

# HPG Briefing

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HUMANITARIAN POLICY GROUP

**Jonathan Benthall**  
Honorary Research Fellow  
Department of Anthropology  
University College London

## About HPG

The Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute is Europe's leading team of independent policy researchers dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice in response to conflict, instability and disasters.

## In brief

- This HPG Briefing Paper traces the roots of charitable action in Islam, and explores the role of religion in the development of Islamic conceptions of humanitarian relief.
- It argues that 11 September and its aftermath have brought into focus a number of debates concerning the relationship between Islam and the West. These debates have important implications for humanitarian action.
- Examining Islamic traditions of philanthropy unsettles preconceived ideas of the West as a privileged aid provider to the disempowered non-Western world.
- As with Western organisations, Islamic humanitarian organisations need to be understood within a broader political and cultural context.



Overseas Development Institute

111 Westminster Bridge Road  
London SE1 7JD

Tel: +44 (0)20 7922 0300

Fax: +44 (0)20 7922 0399

ODI email: [odi@odi.org.uk](mailto:odi@odi.org.uk)

HPG email: [hpgadmin@odi.org.uk](mailto:hpgadmin@odi.org.uk)

Website: [www.odi.org.uk](http://www.odi.org.uk)

## Humanitarianism, Islam and 11 September

### Introduction

Neither the word 'humanitarianism' nor 'charity' has an exact equivalent in Arabic, the formal language of Islam. Nonetheless, injunctions to be generous towards those in need are certainly part of Islamic doctrine; the emphasis on charitable giving is at least as great as in any other religious tradition, and Islam is justly credited with having developed the principles of a welfare state long before Christian Europe.

While Western charity has become a mainstream topic for historians, its equivalent in the Islamic world has only recently begun to be studied with equal seriousness. Despite the special status within Islam of Arabic as the language of divine revelation, and of the sacred pilgrimage centres in Saudi Arabia, the Middle East has long ceased to be the demographic centre of gravity. Fewer than 15% of Muslims are Arabs, and some 69% live in Asia. However, research on Islamic charities has tended to focus on Sunni Muslim populations in the Arab-Islamic world, Pakistan, Muslim Africa and the Balkans.

Many Muslims present a picture of Islam as the undivided *umma* or community of believers. Often, the image of Islam among non-Muslims is equally monolithic. One of Islam's great strengths has been that, like Christianity, it has been able to transcend ethnic and linguistic divides, and maintain a high degree of commonality in its buildings and rituals despite the lack of centralised authority. However, scholars of the Islamic world emphasise that it is as heterogeneous as Christendom, and has been much influenced by modern Western-style nationalism. Moreover, Islam is notable

for its ability to adapt to local people's beliefs and practices, provided that they commit themselves to a few basic articles of faith. The vast majority of Muslims have inherited their religious status by birth, and do not necessarily regard it as the foreground of their daily lives, so much as a taken-for-granted backdrop. Few belong to Islamist movements and even fewer are given to violent extremism.

Islamic welfare and relief agencies in their modern form date back to the time of the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967. Some Islamic organisations are organs of autocratic states; others are entirely independent of government. Some concentrate on proselytising and spreading the Islamic faith. Others argue in favour of the concept of religion as a matter of individual choice, and seek to work more cooperatively with their secular and Christian counterparts. Many international Islamic agencies classify themselves as NGOs and use the jargon of Western aid professionals; their techniques of publicity and fund-raising are clearly borrowed from Western counterparts. British Muslim agencies, for instance, emulate many Christian organisations in seeking as much common ground as possible with other faiths. The tension between maintaining a distinctive religious character, and encouraging the professionalisation of relief, remains a significant issue for Islamic welfare and relief organisations.

### Humanitarianism and religion in the West

The extensive literature on Western humanitarianism seldom does justice to its religious traditions. Western humanitarianism was moulded by

**Box 1: A 'clash of civilisations'?**

Some writers, notably the American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, have posited a 'clash of civilisations', especially between Islam and the West. Huntington synthesises nineteenth-century balance of power principles with definitions of 'civilisations' as the highest unit of cultural analysis. The civilisations he identifies are the Western, the Christian Orthodox, the Islamic, the Hindu and the Chinese. Since 11 September, Huntington's work has been credited with predictive power. It underlies some of the thinking of the current US administration, and his book is reportedly a best-seller in the Middle East.

The thesis has been sharply criticised for underrating influences and inter-dependencies between 'civilisations', for being politically inflammatory and for its emotive use of language. Some aspects of Huntington's thesis nonetheless merit reflection, such as the attempt to avoid ethnocentrism, his interest in the heritage of religious values in different civilisations, and his notion that states' interests are not the only or primary organising principle for international or transnational relations. In particular, Huntington suggests that the absence of an accepted 'core state' within Islam, and the consequent competition for this status, limits the cohesion of the Muslim world, and undermines stability.

Catholic monastic orders, by the Geneva Calvinist founders of the Red Cross, by the Salvation Army, by the Leprosy Mission and by the Oxford Quakers who helped to found Oxfam. Church organisations dominated international aid until the Nigerian civil war of the late 1960s, with the founding of the secular agency Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). Even today, strands of Christian humanitarianism are strongly represented by Caritas, World Vision, the Order of Malta, Christian Aid and the Nordic churches. President George W. Bush's controversial White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives is currently restricted to domestic US welfare programmes, but may eventually be expanded. Although it is likely that practising Christians are in a minority among the personnel who work for Western humanitarian agencies, the West is widely perceived as Christian, and the liberal humanism underpinning Western humanitarianism, even in its 'secular' form, is arguably itself underpinned by a heritage of Judaeo-Christian values.

### Non-state actors operating from or within the Muslim world with an interest in relief

#### The Aga Khan Foundation

The Aga Khan Foundation is formally a non-denominational development agency, but is strongly identified with the Ismaili community – a Shia Muslim sect which has spread over many parts of East Africa and Asia. Set up in 1967 as a private foundation under Swiss law, its annual income is about \$100 million. It is well-known for its strong tradition of solidarity and philanthropy, and it enjoys stronger relations with Western NGOs than with more mainstream Muslim organisations.

#### The Edhi Foundation

The Edhi Foundation was built up from nothing in Pakistan by a refugee from India at the time of Partition, Abdul Sattar Edhi,

who left school at the age of 13. Funded by Muslim alms, it is now prominent in emergency relief, medical care and refugee aid. Austere in his lifestyle and seen as untainted by corruption, Edhi is supported by Pakistanis in all walks of life.

#### Red Crescent societies

The first Red Crescent society was founded by the Ottomans in 1877. Today, there are 30 national societies, carrying out a wide variety of functions. Some are of major national importance, such as the large Iranian society with its expertise in earthquake relief; others, such as the organisation in Syria, boast an impressive branch structure with strong local participation. Although Red Crescent societies are supposed to be non-confessional, many have acquired a characteristically Muslim flavour. Relations with the Muslim national societies are a matter of special concern to the Federation and its sister organisation, the International Committee of the Red Cross, partly because of the issue of the emblem (the red cross has caused problems since the organisation was founded), but also because of the need for the Movement as a whole to demonstrate its commitment to its principles across different cultural traditions.

#### Quasi-government organisations

In many Arab countries, Islam is used to enhance the legitimacy of quasi-governmental agencies. One example is the International Islamic Relief Organisation (IIRO), based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The organisation was founded by the Saudi Arabia-based Muslim World League in 1978. By the 1990s, it had become the largest Islamic relief agency. In 2001, it is reported to have spent some \$33m on 2,800 projects in about 95 countries. Funding is largely from Saudi citizens and businesses. Inter-governmental Islamic organisations are also active. During the Afghan conflict in the 1980s and the Bosnian war in the mid-1990s, state-sponsored Islamic aid agencies competed for influence not only with Western agencies, but also with each another.

#### Shiism

Shia Muslims comprise about a tenth of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims. Shiism is the official branch of Islam in Iran, where charitable foundations were set up after the Revolution in 1979 with assets confiscated from the Shah's court. The huge size of investments under clerical control has led to accusations of corruption. Some of these foundations have been active internationally.

A unique offshoot of Iranian Shiism is Hizbollah ('party of God'). Hizbollah is marked by the Shia doctrines of self-sacrifice and martyrdom that, in the mid-1980s, generated the first suicide bombings in the region. Hizbollah manages a network of hospitals and other welfare and educational services, including the Shahid ('martyr') Foundation, set up to support casualties of the war with Israel and their families, and Jihad al Bina ('construction'), which aims to improve conditions in areas of Lebanon devastated by conflict. Through these and other initiatives, Hizbollah has won a powerful political base. However, like other Islamist movements it is split internally between moderate and radical factions.

#### Sunni Islam

Sunni Islamist organisations typically receive funding and support from Saudi sources. They are most effective domestically. In Egypt and Algeria, grass-roots networks provide extensive welfare and

disaster relief. The militant Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas combines an extensive welfare and education programme with political activities, extending at times to attacks on Israeli targets. Hamas raises substantial funds from Muslims overseas, some 10% of which is believed to be spent on armed resistance. In Jordan, the Muslim Brothers have a similar policy on welfare, and engage in moderate opposition to the Hashemite monarchy and to any 'normalisation' of Arab–Israeli relations. These organisations' charitable departments tend to concentrate on service delivery, and on simple development programmes such as income-generating schemes.

### Agencies in the UK

There are also important Islamic charities in countries with Muslim minorities. In the UK, the two major British Muslim agencies are Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid. Islamic Relief, founded in 1984 by an Egyptian doctor, has fund-raising branches in several other Western countries. It has adopted an impartial and neutral position in its humanitarian action, which allows assistance to be used to help people regardless of their religious affiliation. The slightly smaller Muslim Aid insists that its work should be used to benefit Muslims only. Both agencies have adopted the standards of accountability that prevail among their non-Muslim equivalents: strict rules operated by audit authorities and the UK government's Charity Commission; and conditions imposed by the British government and the European Union as major donors and partners.

### Common features

While the world of Islamic philanthropy is as heterogeneous as is its Western counterpart, the shared religious tradition that underpins it means that there is a familial resemblance between agencies, and some common features can be identified.

#### Box 2: *Zakat, sadaqa and waqf*

*Zakat* is one of the five 'pillars' of the religion (the others are faith, prayer, fasting and pilgrimage, or the *hajj*). *Zakat* is used as a fund-raising device by charities both in the Islamic world and among Muslims resident in Western countries. British Islamic charities supply their supporters with tables to enable them to calculate their *zakat* liability. *Sadaqa* is voluntary alms, or giving over and above *zakat*.

*Zakat* signifies the obligation to donate one-fortieth of one's assets every year to a specific list of eight categories of people. These are (to borrow the most usual descriptions): poor people; the destitute; those employed to administer the *zakat*; those who might be converted to Islam, or assist in the cause; slaves; debtors; those committed to the 'way of God'; and, finally, travellers in need.

*Waqf* is the equivalent of a charitable foundation in Europe. Almost all Muslim countries have nationalised their *waqfs* over the last two centuries. Although Ministries of Awqaf are now generally limited to looking after mosques and religious schools, the institution has been revived in several countries as a vehicle for charitable activity with an Islamic face.

### References to religious tradition

These include allusions to key concepts such as *zakat*, *sadaqa* and *waqfs* (see Box 2), the use of familiar Quranic verses and *hadiths*, or sayings and actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, and the incorporation into logos of Islamic visual motifs.

### Orphans

The Prophet Muhammad was an orphan, and almost all Islamic charities run projects to support orphans, and publish appeals on their behalf. A wide range of services is provided, from residential homes and day-care centres to individual sponsorship, and paying for school uniforms, textbooks or special clothes for festival days.

### Refugees and the displaced

In Islam, as in both Judaism and Christianity, the idea of a forced journey has theological resonance. Refugees are eligible for *zakat* as 'people of the road', and Muslim charities often point out that the majority of the world's refugees are Muslim. Interventions by Islamic charities in relation to displaced people have sometimes proved controversial. Islamic charities based in northern Sudan have been accused of applying undue proselytising pressure on displaced people from the non-Muslim south during the long-running civil war. During the Bosnian conflict in the 1990s, Muslim agencies were concerned to keep refugees in place so that their Muslim identity could be maintained, contrary to the apparent policy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which was to disperse them.

### The religious calendar and lifecycle

The month of Ramadan is both the main time of the year for Muslim fund-raising, and an occasion for special food to be provided to the needy. Some charities also subsidise circumcision ceremonies for young boys, and children are sent on the *umra* (lesser pilgrimage) to Mecca, as a reward for good schoolwork.

### Muslim schools

Several Islamic charities support schools, including traditional *madrasas*, attached to mosques. In the mid-1990s, IIRO ran its own schools in Sierra Leone and Uganda. In 2002, the International Crisis Group claimed that Pakistan's network of *madrasas* was receiving more than £800m a year from Muslim charitable donations. In Africa, Islamic NGOs such as the Young Muslim Association of Kenya are transforming traditional Quranic schools into more activist institutions.

### Gender issues

There is no single Islamic approach to gender issues in humanitarian action. Overall, however, the direct provision of assistance to women in the form of empowerment and capacity-building remains a sensitive subject for Islamic charities, and for NGOs working in Islamic communities. Some operate a 'whole family' policy, which seeks to respect traditional family structures, in particular maintaining the position of men as primary providers, decision-makers and representatives in public life. In other circumstances, gender-sensitive activities for widows and single mothers are becoming increasingly acceptable, including the identification of traumatised widows and orphaned families and their needs, the provision of micro-credit to women, and the provision of training to enable women to find employment, earn an income and provide care for themselves and their families.

## Islamic charities and 9/11

The attacks on the US on 11 September caught observers of the Muslim world unawares in their scale and destructiveness. At the same time, the view that al-Qa'eda has nothing to do with Islam is untenable: all religious doctrines are capable of leading to extremism and violence. Islam may be especially vulnerable to distortion by such movements as al-Qa'eda for various historical reasons, principally the institutional weakness and marginal position of Islam's modernising or reformist tendencies.

Other analysts hold that today's violent Islamist movements are intelligible only when considered in relation to the social costs of decolonisation and the impact of the Cold War on parts of the Muslim world, notably Afghanistan. Although Al-Qa'eda has more in common with European fascism or fringe cults than with traditional Islam, its use of religious idioms and symbols attracts sympathy from a wider circle of co-religionists. Muslims sympathetic to Western liberal values, and opposed both to autocratic governments in the Arab world and to radical Islam, now feel the middle ground eroded and their loyalties torn.

Since the attacks, Islamic charities have faced increased scrutiny over alleged links with extremist groups. The US has tried to identify charities engaged in facilitating 'terrorist' activities, and to cut off funds channelled through them. Progress has, however, been slow; critics of the US administration claim that its efforts to crack down on the funding of 'terrorism' have been compromised by a reluctance to embarrass allies in Saudi Arabia. The US government's campaign is also weakened by its insistence on placing international networks of the al-Qa'eda type in the same category as groups like Hamas and Hizbollah, which are widely viewed in the Arab world as legitimate movements of national resistance.

Although it is understood that Osama bin Laden personally funded relief and development programmes in Sudan and Afghanistan in the 1990s, clear associations between Islamic charity and anti-Western violence are rare. Organisations such as the Muslim World League, the IIRO, Benevolence International and the Saar Foundation have vigorously denied nearly all the published allegations against them, many of which appear to be speculative and/or inaccurate. At the same time, a lack of transparency and accountability has made it difficult for some organisations to rebut public criticism.

## Politics, aid and Islam

Since the 1970s, the founders of modern Islamic charities have been highly sensitive to the political opportunities humanitarianism can offer. A doctrine of 'cultural proximity', or a belief that Muslims are best-equipped to help fellow Muslims, seems to be developing in parts of the Muslim world. This approach has not, however, been entirely successful. During the Bosnian conflict of the 1990s, efforts by Arab-Islamic aid organisations to 're-Islamise' Bosnian Muslims were frustrated both by the diversity of the Muslim influences brought to bear

through the various forms of assistance, and by the poor reception of Bosnian Muslims to symbols of Islamist revivalism, such as beards for men and veils for women. By contrast, the Saudi Joint Committee for the Relief of Kosovo and Chechnya has targeted rural Kosovo with some success, introducing a rigid interpretation of Islam through relief aid and schools.

## Principles and laws

Islamic law addressed the 'laws of war' long before Christian Europe, but these ideas draw their strength from a religious order that recognised no sharp line between spiritual and temporal matters, and from a time when such practices as enslavement and plunder were considered an inevitable part of war. In the West, by contrast, international humanitarian law has emerged from a movement of ideas rooted in the seventeenth-century Enlightenment and nineteenth-century philanthropy. Nonetheless, there is much common ground between these two traditions. Both, for instance, recognise the important principle of mutual respect between opposing armies in combat, and both share a commitment to the protection of children and the elderly.

Since the 1960s, the ICRC and some of its associates have devoted considerable efforts to seeking parallels in Islamic and other non-Western doctrines for its humanitarian principles and for the essentials of IHL. Through these efforts, the ICRC has equipped itself to enter discussions with such organisations as Hizbollah and Hamas about issues of military ethics, such as attacks on non-combatants and the treatment of alleged collaborators.

The political intentions of many Islamic humanitarians seem obvious to non-Muslim observers. At the same time, Islamic humanitarianism cannot be reduced to politics alone. Traditions such as *zakat*, *sadaqa* and *waqf*, and the rich verbal imagery of the Quran, constitute a form of 'social capital'. Dialogue on issues of this kind – not merely between different faiths, but between the religiously inclined and the secular – is an alternative to accepting the clash of civilisations as inevitable.

This Briefing Paper is drawn from Jonathan Benthall, 'Humanitarianism and Islam after 11 September', in Joanna Macrae and Adele Harmer (eds), *Humanitarian Action and the 'Global War on Terror': A Review of Trends and Issues*, HPG Report 14 (London: ODI, 2003).

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