



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 3

Gulf Charities in the Age of the ‘War on Terror’ and the ‘Arab Awakening’

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Abstract

Motivated by the Islamic traditions of generosity and almsgiving, the charities of the Gulf States enjoy great potential to expand their activities inside the GCC and beyond. But two 21st century developments – the so-called ‘Global War on Terror’ and, more recently, the advent of the ‘Arab Awakening’ or ‘Arab Spring’ – have confronted these charitable organizations with serious challenges to the aims and methods of operation that they have followed since the 1980s. This workshop will examine those challenges and propose some pointers to a way ahead. It will complement, by means of disciplined research, the practical steps currently being taken by such organizations as the London-based Humanitarian Forum, to promote better understanding between Muslim organizations and their Western and multilateral counterparts.

Description and Rationale

Research on Islamic relief and development charities, though previously neglected, has been expanding fast in recent years (see Appendix – *Publications on Islamic Charities*), reflecting an increasing interest in faith-based organizations in general. But, with a few exceptions (see Appendix), studies of the work of charities based in the GCC states remain scanty, and there is little publicly available factual data on which to form balanced conclusions. This workshop will provide the first opportunity to bring researchers together and begin to build up a body of evidence to make scholarly analysis and interpretations possible.

The overall goal of the proposed workshop is to make a contribution, through rigorous evidence-based research, towards understanding the Islamic charity sector in GCC countries. This has grown over the last thirty years in parallel with Western humanitarianism, seldom recorded in the analysis of international aid flows and taking little direct part in the intense debates that have raged in the West about the roles of Non-Governmental Organizations and the efficacy of relief and development programs. It is widely assumed in Western government circles that a large ideological gulf separates GCC-based, especially Saudi, charities, from Western humanitarianism (see Appendix). Our working assumption is that this viewpoint underestimates both the extent of change actually occurring in the region already, and the potential for Islam and its institutions to adapt to change, as well as the need for Western aid agencies to develop more effective partnerships in Muslim-majority countries, including numerous conflict zones. We hope therefore to help formulate an intellectual toolkit which could be used towards a gradual ‘de-politicization’ of the GCC-based charity sector, i.e. its normalization as a participant in the wider world of international relief and development aid, in harmony with non-Muslim agencies and with standards of policy and conduct generally accepted by governments and NGOs. This can be done through assembling factual information in an impartial manner, and by critically comparing various interpretations of the facts; then making the findings publicly available to policy-makers and opinion formers both inside and outside the GCC.

Workshop Themes and Anticipated Papers

The convenors propose the following issues to research and discuss. The list is not intended to be exhaustive.

- **Precautions against the alleged funding of terrorism.**

In recent years much Western discussion of Islamic charities, and especially those operating from GCC countries, has been dominated by fears that their funds have been or could be misdirected towards violent ends, and this has sometimes led – in Saudi Arabia, for example – to the quite drastic curtailment of philanthropic activities abroad. US and Israeli government policies have criminalized certain Palestinian Islamic charities as alleged fronts for Hamas, though the justice of this has been called in question by recent researchers (see Appendix). There is no doubt that in the past some Islamic charities were abused for violent ends – especially in the 1980s, when some of them worked in cooperation with the US Government and certain US-based charities to support the Afghan mujahideen. It is suspected, though it has not been proved, that charities were one of the vehicles for the transfer of funds that made possible the 9/11 attacks on the USA, and there is evidence that the 2008 Mumbai bombings were coordinated by a Pakistani charity which is a front for violent extremism. Possible themes that workshop contributors might explore in this area include factual allegations against Islamic charities based in GCC countries, including criminal and civil court cases, and the persuasiveness or otherwise of the allegations; the need for vigilance by all charities and regulatory authorities to prevent abuses; media representations of Islamic charities.

- **Religious bias and the encouragement of religious extremism.**

Like many Western charities, most GCC charities combine humanitarian and religious goals, and history shows that religion has long been a wellspring of the charitable impulse around the world. But recent Western criticism of Gulf philanthropy has focused on the so-called ‘madrasa syndrome’, and the accusation that Islamic charities have encouraged extremism and even violence through their uncritical support of religious schools in certain developing countries. This is another area that is high in speculative suspicions and low in solid facts, and one objective of the workshop is to encourage further research in the hope that more reliable data may emerge.

- **Should Gulf charities diversify their giving away from Islamic and Islamic-majority societies?**

The related issue of preferential support for co-religionists or prospective converts in a given territory is a question that applies to numerous Christian charities, and it seems likely that GCC-based charities are coming to accept international norms for NGOs, which prohibit discrimination. But the incidence of suffering, conflict, refugee problems etc. in the Muslim world is extremely high, and it is often argued that this justifies Muslim charities in prioritizing operations in Muslim-majority countries and/or for the benefit of Muslim minorities in other countries. It is also argued that Islamic charities have worked and can work with particular success among Muslim communities, and this has been demonstrated by research in some areas (see Appendix). So the workshop will invite examination of how religious priorities can co-exist with secular regulations and norms, and with the special ethical prescriptions that are increasingly accepted by aid agencies which work in mixed religious populations.

- **Transparency and accountability**

Basic data about the size of the Islamic charity sector in the Gulf are not yet available. Moreover, the traditions of secrecy and discretion in some GCC countries have made it hard for them to defend themselves against allegations of malpractice, however unfair. It seems that Kuwait and Qatar are leading the way in developing standards of accountability and transparency. However, accountability is still to a great extent seen in the Gulf region as owed only to donors, whereas there is a growing tendency in the West to see accountability as owed also to the beneficiaries of aid and to the public at large. Workshop contributors may choose to examine the spectrum in the GCC between, on the one hand, foundations that are entirely private and independent, and on the other hand organizations that are charities in name and constitution, but in practice very close to their governments.

- **Short term emergency aid versus long-term development**

Whereas bilateral aid by GCC governments has often emphasized the long term, with infrastructure projects and education, the tendency has been for the more independent charities to respond to immediate humanitarian crises. One exception is a microcredit scheme in Niger, initiated by Qatar Charity (see Appendix).

- **Gender issues**

Male-female role conflicts are likely to continue to result in some tensions between GCC-based charities and Western aid agencies, owing to the relatively conservative approach to gender in GCC cultures and, in some cases, to a lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of certain Western aid workers.

- **Islamic teaching and practice as ‘social capital’**

The scriptural traditions of zakat, sadaqa, waqf, Ramadan, Qurbani, and special concern for orphans, widows and refugees, provide particular opportunities for Islamic charities, which have already been turned to account in certain GCC countries. But the promise has been greater than practical implementation to date, and there is potential for GCC charities to learn from the lead taken by European Islamic NGOs such as Islamic Relief Worldwide.

- **Professionalization versus volunteering**

A trend towards professionalization, with increased administrative costs, seems inevitable, but at the cost of the voluntary spirit which is essential to all traditions of charity. For instance, it is now extremely dangerous for travelling Muslims to volunteer as aid workers in distant and troubled regions, since support for terror is widely deemed to be the only possible reason for a foreign Muslim to be present in such regions (see Appendix). Here is another issue to examine as we look at the future for Gulf charities – which seems certain to involve greater adjustment to Western norms, while seeking to retain treasured Islamic characteristics and values.

Workshop Director Profiles

Robert Lacey is the author of *The Kingdom* (1982) and *Inside the Kingdom* (2011) and has contributed papers to previous Gulf Research Center meetings in Cambridge on Saudi attitudes towards suicide bombing (2010) and Saudi soft power in the context of the ‘Arab Spring’ (2011). His paper for the 2012 workshop on Islamic Charities in the Gulf will examine the adaptation of Saudi charities to the ‘Global War on Terror’ since the early 1990s and the way ahead for these organizations, and for government and semi-official giving, since the 2004 ban on private charitable initiatives abroad.

Jonathan Benthall has published widely on Islamic charities and has served since 2005 as an advisor to the Islamic Charities Project (formerly the ‘Montreux Initiative’) sponsored by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and administered by the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, taking part in recent field research on zakat practices in the Palestinian Territories. He was Director of the Royal Anthropological Institute for 26 years and Founder Editor of the successful international journal *Anthropology Today*. He is an Honorary Research Fellow in the Anthropology Department, University College London. He will contribute an overview of the Islamic Charities Project, with emphasis on issues of accountability, governance and regulation in the post 9/11 context.

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