

Development & Islamic Charities

Aid workers on the ground have become increasingly aware that Islamic associations and agencies have often much better access to the people in need of support than their own secular counterparts. In the case of civil war-torn regions such as Somalia, for instance, there is no other way to bring relief to the victims than through the few transnational Islamic agencies still operating there.

The increased distrust between the Muslim world and the West since 9/11 and the “war on terror” have made it increasingly difficult for both Western and Islamic donor agencies to operate effectively in many areas. In many Muslim societies, the motives of Western agencies are distrusted, and groups have actively opposed them. Besides the old suspicions that aid is a thinly veiled cover for neo-colonial economic penetration or for efforts to spread Christianity in Muslim lands, there is now also a widespread perception that aid and the “war on terror” are intimately connected and that Western development agencies are aiming to subvert Islamic movements and replace them with more acceptable varieties of the faith. Reports on ambitious American programmes to “change the very face of Islam” have strengthened these anxieties about Western charitable involvement in the Muslim world.¹ Even at times of natural disasters, these anxieties have stood in the way of effective help. Christian charities sending relief to Aceh in the wake of the December 2004 tsunami found that the best way to overcome the suspicions and have the aid reach the target population was by channelling all funds through the large Indonesian Muslim association, Muhammadiyah.

The problems faced by Muslim charities are of a different nature. Most of their activities amount to the channelling of zakat and sadaqa funds to needy and deserving recipients. Since a considerable part of jihadist and terrorist activity in the world’s trouble spots has been funded from the same type of sources (and is considered as a legitimate concern by some donors), all international Muslim charities have come under scrutiny for possible involvement in terrorism. Bank accounts have been frozen and financial transfers blocked, causing much genuine charitable work to suffer. It is true that several Islamic charities have in fact channelled money to groups engaged in armed violence against perceived enemies of Islam, and such movements, from Hamas to Al-Qaida, can no doubt count on numerous voluntary contributions to its struggle. However, many other Islamic charities are only involved in charitable work in the strict sense, including relief in disaster-struck regions where Western agencies cannot or do not operate. Their work too has been seriously impeded by the “war on terror,” depriving numerous poor people from aid.

Prejudices against and suspicions of Islamic charities are deeply entrenched, and not only in the West. The uneasiness with which certain charities are viewed, is shared by many in the Muslim world—just like many Westerners object to the way certain fundamentalist Christian associations carry out charitable work. Especially those with headquarters in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states are widely criticized for pushing a political agenda that serves the interests of the Saudi regime and of being oblivious to the basic economic needs of the poor in Muslim societies. Much of the enormous resources of these charities has gone to spread the Salafi version of Islam, to combat beliefs and practices considered as deviant—whether Sufi-inspired, rationalistic, or accommodating local traditions—and to contain the revolutionary influences emanating from Iran. These charities would finance mosques but not

There was a time when Western relief and development agencies working in Muslim-majority countries would, as a matter of course, choose secular or non-Muslim NGOs as their local partners (or, not infrequently, help in establishing such NGOs to be their counterparts). Even where there were Islamic organizations, often much better connected at the grassroots level than the secular actors, these were generally not perceived as proper NGOs and distrusted because of their religious nature and unfamiliar agendas. During the past decades, however, the number and range of activities of Islamic associations involved in charity, relief, and the empowerment of underprivileged groups have dramatically increased; they can no longer be ignored.

and clothing to orphans and the poor, but also cheap medical services and education, income-generating projects, and disaster relief. Their professional staff and voluntary workers are usually highly educated (typically in such disciplines as medicine and engineering, not in religious studies) and strongly motivated. They often provide better services than state agencies, and they are often more trusted by the poorer segments of the population than either the state or secular NGOs. They differ from the latter in that to them the charitable work is a form of *da’wa*, missionary effort, and part of a broader struggle to achieve a more Islamic (and therefore more just) society. Some of them, moreover, may represent ideological positions and political strategies—notably the use of violence—that Western governments find objectionable. There have also been doubts about their commitment to democracy and human rights, especially where religious minorities are concerned. Critics have wondered to what extent their activities empower the recipients or simply make them dependent on patronage.

These are valid and legitimate concerns, and many in the West would reject the possibility of meaningful co-operation with Islamic welfare associations out of hand. Yet most of these concerns are not specific to Islam and are familiar from the experience with development associations of different ideological orientations, e.g. those associated with liberation movements, and the dilemma of patronage versus empowerment is well-known in the history of Western aid. Workers in the field have often tended to take a more pragmatic view and perceive that there is an area of shared interest, in which co-ordination and co-operation with Islamic counterparts are quite possible and perhaps even desirable—if only because in certain contexts the Islamic associations can deliver where others cannot. In the current world environment, Islamic charities and welfare associations have become major actors that need to be taken seriously. It is important to recognize that they are not all the same, nor are they unchanging. There has been much reflection on development issues and, like in Christian charities, there have been efforts to move beyond the distribution of alms to more “structural” approaches. A dispassionate look at these charities and welfare associations may suggest that, in spite of all reservations, here lies one of the most promising prospects of a meaningful engagement with the Muslim world.

modern schools, provide students with grants to study religious subjects but not other sciences, and “educate” the masses with cheap booklets expounding simple Salafi messages and a conspiratorial, dichotomous worldview, in which Islam is under attack by a coalition of Crusaders, Zionists, Freemasons, Orientalists, and a fifth column of liberal Muslims. But this does not sum up their activities, and even less that of other Islamic initiatives.

The range of Islamic associations involved in various forms of aid and social welfare work is enormous.² Those inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood and similar Islamist movements have been especially conspicuous, providing food

MARTIN VAN BRUINSEN

Notes

1. See David E. Kaplan’s report on the White House’s well-funded Muslim World Outreach: “Hearts, Minds, and Dollars: In an Unseen Front in the War on Terrorism, America is Spending Millions ...To Change the Very Face of Islam,” *US News and World Report*, 5 April 2005, at <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/050425/25roots.htm>.
2. A serious overview is: Jonathan Benthall and Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan, *The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2003).

Martin van Bruinssen holds the ISIM Chair at Utrecht University.