

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND NITAQAT STATUS IN SAUDI ARABIA

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ABSTRACT

The Nitaqat program is the latest in the Saudization policies to increase the number of Saudi workforce in the local labor market and to reduce the heavy reliance on foreign labors in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We argue that hiring decisions made by private sector organizations are not entirely based on government mandates alone. We propose that the internal organizational characteristics are also important in determining the hiring decision. Applying resource-based view, we demonstrate how organizational culture, leadership style, and human resource management practices could play a key role toward such decision and hence the Nitaqat status.

Keywords: Organizational culture; nitaqat status; Saudi Arabia.

I. INTRODUCTION

After the discovery of oil, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been heavily relying on foreign workforce to develop its economy due to shortage of qualified workforce (Mashood, Verhoeven, & Chansakar, 2009; Randeree, 2012). The dominance of foreign labor in the Saudi economy has caused high unemployment among the nationals and other social and security issues (Al Dosary & Rahman, 2005). These reasons have prompted the Saudi government to implement a series of policies, known as Saudization. Introduced since the mid-1990s, Saudization can be understood as a set of government policies aimed at increasing the number of Saudi nationals employed by the public and private organizations in the Kingdom (Al Dosary & Rahman, 2005; Fakeeh, 2009; Mashood et al., 2009). The latest introduced policy is the Nitaqat, which assigns companies in the private sector a special rating depending on the percentage of local workforce employed.

However, the results of Saudization have been mixed at the very best. Studies showed that while Saudization policies have helped increase the proportions of local workforce in the public sectors, the private sector has remained largely unaffected by it (Al Dosary & Rahman, 2005; Kenawi, 2011; Ramady, 2013). The criticism has been also directed at the Nitaqat initiative. Specifically, concerns have been raised regarding the effectiveness and economic feasibility of the policy, and the degree to which firms in certain sectors would be able to match the requirements (Ramady, 2013).

Literature on Saudization and more recently on Nitaqat is often limited to the criticism of the government initiatives and suggestion of the prescriptive actions to increase Saudi workforce integration into the private sector (Randeree, 2012; Torofdar, 2011). Researchers generally view private firms as being reactive to the legal constraints placed by the government in an attempt to increase the number of Saudis in the workforce. However, such explanations are incomplete since they fail to explain the variations in the hired number of Saudis among the firms of the same industry

and size. Indeed, when the Nitaqat was established, such variations became evident because in every sector and for every company size, there were firms that fell into every category based on the percentage of hired Saudi nationals.

Inconsistency among private firms in terms of the local workforce inclusion could be explained by the dynamics of the internal organizational system and characteristics, which are rarely explored. Even though external pressures drive organizational behavior of the private sector firms, internal factors may shape their response to such pressures. This idea is expressed in the growing body of literature focusing on the internal factors affecting organizational compliance with the regulations (Howard-Grenville, 2007; Pache & Santos, 2010). Moreover, organizational level factors have been consistently shown to influence the decision-making processes and performance of the firms (Delmas & Toffel, 2004; Jones, 2010). Toward this, we propose organizational culture as an internal organizational characteristics that may have bearing on the Nitaqat status of private sector firms in the Kingdom. Since the Nitaqat focuses on organizational human resources, its outcomes can be used interchangeably with hiring practices, as Nitaqat connotes the idea of hiring Saudis into the workforce.

Our theoretical argument on the role of organizational culture in determining hiring decision of Saudi workforce and hence the Nitaqat status is grounded within resource-based perspective, which essentially argues that organizations could enhance their competitive advantage through the development and utilization of their internal resources and capabilities. Toward this end, we organize this paper as follows: First, we shall introduce briefly the Nitaqat program followed by a brief literature on labor market in Saudi to establish the context of our propositions. Next, we argue how organizational culture could play a role in hiring Saudi workforce by private sector organizations in Saudi and hence their Nitaqat status from the resource-based perspective. Finally, some concluding remarks are presented.

2. NITAQAT AND SAUDIZATION POLICY

For a long time, the labor market of Saudi Arabia has been relying strongly on foreign labor. Though industries with the highest proportion of Saudis are utilities (electricity, water, and gas) with about 39% of the industry employees and social services (community, social, and personal) with about 32%, other industries fare significantly lower in this regard especially in the agricultural sector, which is almost entirely made up of non-Saudi employees (SAMA, 2011). To reduce such reliance, the quota systems in Saudi Arabia were introduced. But they proved to be inefficient especially in relation to the private sector.

The Nitaqat, introduced in 2011, is a policy aimed at increasing the number of Saudi employees in the private sector to replace the Saudization quotas, which were earlier implemented but without much success due to the rigidity of the system. Unlike its predecessors, the Nitaqat applies a flexible system of metrics which requires different representation of Saudis as a percentage of organizational workforce. Nitaqat, which means “categories” in Arabic, classifies organizations based on the percentage of Saudis employed: red (lowest percentage), yellow, green, and premium (highest percentage).

The Nitaqat policy applies different requirements for organizations of different industry and size. In terms of size, five groups are created: micro (0–9 employees), small (10–49 employees), medium (50–499 employees), large (500–2999 employees), and giant (3,000+ employees) (Saudi Hollandi Capital, 2012). Larger organizations under the Nitaqat have higher requirements in terms of Saudis employed. In terms of economic activity, organizations are differentiated by sector (41 in total), where different requirements for each Nitaqat segment apply. Sectors with the traditionally large percentages of expatriates, like agriculture or construction, have lower percentage requirements than sector where Saudis traditionally contained substantial percentage of workforce (e.g., banking and shipping).

Under the Nitaqat, private organizations are evaluated in terms of percentage of local workers to the total number of employees (Saudi Hollandi Capital, 2012). The percentage is measured based on a thirteen week moving average

to ensure consistency of the hiring policies. The obtained percentage is matched against the type of organization's economic activity and size to place the organization within one of four segments as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Classification of Organizations Based on the Nitaqat

Type of status	Interpretation	Note
Excellent	Entities achieving superior nationalization performance with the highest percentage of local employees.	Green and excellent companies represent the top half entities with same size and economic activity.
Green	Entities achieving superior nationalization performance with good percentage of local employees.	
Yellow	Entities achieving below average nationalization performance with lower percentage of local employees.	These firms represent the bottom one fifth percentile of entities with the same size and economic activity.
Red	Entities achieving poor nationalization performance by hiring the lowest percentage of local employees.	

Source: Saudi Hollandi Capital (2012)

Placement in each of the segments has either positive or negative consequences for each organization. The companies in Green and Excellent segments enjoy additional foreign worker visas and are allowed to hire expatriates from the organizations in Yellow and Red sectors. Consequently, Yellow segment organizations are restricted to issue working visas for over six years, while Red segment organizations are not allowed to issue any additional visas at all. Yellow and Red segment organizations are given nine and six months to move into the Green zone by hiring more Saudis before the sanctions apply (Saudi Hollandi Capita, 2012).

3. THE SAUDI LABOR MARKET

Starting from the late 1980s, researchers have investigated the possible challenges and obstacles to Saudization efforts in the private sector. In general, challenges to Saudization efforts in the private sector can be divided into three broad categories: structural issues, employer issues, and workforce issues. Structural issues are reflected in the mismatch of the employment, educational, and administrative systems of the Saudi government (Alogla, 1990; Al-Ajaji; 1996). Employer issues are reflected in unwillingness to hire Saudis for different reasons. The rapid development of Saudi economy and the explosion of the private sector were claimed to be main cause for the expansive hiring of foreign workers who possessed the required skills and qualifications to meet the requirements of the private businesses (Al-Hassan, 1988; Alogla, 1990; Randeree, 2012). Eventually, the entire private business sphere in the Kingdom became reliant on foreign labor and saw no local alternatives to it. At the same time, foreign workers have proved to be more productive, reliable, and less demanding than the local workforce. Lower risk and costs of employing foreigners were mentioned as the reasons driving private businesses into rejecting Saudi nationals (Al-Ajaji, 1996; Al Ghaith & Al Maashoog, 1996).

Workforce issues are reflected in social, cultural, and economic barriers that prevent Saudis from active participation in the private sector labor market (e.g., Alogla, 1990; Mackey, 1990). Al-Ajaji (1996) showed that Saudis were reluctant to take positions in the private sector because public sector jobs offer higher pay, job security, better working conditions, prestige, and provide better promotion opportunities, and career growth. Al- Towajiri (1992) also emphasized stability of jobs in the public sector and wrote that relocation issues might play role in Saudis'

reluctance to seek jobs in the private sector. Other studies mentioned the importance of mental influences and traditional beliefs in choosing the employment sectors. More recent studies showed that the issues identified by the early Saudization researchers are persistent in the program today (Ibrakhimkhan, 2006; Ramady, 2013; Torofdar, 2011).

4. STRATEGIC RECRUITMENT AND RESOURCE-BASED PERSPECTIVE

Since Saudization and, later, the Nitaqat, are the policies implemented with the goal of increasing representation of Saudi employees in the private sector in the long term, recruitment practices by the private sector firms should be considered from a strategic perspective. Literature increasingly views recruiting as a significant contributory practice to sustainable organizational performance (Gully et al., 2013; Yu & Cable, 2012). As a strategic initiative, effective recruitment is believed to provide two major forms of fit: horizontal and vertical (Gully et al., 2013). Horizontal fit refers to the alignment of recruitment with other practices and aspects of organizational HRM strategy. Researchers noted that organizations need to align their recruitment practices so that they effectively complement each other to achieve the strategic outcomes (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Wright & Snell, 1998). On the other hand, vertical fit refers to how well the recruitment strategy is aligned with the external context and organizational strategy (Delery, 1998; Wright & McMahan, 1992). This type of fit ensures that the outcomes of recruitment are in line with the social, competitive, and legal demands of the labor market and the environment in which organizations operate (Delery, 1998).

The importance of strategic recruitment within the context of the Saudi private sector can be grounded within Resource-Based View (RBV). RBV of strategic management focuses on the organizational resources and capabilities that help them achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Mahoney & Pandian, 1992). This approach views organizations as collections of resources which can be used to attain competitive advantage over the rivals (Barney, 1991). It provides an internally focused perspective of how organizations define their resource needs, obtain and develop the resources to get a competitive edge (Hillman, Withers, & Collins, 2009).

The RBV applies the principle of heterogeneity to explain why some organizations are more successful than the others. Since each organization has a unique collection of acquired and developed resources, there are substantial variations in the way each organization plans, organizes, and runs its activities (Barney, 1991). Consequently, organizations that possess more valuable, less imitable, and rarer resources are those that obtain competitive advantage and enjoy strategic success (Barney, 2001; Conner, 1991). The majority of scholars within the RBV tend to agree that intangible resources have much stronger chance to contribute to the competitive advantage because they are harder to recreate and imitate by the competitors (Barney, 2001; Escobar & Vredenburg, 2011; Oliver, 1997). For these reasons, organizational systems, such as organizational culture, are likely to strongly contribute to organizational success within RBV (Barney, 1991; Escobar & Vredenburg, 2011).

5. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

5.1 ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND NITAQAT STATUS

The RBV initially treated organizational culture as a source of differentiation and competitive advantage (Barney, 1991) because, being intangible in nature, culture is difficult to copy and apply in the real world (Fiol, 1991). But organizational culture has been used consistently as a predictor of strategic outcomes by RBV researchers (Fiol, 1991; Genc, Ozbag, & Esen, 2013; Klein, 2011; Russo & Fouts, 1997). Organizational culture can be understood as a collective behavior of organizational members and the meanings that they attach to their actions within organizational context and in relationships with the organizational stakeholders. According to Schein (2009), organizational culture encompasses a wide variety of things, such as, organizational goals, values, norms, visions, beliefs, ideologies, symbols, and habits. Because cultures differ greatly from organization to organization, every newcomer is introduced to the

collective assumptions that encompass the culture of the organization to develop a certain way of thinking, behaving, and working (Deal & Kennedy, 2000; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Schein, 1992).

Organizational culture is often considered one of the major components in achieving organizational goals and objectives as well as in facilitating the process of organizational change (Adeyoyin, 2006). Hence, organizational culture may become supporting or detrimental to certain types of activities, organizational practices as well as to organizational performance in general (Kefela, 2010). Therefore, organizations may differ in terms of hiring processes based on their dominant cultures. In fact, more than two decades ago, Bowen, Ledford, and Nathan (1991) argued that hiring an individual is not only based on skills and competence, but also on his/her fit into the specific organizational culture. Although there is no solid systematic empirical research investigating the role of organizational culture in hiring (Huffcutt, 2011; Stainback, Tomaskovic, Devey, & Skaggs, 2010), scholars often stick to Bowen et al.'s claim and argue that organizational culture does have an impact on employment decisions (Rivera, 2012). Previous studies (e.g., Aldhuwaihi, Shee, & Stanton, 2011; Awadh & Wan Ismail, 2012) have demonstrated that organizational culture could be associated with job satisfaction and employee retention, thereby suggesting the relationship of culture with employee-related organizational practices. Since organizational culture has been discovered as a significant factor in influencing these aspects of employment, it is likely that it would also influence hiring practices.

The Competing Values Framework developed by Cameron and Quinn (1999) is one of the many theoretical approaches to understanding organizational culture. According to Cameron and Quinn, organizational cultures can be distinguished on the bases of goals: internal versus external focus and flexibility versus stability. The resulting cultural quadrant defines four types of organizational cultures: Clan Culture (internally oriented and flexible), Adhocracy (externally oriented and flexible), Market Culture (externally oriented and controlled), and Hierarchy Culture (internally oriented and controlled). Clan Culture represents a friendly and open place to work resembling an extended family. Such cultures instill high degree of organizational loyalty and traditions. In terms of human resources, Clan Cultures place emphasis on their long term development and close ties to the organization and to the working community. Teamwork, participation, and consensus are the driving principles of Clan Cultures. Consequently, a core organizational belief is in trust and commitment to employees, which would reply in the same manner. Organizations with Clan Cultures are expected to be more inclined to hire Saudi nationals because they place value in all types of human resources even in the absence of the external stimuli to do so.

Adhocracy Culture creates a dynamic and entrepreneurial place to work. Organizational leaders in such cultures encourage innovation and risk taking and are willing to do so themselves. Adhocracy Cultures place high value in thinking outside of the box and commitment to experimentation. Their long-term goals are growth and competitive edge through the creation and use of unique and highly valued products and services. Adhocracy Cultures encourage competitiveness inside and outside of the organization. Because of this and the idea of strong growth through the use of internal resources, Adhocracy Cultures are expected to be less prone to hire Saudis due to their perceived low productivity and lack of innovativeness.

Hierarchy Culture represents a structured, formalized place, with the leaders coordinating the activities and focusing on efficiencies. In such cultures, all processes and procedures are governed by strict rules and hierarchy of positions. Hierarchy Cultures are concerned about stability and efficiencies in the long run. They are not prone to taking risks; instead, they aim to preserve and improve what they have. Security and predictability are the key features of such organizations. Hierarchy Culture organizations are likely to be less prone to hire Saudi nationals if they have not historically hired them and more willing to hire Saudis if they have done so. Due to their strong reference to traditions and performance and conservative nature, willingness to hire nationals in such organizations will be based largely on the previous outcomes of their employment arrangements.

The final organizational culture defined by Cameron and Quinn (1999) is Market Culture. Organizations practicing such cultures are highly competitive by nature. They are strictly result-oriented and focus on fast and quality job completion based on the established criteria. In relation to human resources, Market Cultures are inclined to set clear goals and contingent rewards as the means of motivation for the employees. Leaders in such organizations are normally very demanding and emphasize the “winning” approach. As such, internal competition in such organizations is high, and the best performers are rewarded accordingly. Market Culture organizations are expected to be less likely to hire Saudis considering their focus on results and their highly competitive internal environments. They will be less likely to follow what is morally right to do in terms of hiring and focus instead on hiring the employees with the highest potential to contribute to the corporate success.

Therefore, the following proposition is formulated:

Proposition 1: Organizational culture will influence the Nitaqat status of a private sector organization.

6. CONCLUSION

The Nationalization or Saudization programs have been aggressively implemented in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to address the imbalances in the Saudi labor market which has been reliant strongly and heavily on foreign labor to develop the national economy. However, despite much attempt to nationalize the jobs to the local Saudi workforce in the private sector organizations, such programs have been met with little success, prompting the Saudi government to introduce the Nitaqat program. While the success of such program is yet to be materialized, we argue that external government pressure to nationalize jobs is limited to help explain hiring outcomes. Instead, we propose that the culture of the organization may also play a key role in determining hiring decisions of these private sector organizations to hire Saudi workforce. Using the resource-based view as our underpinning theoretical justification, we develop arguments on how the internal system works to influence hiring decisions and hence the Nitaqat status.

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