether it's hate against people in the Black community, in the Muslim community, in the Asian community — any form of hate and bias is unacceptable," David Solomon, the bank's chief executive, said in an interview with Fox Business. (Mr. Solomon has been outspoken about the Israel-Hamas war.)

Some business leaders are weighing whether to create specific employee groups for every religion or an umbrella organization focused on interreligious issues, Ms. Creary of the Wharton School said. Many are struggling to determine what sort of language might be offensive to one faith group even if it's affirming to another.

"There's concern about having dialogue facilitated by people who are skilled," Ms. Creary said. "Because so many of these issues go back millenniums."

And as pledges from executives proliferate — whether it's people signing on to the ADL's letter, participating in the Council on American-Islamic Relations's webinar on "Work, H.R. and Palestine" or, like Mr. Solomon at Goldman Sachs, expanding existing resource groups — some D.E.I. leaders worry: How long will it last?

They note lingering frustration over a lack of corporate accountability to racial justice commitments made after the killing of Mr. Floyd. "Right now we have Black employees saying companies have dropped the ball on making progress on all the commitments they made in 2020," Ms. Creary said.

"This might be that moment for Jewish and Muslim colleagues," she continued. "Organizations invest all these resources in rising to the occasion to create inclusive workplaces, but three years from now it might trickle out."

Emma Goldberg is a business reporter covering workplace culture and the ways work is evolving in a time of social and technological change.