

The Rise and Decline of Saudi Overseas Humanitarian Charities

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Center for International and Regional Studies

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Georgetown University in Qatar

Occasional Paper No. 20
ISSN 2072-5957



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This publication series is made possible by the generous support of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development.

The Rise and Decline of Saudi Overseas Humanitarian Charities

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Acknowledgments

This Occasional Paper originated from a contribution to the “Middle Power Politics in the Middle East” Working Group convened by the Center for International and Regional Studies (CIRS), Georgetown University in Qatar, in 2017. Thanks are due to the Director, Mehran Kamrava, other members of the Working Group, and the Center’s administrative and editorial staff, also to two anonymous referees. David H. Rundell, Emanuel Schaeublin, and Ameer Zemmali kindly read drafts of the text, and Abdulfatah S. Mohamed and Nora Derbal provided valuable information. None of these bear responsibility for any errors.

Abstract

This paper records and interprets the rise and decline of Saudi overseas humanitarian charities, with special reference to the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO or IIROSA). This and another prominent Saudi-based charity, the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), were reduced to small offices in Jeddah by 2017. Founded in 1975, IIROSA grew as a vehicle for a distinctively Saudi version of Islamic humanitarianism. The kingdom's pan-Islamic policy played a major role in the Soviet–Afghan war of the 1980s, including support for the mujahidin in concert with Western powers. By the mid-1990s, IIROSA was the world's largest Islamic charity. Following the dismissal of its secretary general in 1996, and the crises of 9/11 and the Al-Aqsa Intifada, which cast a cloud to varying degrees over nearly all Islamic charities, IIROSA's activities were reduced but efforts were made to revive them. In 2017, however, the kingdom's new policy of centralization, and its disengagement from the "comprehensive call to Islam," resulted in a remodeling of IIROSA's role in support of the kingdom's diplomatic interests but marginalized and stripped of religious content. Finally, this paper considers the consequences of Saudi Arabia's disengagement from all overseas aid except that administered centrally.

Introduction

In January 2018, a health and community program in the Comoros archipelago was launched in the state capital, Moroni, by the International Islamic Relief Organization of Saudi Arabia (IIRO or IIROSA), with a staff of more than forty Saudi professionals working under the leadership of its secretary general, Hassan Darweesh Shahbar. Like humanitarian programs almost everywhere, it had a political dimension. First, it was reported as being the direct responsibility of the director general of IIROSA's parent body, the Muslim World League (MWL).¹ The president of MWL, Mohammed Al-Issa, was known to be a close ally of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Second, though ninety-eight percent of Comorians are Sunni Muslims, the program entirely lacked the religious content previously associated with IIROSA's policies. Third, this Saudi intervention was presumably by way of compensation for the loss of development and humanitarian aid that had flowed to Comoros since 2010 from Qatar, until Comoros severed ties with Qatar in June 2017. Fourth, whereas Comoros had its own problems of poverty and political instability, as the third smallest country in Africa it was marginal to the major conflicts that beset the Middle East. The establishment of this operation in Comoros, however, was an anomaly in the context of the organization's overall decline.

News reports during 2017 suggest that IIROSA was still operational in countries like India and Nigeria.² By April 2017, however, word was getting around that the charity was now reduced to a small office in Jeddah, and was forbidden from raising funds for overseas activities. I set out here to assess why the Saudi Islamic international charities were reduced to their present marginal state in 2017. At the time of this writing, Saudi Arabia's foreign aid was channeled exclusively through the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief

¹ "IIROSA Launches Health and Community Projects in Comoros," *Saudi Gazette*, January 10, 2018, <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/525952/SAUDI-ARABIA/IIROSA-launches-health-and-community-projects-in-Comoros>.

² "Saudi Arabia: IIROSA Committed on Expanding Humanitarian Initiatives," *Arab News*, February 24, 2017; "Free Eye Surgeries for Nigerians, a Gift from Saudi People—IIRO Director," *Nigerian Tribune*, April 7, 2017, www.tribuneonlineng.com/free-eye-surgeries-nigerians-gift-saudi-people-iirro-director.

Centre (KSRelief) and the Muslim World League. A year after KSRelief was founded in May 2015, a press announcement stated that it “operates a range of programs following state-of-the-art models which enable the centre to deliver relief to the world’s crisis-stricken communities and re-establish dignity for those in need.” Furthermore, “Over the past 40 years, Saudi Arabia’s humanitarian contributions totalling over 125 billion euros have helped to improve the lives of people in over 80 countries with complete political impartiality.”³

At its high point, in the mid-1990s, IIROSA was the world’s largest Islamic charity,⁴ with extensive fundraising and promotional capacity and increasing international linkages—a substantial instance of the Saudi kingdom’s use of humanitarian aid combined with political and religious objectives.⁵ One of the first studies of Islamic charities, published in 2002, described IIROSA as a leading institution implementing a “cordon sanitaire” to maintain Saudi ideological influence on the Middle East.⁶ However, IIROSA was a large, rambling organization and some of IIROSA’s branches got out of control, with the incidental result that for many years (up until 2016) two of its branches in Indonesia and the Philippines were designated as terrorist entities by the US government. The charge sheet against IIROSA’s branches during the 1980s and 1990s is extensive. For instance, it was one of four Islamic charities suspected by the Kenyan authorities of being implicated in Al-Qa`ida’s activities after the

³ “Saudi Arabia Presents its Humanitarian Aid and Relief Program,” Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, October 19, 2016, <http://ksamissioneu.net/en/saudi-arabia-presents-humanitarian-aid-relief-program>. IIROSA reportedly gave aid to Syrian refugees in Jordan on August 6, 2017, from its office in Amman. “IIRO Distributes Relief Aid to Syrian Refugees in Jordan,” *Saudi Press Agency*, August 7, 2017, www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=1654545. See also a report on eye cataract surgery organized by IIROSA in Harare: Afshan Abdulaziz, “IIROSA Provides Humanitarian Assistance around the World,” *The Muslim World League Journal* 46, no. 2, November 2017, 18–9, www.themwl.org/downloads/The-MWL-Journal-2017-november.pdf. Abdulaziz stated that IIROSA’s endowment buildings in Mecca provide revenues of SR 50 million per annum (US\$13.3 million).

⁴ Excluding the unique case of the Aga Khan Foundation.

⁵ For comparison (unexamined in the present paper) between different cultural traditions of “charity” and “humanitarianism,” with special reference to religious aspects, see Jonathan Benthall, “Charity,” *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, December 22, 2017, www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/charity; and Jasmine Moussa, “Ancient Origins, Modern Actors: Defining Arabic Meanings of Humanitarianism,” working paper (London: ODI Humanitarian Policy Group, 2014).

⁶ Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, *Jihad humanitaire: Enquête sur les ONG islamiques* [Humanitarian jihad: a survey of the Islamic NGOs] (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), 242–4 (author’s translation).

August 1998 bombings in East Africa.⁷ The truth or falsity of such allegations is impossible to establish, but, if true, the aberrations probably resulted from local opportunism and lax administration rather than from any master strategy devised in Jeddah. A similar defect of leadership and organization led to the humiliating 2004 closure of the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation, a Saudi international charity that was as prominent in its day as IIROSA,⁸ which was accused of links with violence and terror. Declining oil revenues might be assumed to be a reason for the marginalization of IIROSA and World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY). It is true that, according to one attempt to provide impartial statistics, Saudi humanitarian aid decreased in 2017 by 26 percent against the previous year, after a very sharp increase in 2014 in response to conflict and displacement in the region.⁹ But the estimated total was still \$395 million. Much smaller sums gleaned from governmental budgets would have stimulated private donations and retained a measure of independence for the quasi-independent charities. The most decisive likely reasons for the collapse of the Islamic overseas charity sector were twofold: first, the new regime's resolve to curb the power of the domestic religious authorities and oppose the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood through criminalizing it; and second, the implacability of the US government, specifically the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) and the Justice Department, with regard to Islamic charities that are widely seen in government circles and in the US media as implicated in terrorism. The policies set in place by President George W. Bush were carried on under President Obama, with the same leadership teams, and seem unlikely to be moderated until 2021 at the earliest.¹⁰

⁷ M. A. Mohamed Salih, "Islamic N.G.O.s in Africa: The Promise and Peril of Islamic Voluntarism," in *Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa*, ed. Alex de Waal (London: Hurst, 2005), 172; and Aid Watch, "International Islamic Relief Organisation of Saudi Arabia," n.d., www.observatoire-humanitaire.org/en/index.php?page=fiche-ong.php&part=historique&chapitre=338&cid=81. This entry has not been updated since c.2010.

⁸ See Yusra Bokhari, Nasim Chowdhury, and Robert Lacey, "A Good Day to Bury a Bad Charity," in *Gulf Charities and Islamic Philanthropy in the "Age of Terror" and Beyond*, eds. Robert Lacey and Jonathan Benthall (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014), 199–230.

⁹ *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2017*, 43. Bristol: Development Initiatives, <http://devinit.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/GHA-Report-2017-Full-report.pdf>; *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2015*, 34. Bristol: Development Initiatives, http://devinit.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/GHA-Report-2015_-Interactive_Online.pdf.

¹⁰ The Charity and Security Network, based in Washington, D.C., maintains a running commentary on the inhibiting effects of counterterrorist measures on all humanitarian organizations working in conflict zones at www.charityandsecurity.org.

For several decades, the Saudi government had spread largesse from its petroleum exports to many causes that were broadly compatible with its Hanbali-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam.¹¹ Intense concern about Islamic charities in the United States after 9/11 prompted the Saudi government to decide in December 2002 to subject all the kingdom's charities to extensive audits, while charities whose activities extended beyond its borders were ordered to report and coordinate with the Foreign Ministry. Collecting boxes in mosques—an immemorial way to raise funds for disaster relief—were prohibited. A high commission for oversight of all charities was announced—although it has never become a reality despite sporadic consultations with visiting experts. The Saudi regime's concern about the outcomes of pan-Islamic projects abroad was matched by its need to respond to the surge of Islamist violence within the kingdom itself in 2002–04.¹²

IIROSA was not the only Saudi charity of its kind, and others are mentioned in this study. Their roles until recently may be seen as complementary to the work of the Riyadh-based Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Awqaf [endowments], Da`wa [the “call to Islam”] and Guidance, which is responsible for all religious matters other than the hajj; its duties include the dissemination of Islam through mosques, madrasas, and publications throughout the world. IIROSA is relatively well documented and will be treated here as a case study, with some shorter references to cognate institutions. The purpose of this paper is to sketch how Saudi overseas aid charities grew, and how, despite much meritorious work, they became objects of mistrust and curtailment, which finally led to their disappearance or marginalization by 2017. It cannot be claimed however that IIROSA was typical, since it was one of only a few large overseas aid agencies each of which had a distinct character, in keeping with the “segmented clientelism” of Saudi power structures in general: vertical relations with the royal family, and little horizontal coordination between institutions.¹³ Given

¹¹ Guillaume Fourmont–Dainville notes the variety of Islamic publications sponsored by the kingdom, including those by Egyptian and Asian authors, in *Géopolitique de l'Arabie Saoudite* [The geopolitics of Saudi Arabia] (Paris: Ellipses, 2005), 117.

¹² Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 202–10.

¹³ Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

the paucity of hard evidence, it is necessary to rely on speculation at some points in this analysis, in the hope that future researchers will be able to refine it through deeper investigation, including interviews with surviving actors.

Saudi Soft Power and Pan-Islamism

Although there is no originality in considering national Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) as an expression of “soft power”—a concept that originated in American political science in the 1990s—it is used in this paper simply to indicate the projection of power through means other than military force or economic ascendancy. We must leave open the question to what extent this projection in the Saudi case was driven by a conscious and coordinated national policy.

Saudi Arabia, as by far the largest Gulf state, had long been a leader in global humanitarian and development assistance—especially in response to disasters in Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh. Since 1975, its total governmental aid to developing and poor countries outstripped that of most Western donors and was, according to Khalid Al-Yahya and Nathalie Fustier, “higher than the United Nations target of 0.7 percent of GDP and three times the average achieved by OECD–DAC countries.”¹⁴ In particular, the Saudi Fund for Development, founded in 1974, specialized in providing grants and long-term loans on favorable terms, and, by 1991, its capital increased to 31 billion Saudi riyals (\$8.26 billion).¹⁵ Al-Yahya and Fustier concluded in 2014 that though the extent of humanitarian assistance by Saudi Arabia would be the envy of any other country as a means of winning hearts and minds, it was a form of soft power that “the kingdom has not adequately realized, let alone full exploited, to its advantage,” whereas it could have been used to counteract negative publicity in the West. “Overall, the kingdom’s approach towards humanitarian assistance appears to be a mix

¹⁴ I.e. members of the Development Assistance Committee of the Office of Economic Cooperation and Development. Khalid Al-Yahya and Nathalie Fustier, “Saudi Arabia as a Global Humanitarian Donor,” in *Gulf Charities and Islamic Philanthropy in the “Age of Terror” and Beyond*, eds. Robert Lacey and Jonathan Benthall (Berlin: Gerlach, 2014), 170.

¹⁵ “Saudi Fund for Development,” SAMIRAD, the Saudi Arabian Market Information Resource, www.saudinf.com/main/1104.htm.

of opportunity and reactivity.”¹⁶ The reasons for this weakness, according to these authors, included the fragmentation of administrative procedures, with much overlapping and duplication, as well as lack of professionalism and accountability. In the past, the kingdom’s preference for implementing humanitarian aid seems to have been through bilateral government-to-government agreements, though also through the UN system, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and other intergovernmental agencies. Some members of the royal family also have their own charity organizations, such as the Alwaleed Bin Talal Foundation, whose activities have covered a wide geographical area but about which little is published.¹⁷

One way of understanding Islamic NGOs is as a subset of Faith Based Organizations (FBOs)—a broad category encompassing a continuum between agencies that systematically eschew all activities with religious content, and others that openly combine religious and humanitarian objectives.¹⁸ Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the old-style in-house, often hagiographic histories of Western NGOs have been gradually replaced by studies that locate them—sometimes going so far as to radically challenge their claims to altruistic motivations—in a nexus of managerialism, competition for market share, journalism in the “global village,” international relations, and security policies.¹⁹ Many humanitarian organizations remain essentially mononational. Though most US-based NGOs see themselves as

¹⁶ Al-Yahya and Fustier, “Saudi Arabia as a Global Humanitarian Donor,” 172.

¹⁷ Ibid., 179–80, 184–5. In 2016, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal donated \$29 million to the British NGO Save the Children to train a “next generation” of emergency aid workers from developing countries. Ben Parker, “Should Save the Children Take Money from this Donor?” *IRIN News*, June 14, 2016, www.irinnews.org/analysis/2016/06/14/should-save-children-take-money-donor. Independently of Al-Yahya and Fustier, Khalid A. Almezaini in *The UAE and Foreign Policy: Foreign Aid, Identities and Interests* (London: Routledge, 2012), has argued that the United Arab Emirates’ extensive foreign aid programs have owed less to the pursuit of foreign policy interests than to values rooted in Arab and Islamic solidarity.

¹⁸ Here we leave aside the growing body of opinion that the boundary between religious and secular initiatives in aid and development is conceptually porous, in that many such initiatives have “quasi-religious” features or at least bear the imprint of a religious culture. See Michael Barnett and Janice Gross Stein, eds., *Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ See Antonio Donini, ed., *The Golden Fleece: Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action* (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2012); Jonathan Benthall, “Humanitarianism as Ideology and Practice,” in *Wiley-Blackwell International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Hilary Callan (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018).

committed to a humanitarian ideal, they have had to face pressure, after a speech by Secretary of State Colin Powell in October 2001, to see themselves as “force multipliers” for the military.²⁰

In 2017 in the Muslim world, the only Islamic charity that had begun to make a gradual transition from mononational to transnational operation is Islamic Relief Worldwide, founded in Birmingham, England, in 1984. In 2017, it had sixteen affiliates or “partner offices,” while the UK charity still served as the “catalyst, coordinator and implementer” of the network.²¹ The existence of a transnational network known as the “Red Crescent” is often incorrectly assumed, whereas thirty-three National Societies of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement use the red crescent rather than the red cross as their emblem. The Movement in its entirety is officially non-confessional, though, in practice, some of the Red Crescent National Societies have taken on a local Islamic coloring.²² The Muslim Brotherhood, which originated in Egypt, and the Gülen movement, which originated in Turkey, have also achieved a transnational status, and both subscribe to charitable or welfarist aims, but their religious and political commitments are in both cases more prominent, especially since the dramatic political upheavals in both countries since 2011 that have severely weakened them both.²³

Charity and welfarism have been important aspects of Islam that date back to the Qur’anic principles of *zakat* (the Islamic tithe) and *ṣadaqa* (voluntary or supererogatory charity), supplemented by the tradition of *waqf*, which was established soon after the Prophet Muhammad’s death and is more

²⁰ “Secretary Colin L. Powell Remarks to the National Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organizations,” Yale Law School, October 26, 2001, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/sept11/powell_brief31.asp.

²¹ Islamic Relief USA, “Affiliates,” <http://irusa.org/affiliates-and-alliances>. IRUSA was founded in 1993. The French branch of Islamic Relief Worldwide, Secours Islamique, was founded in 1991 but split off to become completely independent in 2006. For the view of the French charity’s founder, see Rachid Lahlou, *Un humanitaire musulman dans la République* [A Muslim humanitarian in the Republic], (Paris: Atelier Henry Dougier, 2018).

²² For a summary of the origins of the Red Crescent name and emblem and issues arising therefrom, see Jonathan Benthall, “Red Crescent Politics,” in *The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World*, eds. Jonathan Benthall and Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 45–68.

²³ On the Muslim Brotherhood, see Hazem Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); Shadi Hamid and William McCants, eds. *Rethinking Political Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

or less equivalent to the European charitable foundation.²⁴ But these traditions took new institutional forms in the twentieth century, and, since the 1970s, culminated in the growth of an “Islamic NGO” sector. This was due to the confluence of two historical tendencies: the expansion of aid organizations, in general, and the “Islamic resurgence” (*ṣaḥwa*), in particular, which intensified during the same period. The Muslim Brotherhood had a profound influence on the growth of modern Islamic charities—until the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi’s presidency in Egypt in 2013—in ways that have yet to be precisely delineated. Many Muslim Brothers found refuge in Saudi Arabia after the mid-1950s, having been driven out of Egypt and Syria. They contributed intellectual and organizational skills to the kingdom, as well as their view of Islam as a seamless whole—a view at odds with the traditional pact whereby the religious authority of the *‘ulama’* and the political authority of the House of Saud were kept distinct.²⁵ A complex interplay of ideological and political forces resulted, consolidating for some decades in a unique “State Islamism” by contrast to the marginality of Islamist movements at that time in nearly all other Muslim-majority countries.²⁶ The ideal of the solidarity of the Muslim nation as a single *umma*, transcending ethnic or political definition, served as a counterweight to Soviet Marxism, to the Zionist ideology of Jewish solidarity, and to Nasser’s secular Arab nationalism with its threats to the stability of the Saudi monarchy.²⁷

The two most important organizations founded by the kingdom were the Muslim World League (MWL) in 1962, and the OIC in 1969—renamed the

²⁴ See Amy Singer, *Charity in Muslim Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Monzer Kahf, “Waqf,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics*, ed. Emad Shahin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 536–9.

²⁵ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 50–1; Stéphane Lacroix, *Les islamistes saoudiens: Une insurrection manquée* [The Saudi Islamists: a failed insurrection], (Paris: Press Universitaires de France, 2010), 11–2, 58.

²⁶ Lacroix, *Les islamistes saoudiens*, 317–8. The drive to “tame” political Islam, however, through bureaucratization of the religious establishment, has been observed not only in Saudi Arabia but across the Arabian Peninsula, see Mehran Kamrava, *Inside the Arab State* (London: Hurst, 2018), 171.

²⁷ On King Faisal’s confrontation with Nasser between his accession to the throne in 1964 and Nasser’s death in 1970, see Joseph Mann, “King Faisal and the Challenge of Nasser’s Revolutionary Ideology,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 5 (2012): 749–64.

Organization of Islamic Cooperation in 2011.²⁸ The OIC became the world's second largest intergovernmental institution after the United Nations, uniting fifty-seven Muslim-majority states,²⁹ while the MWL embraced a range of cultural, educational, and charitable activities, and was partly inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood though substantially funded by the Saudi state, which was enriched by the rise in the price of oil in 1973.³⁰ The MWL is still active today, especially in opposing the jihadist ideology of the so-called Islamic State (IS or ISIS) and accepting the challenge facing Muslims to craft a narrative that will overpower it, but also as a vehicle for Saudi influence.³¹

The MWL and OIC's early activities were largely humanitarian (with the exception of active support for the Palestinians), one of the evident priorities being, in Abdul-Rahman Ghandour's words, to "reduce, at least symbolically, the flagrant disparity between the Gulf countries that exported petroleum and their neighbors who lacked natural resources."³² Though diffusion of the Saudi religious ideology was certainly a leading objective of the kingdom, its rulers were arguably focused even more on "dissipating the envy provoked by its good fortune, and papering over the fact that its security depends on the United States."³³ The programs of WML and OIC became more politically grounded in the late 1970s, partly as a way to deflect some of the domestic dissent within the kingdom but also in reaction to two new developments: competition from post-revolutionary Shi'a Iran for leadership of the Muslim world,³⁴ and the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Saudi Mahdists in November and December 1979.³⁵

²⁸ Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, 16–24.

²⁹ Saudi Arabia currently dominates both organizations. Iran, though a member state of both, has been sidelined; and both are silent on the question of the Sunni–Shi'a split.

³⁰ J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, *Alms for Jihad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 34.

³¹ Edward Delman, "An Anti-ISIS Summit in Mecca," *The Atlantic*, February 26, 2015, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/ISIS-summit-Islam-Obama/386303.

³² Ghandour, *Jihad humanitaire*, 242.

³³ Fourmont-Dainville, *Géopolitique*, 118 (author's translation).

³⁴ The Iranian Republic's pan-Islamic vision, by contrast with Saudi Arabia's dissemination of religious orthodoxy, has focused on the need for the protection of the *umma* from Western encroachment.

³⁵ Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, 3–4, 19, 23.

None of the Saudi-based Islamic charities considered in this paper took steps to transcend their origin and control within the kingdom. Despite their transnational pan-Islamic ambitions, they abstained from actively promoting Islam to non-believers—unlike the World Islamic Call Society, originally founded in Libya in 1972, which was devoted to spreading Islam all over the world.³⁶ They committed themselves to reaching the large constituencies in the Muslim world who were in severe need or distress, but who might also be candidates for “re-Islamization” (*i`adat aslamah*)—that is to say, the protection of Muslim societies through stiffening of their doctrinal resolve from the twin threats of secularization and Christian proselytism.

Saudi Support for International Mujahidin

IIROSA was founded in 1975 by the MWL as its humanitarian subsidiary, and was endorsed shortly after by the Saudi royal family, especially as a vehicle for *zakat* and *ṣadaqa* contributions. With close ties to the government, its funds were managed by the Islamic Affairs departments of Saudi embassies.³⁷ By the end of the century, IIROSA had reportedly thirty-six offices in Africa, twenty-four in Asia, and thirty in Europe and the Americas. It had a broad remit to bring aid to victims of wars and other disasters, with substantial funding from multilateral institutions.³⁸

By the early 1980s, IIROSA had embarked on relief programs in Afghanistan and Pakistan, supported by the General Donation Committee

³⁶ Salih, “Islamic N.G.O.s in Africa,” 172–3.

³⁷ At least in the case of the US: see Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball, “Charity and Terror,” *Newsweek*, December 9, 2002, www-nexis-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/results/enhdocview.do?docLinkInd=true&ersKey=23_T25855639960&format=GNBFI&startDocNo=351&resultsUrlKey=0_T25855639977&backKey=20_T25855639978&csi=5774&docNo=373.

³⁸ Brown cites an IIROSA annual report for 1991 to give the following analysis of total revenue in 1990: Islamic Development Bank 25 percent; Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development 23 percent; Arab Monetary Fund 14.5 percent; OPEC 30 percent; World Bank 3.3 percent. Rajeswary Ampalavanar Brown, *Islam in Modern Thailand: Faith, Philanthropy and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2014), 191. If these percentages are accurate, the proportion of income deriving from private donations was at that time only about 4 percent.

for Afghanistan, led by Prince Salman.³⁹ It was one of many Islamic charities working on the Pakistan–Afghan border, combining an ideological mission (aimed specially at Afghan refugees), paramilitary support for the Afghan combatants, and humanitarian aid, including the installation of hospitals and supply of medicines and medical equipment. In 1986 in Peshawar (some thirty-five miles from the Afghan border), an umbrella body called the Council for Islamic Coordination was formed by the Saudi and Kuwaiti Red Crescent societies, the Muslim World League, and the Sudan-based Islamic African Relief Agency. IIROSA joined this Council together with a number of other Islamic agencies, with Abdullah Azzam among the rotating presidents of the Council before his still unexplained assassination in 1989.⁴⁰

By the beginning of the 1990s, IIROSA had a presence in many Muslim-majority countries, but maintained a base in Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan, a former stronghold of the pro-Soviet government that fell to the mujahidin in 1992. IIROSA ran a hospital and a malaria center in Jalalabad, and established a camp to accommodate some of the hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees fleeing during the civil war.⁴¹ Up to 2002, IIROSA is recorded as having run a camp for displaced persons in the southern Kandahar province of Afghanistan (Spin Boldak), though according to a Médecins Sans Frontières' report the camp's standards of nutrition were very poor, and at the end of July IIROSA gave only three days' notice before pulling out from its camp.⁴²

To understand the crisis for Islamic charities in general, and for Saudi charities in particular, it is necessary to look back to Saudi support for

³⁹ According to Leo Barasi, relief committees were frequently sponsored by a member of the royal family as a means to raise funds. He adds that “even when a Relief Committee is not involved, the King himself is personally credited with providing the humanitarian supplies distributed by the charities,” Leo Barasi, “Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Aid since 1973: Priorities and Motivations” (PhD diss., Oxford University, 2005), 21–2.

⁴⁰ Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan, “Prédication, secours, combat: L’action humanitaire des ONG islamiques entre *da’wa* et *jihad*” [Preaching, relief aid, combat: The humanitarian action of Islamic NGOs between *da’wa* and *jihad*], (PhD diss., Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris, 2002), 194.

⁴¹ *IIRO Newsletter* 1.2, May 8, 1994, 5; 1.4, December 23, 1994, 9; 1.7, October 20, 1995, 12. Steven Wolfson, “Afghanistan: The Unending Crisis: The Dilemma of the Internally Displaced,” UNHCR, *Refugees Magazine* 108, June 1, 1997, www.unhcr.org/uk/publications/refugeemag/3b681081d/refugees-magazine-issue-108-afghanistan-unending-crisis-dilemma-internally.html.

⁴² Fiona O’Reilly and Jeremy Shoham, *MSF Holland in Afghanistan Mission Evaluation: May 2000–May 2002*, 48, www.alnap.org/resource/3160.

international Islamic resistance movements in Palestine and Afghanistan, a country that has been described as the “cradle of the jihadist movement.”⁴³ Saudi financial support for the Palestinians, including the armed resistance as well as humanitarian causes, began as early as 1948 and continued beyond the end of the century despite the loyalty of the United States to Israel. A fatwa issued by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia in 1968 authorized use of some of the proceeds of zakat, if supervised by the government, to buy weapons for those fighting Israel.⁴⁴ Help for the Palestinian cause was exceeded, however, by the commitment to Afghanistan, where extensive direct military and logistical support was given to the mujahidin in the 1980s after political signals from Washington that every means should be used to expel Soviet influence.⁴⁵ The Pakistan government blurred the distinction between passive refugees and armed resistance fighters, as did many NGOs, wittingly or unwittingly, so that in practice the aid efforts supported the mujahidin. All analysts agree that the boundaries between humanitarian aid, military support, and *da`wa* (missionary activity) were comprehensively blurred by the Saudis during the Soviet–Afghan conflict, though less attention has been given to the fact that the United States encouraged these mixed operations, reflecting the “Reagan Doctrine”—the rolling back of Soviet domination all over the world.

Official Saudi aid to Afghanistan was first channeled through the Saudi Red Crescent—transgressing the rule that the National Societies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement are supposed to be independent and neutral—and the “Popular Committee for Fundraising,” chaired by Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (who was to succeed to the throne in 2015), and after the mid-1980s through numerous semi-official agencies as well. Key figures in the evolution of global jihadism, Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden, were closely involved in enabling young Muslims from different backgrounds to fight beside the Afghan mujahidin. Azzam (1941–1989) was a Palestinian by origin and a Muslim Brother, but his salary at a university

⁴³ Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, 38.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

in Islamabad was paid by the MWL between 1981 and 1986.⁴⁶ Bin Laden, the son of a Saudi construction billionaire, established close links between major donors and charities.⁴⁷ The office of Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, then Minister of Defense, is said to have granted three quarters of the price of an air ticket for Saudi men leaving to fight in Afghanistan.⁴⁸ After the withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan in 1988–89, Pakistani and Saudi aid continued until shortly after the fall of the Soviet-backed President Muhammad Najibullah in 1992.⁴⁹

Jihadi fronts were then opened in Bosnia until 1995 (despite the lack of welcome given to Arabs), and to a lesser extent in other conflict areas such as Chechnya, with some involvement of Islamic charities in pursuing war aims. IIROSA is said to have sometimes extended services such as visas and fake ID cards to Arab combatants, even though “these fraudulent activities were not always carried out with the full knowledge of the charities’ leaders,” writes Thomas Hegghammer, “and they represented only a minor part of the vast and genuine aid effort.”⁵⁰ As a result of an abrupt change in US foreign policy, however, “freedom fighters” or “heroic combatants” became reidentified as terrorists. It is now widely accepted that the West was sowing dragons’ teeth in inflaming Islamist passions in Afghanistan.⁵¹ Though some jihadists in the bin Laden mold would have taken advantage of the privileges of charities to further their aims without scruple, other Muslims may simply have been slow to notice the change in US foreign policy, were following what they took to be

⁴⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁷ See Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan, “Helping the ‘Brothers’: The Medic, the Militant and the Fighter,” in *The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World*, eds. Jonathan Benthall and Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 69–84; Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, 38–48; Hegghammer, “Violent Islamism in Saudi Arabia, 1979–2006: The Power and Perils of Pan-Islamic Nationalism” (PhD diss., Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris, 2007), 360; Burr and Collins, *Alms for Jihad*, 77–92. For an analysis of the opposition to international jihadism of the nonviolent Saudi reformist movement known as the Sahwa (awakening), see Lacroix, *Les islamistes saoudiens*, 133–44.

⁴⁸ Lacroix, *Les islamistes saoudiens*, 138.

⁴⁹ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 197–8; Hegghammer, “Violent Islamism,” 198, 207.

⁵⁰ Hegghammer, “Violent Islamism,” 203, 207.

⁵¹ See, for instance, Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, 136–50, 397.

legitimate religious leadership, and had become accustomed to the blurring of charitable and non-charitable forms of support for pan-Islamic causes.⁵² Some of the obloquy that fell on Saudi, and some other Arab and Muslim charities, was undoubtedly due to episodes of sharp practice and lack of rigorous supervision, to say the least; but it should not be forgotten that during the Soviet–Afghan war, the Western powers, and especially the United States, set a lead for others to follow, only to turn later against Islamic charities with draconian counterterrorist measures.

Rise of IIROSA: The Qurashi Regime

The rise of IIROSA was to a great extent due to its cofounder, Farid Yasin Qurashi. He was born in 1949 and died in 2003. He was educated in Cairo and Jeddah before obtaining master’s and doctoral degrees in business administration from Claremont University, California, and working as an associate professor in economics and administration at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah. He was secretary general of IIROSA from 1985 until his dismissal in 1996. It has been speculated that Qurashi’s dismissal may have been the result of a political decision in the kingdom to slow down IIROSA’s growth, because it had succeeded in forming links with international organizations such as UNHCR at the highest level.⁵³ While we may only guess at the reasons for Qurashi’s dismissal in 1996, he was posthumously hailed in 2003 for his “remarkable role in making IIRO an internationally known relief agency,” and especially for his innovative ideas for collecting and developing funds.⁵⁴ Hany El-Banna, the inspirational founder of Islamic Relief Worldwide in Britain, summed up his opinion of Qurashi as follows:

⁵² See Jonathan Benthall, “Islamic Humanitarianism in Adversarial Context,” in *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism Between Ethics and Politics*, eds. Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2010), 117. See also Hegghammer, “Violent Islamism,” 207.

⁵³ Interview with an Islamic charity trustee who prefers not to be named, 2017. Maybe Qurashi’s excursions into interfaith dialogue, willingness to bring aid to non-Muslims as well as Muslims, and proposals for cooperation with Christian and secular aid organizations went too far for his patrons in Saudi Arabia. It has been suggested by another interlocutor (2018) that Qurashi was particularly close to Prince Sultan, who lost influence to Prince Nayef in the mid-1990s.

⁵⁴ P. K. Abdul Ghafour, “Former IIRO Chief Qurashi Dies after Liver Transplant,” *Arab News*, January 31, 2003, www.arabnews.com/node/227957.

Dr. Qurashi was a very enthusiastic young man who loved his country and his work, and was able to take IIRO from a small backyard at the Muslim World League's offices to a gigantic organization. He had great skill in fundraising and public relations. Unfortunately, the speed of growth of IIRO was faster than the speed of restructuring of the headquarters in Jeddah and the main branches. He was a very modest man. His hands were clean, his vision was clear, and he had this power of communication. If he had been given time, I think he could have attracted tens of thousands of Saudi charitable volunteers.⁵⁵

The newsletter that Qurashi published between 1994 and 1995 testifies to a stated ambition to cooperate with non-Muslim organizations, and a dynamic and open approach somewhat at odds with the Saudi tradition of discretion and secrecy.⁵⁶ One motivation behind the growth of international Islamic charities was to provide a counterbalance to Christian and secular NGOs, which Islamist leaders—such as Yusuf Al-Qaradawi in Qatar, and Hassan Al-Turabi in Sudan—had accused of using aid and welfare to undermine Islam.⁵⁷ The result was that Islamic charities in many countries came to form a kind of parallel system having little communication with mainstream NGOs; and they were omitted in official analyses of international aid flows. IIROSA's policies in the field exemplified this tendency. Rony Brauman, a prominent figure in Médecins Sans Frontières, reported that in Baidoa, southwestern Somalia, IIROSA created what was seen by Western fieldworkers as a “forbidden village,” a walled-in and self-sufficient Wahhabi enclave.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Interview with Dr. Hany El-Banna via Skype, conducted by the author, April 28, 2017.

⁵⁶ E.g. a meeting organized in Zagreb on July 2, 1995 with the World Council of Religion and Peace, attended by representatives of the the United States Council of Churches, the Vatican, and the Evangelical Churches of Germany, *IIRO Newsletter*, p.4. Qurashi's editorial comments on an agreement to finance and implement a developmental project in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, “This example is a vivid [proof] that humanitarian and relief organizations can work together for the sake of humanity, regardless of their cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds. Diversity is indeed a source of strength and enrichments” (p.1).

⁵⁷ Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan, *The Charitable Crescent*, 41, 121.

⁵⁸ Ghandour, *Jihad humanitaire*, 218–9.

During Qurashi's visit to London in 1995, I interviewed him and he impressed me with his commitment and energy. However, on the issue of transparency and accountability, which I raised with him, he was adamant.⁵⁹ Charitable giving was a Saudi tradition, he explained, and how contributions were spent was no one's business except the donors'. I refrained from commenting that this was contrary to growing demands in Western humanitarian circles that accountability should be accepted as a duty to the public at large and even (as far as possible) to the recipients of charity. Qurashi's attitude has been a constant in Saudi charitable culture. One reason for this is the Qur'anic injunction that it is best for a donor to give alms in secret. As IIROSA, like its sister organizations in Saudi Arabia, never published detailed accounts (whose necessity is taken for granted for charities in the US or the United Kingdom), it lacked defenses when accused in the Western media of irregular conduct. Though Qurashi, in his role as chief executive, was given great freedom of action by the MWL as its sponsor, IIROSA seems to have been a clear instance of the divided fiefdoms that, according to Steffen Hertog, have made up the fragmented Saudi state dependent on powerful but often capricious individual patrons.⁶⁰ In 1987, IIROSA established a fundraising section, *sanābil al-khair* (seeds of good), with the aim of building up a large capital fund (\$266 million),⁶¹ and by the mid-1990s, IIROSA had a wide geographical spread of activities, and its annual budget is believed to have been about \$85 million dollars. After Qurashi's death, in response to criticism about IIROSA's lack of transparency, the international accounting firm Ernst and Young were appointed as auditors in 2011 and IIROSA was awarded the ISO 9001 certificate by the International Standardisation Organisation, an accreditation of its business management systems.⁶²

⁵⁹ "London Visit of IIRO Delegates," *IIRO Newsletter* 1.5, April 21, 1995.

⁶⁰ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*.

⁶¹ Burr and Collins, *Alms for Jihad*, 36.

⁶² "IIROSA General Assembly to Discuss Issues Affecting Humanitarian Work," *Arab News*, May 16, 2012.

During his reign, Qurashi was a talented publicist. He was able to not only report that IIROSA's branch in the US had been in the forefront of relief agencies undertaking rescue operations after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 (carried out by an idiosyncratic US domestic terrorist, Timothy McVeigh), but also to quote a statement by the deputy governor of Oklahoma City: "Oklahoma State is proud to say that the first who volunteered their services to rescue the blast victims were IIROSA."⁶³ Though barely credible, this claim was an astute way to rebut the commonly heard complaint against Islamic charities, that they were committed only to bringing succor to fellow Muslims.⁶⁴ The official credited with IIROSA's response in Oklahoma City was the director of its Washington office, Sulaiman Al-Ali, a wealthy Saudi businessman and fundraiser. Al-Ali was later accused of remitting large sums of money for IIROSA operations in Bosnia and Somalia, as well as indirect support of the Palestinian Hamas.⁶⁵

In the early 1990s, soon after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, IIROSA's main preoccupation was evidently the re-Islamization of Muslim-majority communities that had been suppressed under Communism. During the Bosnian conflict, for example, IIROSA sometimes used material relief to undertake *da`wa* or spiritual relief in the cause of re-Islamization—for instance, by distributing militantly anti-Christian videocassettes.⁶⁶ IIROSA released a series of highly professional fundraising videos, depicting scenes of misery and devastation

⁶³ *IIRO Newsletter* 1.6, July 27, 1995, 3.

⁶⁴ In practice, all international Muslim aid agencies devote most of their resources to working in Muslim-majority countries, which they justify by drawing attention to the high levels of deprivation and political unrest in large swathes of the Muslim world. See Bruno De Cordier, "The 'Humanitarian Frontline,' Development and Relief, and Religion: What Context, which Threats and which Opportunities?" *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2009): 663–84.

⁶⁵ Matthew Epstein with Evan Kohlmann, "Arabian Gulf Financial Sponsorship of Al-Qaida via U.S.-Based Banks, Corporations and Charities." Testimony of Matthew Epstein with Evan Kohlmann before the House Committee on Financial Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, "Progress Since 9/11: The Effectiveness of U.S. Anti-Terrorist Financing Efforts," March 11, 2003, 9–13, www.investigativeproject.org/documents/testimony/15.pdf.

⁶⁶ Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan, "The Balkan Case," in *The Charitable Crescent*, eds. Jonathan Benthall and Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 142–4.

alleviated by dedicated IIROSA staff and volunteers. The commentary for its 1992 appeal video, “The Path of Hope,”⁶⁷ asserts (translated from the Arabic):

The sound of the muezzin is back: with these words, all over Russia and the Islamic Republics, and after seventy years of repression, Islam regains its place, overcoming the effects of Communist rule, which isolated Muslims and divided them into thirty-seven nationalities. Despite all this, Muslims have managed to maintain their culture [*thaqāfa*] and adhere to their faith [*aqīda*]. Around forty percent of the Muslim population lives in countries where most of the population is not Muslim, and they feel as if they are living in isolated islands surrounded by people who have different thoughts and ideologies and behavior.

IIROSA’s ambitions as a leader in Islamic humanitarianism were made clear in a major conference on displaced Muslim women that it co-organized in November 1994 in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, with more than 250 delegates in attendance from a wide variety of institutions in forty-two countries. The conference collaborators were the International NGO Working Group on Refugee Women and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and it took place during the Bosnian crisis and a few months after a major Beijing conference devoted to the rights of women. It was argued that out of the world’s refugees, eighty percent was Muslim, and seventy percent was made up of women or children, and so the aim of the conference was to set out guidelines for bringing them assistance.

In 1993, a year before the Sharjah conference, the Zagreb branch of Islamic Relief (later Islamic Relief Worldwide), headquartered in Birmingham, England, released a documentary video about the women and children of Bosnia and Herzegovina who had suffered violence and abuse at the hands of Serb fighters. Relying on sensitive interviews with victims for its powerful impact, it included fatwas by Islamic religious leaders, led by Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, advising that raped women were not to be held responsible for their

⁶⁷ *Tarīq al-amal*.

suffering, and that if children were born of rape they should be brought up as Muslims by the mother's husband or family.⁶⁸

The emphasis of the Sharjah conference was quite different: on the need to recognize the cultural and religious identity of uprooted Muslim women. The keynote speaker, a leading religious scholar, expounded a view of women's rights that continues to have considerable support in conservative Islamic circles. It accepts the concept of universal human rights, but claims that it is limited with regard to women, to whom Islam accords certain provisions: not to engage in wars and combat, a lesser responsibility when giving evidence before a judge, and the right to have household expenses provided by their husbands.⁶⁹ The inference drawn from such arguments is that like-minded Islamic charities are best placed to cater for Muslim women's needs. Since the 1990s, a small research literature has grown up around the question of "cultural proximity," considering the extent to which a confessional charity can avail itself of a privileged access to recipients of aid who subscribe to the same religion and/or who are attuned to the same kinship sensitivities.⁷⁰ For IIROSA and most of the Islamic institutions that it convened in Sharjah, the advantages of cultural proximity would not have been questioned. The Islamic Relief video about Bosnian women exemplifies the value of "cultural proximity" in a way more consistent with Western liberal views, and with the gradually rising movement of Muslim feminism.

In their responses to emergencies and developmental projects, Islamic charities have much in common with other NGOs, but they may also carry out specifically Islamic programs, which include building and repairing mosques, providing special meals for religious festival days, sponsoring pilgrimage visits to Mecca (including proxy visits on behalf of others), facilitating Qur'anic

⁶⁸ *Wounded Souls: The Women of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, directed by Adi A. Imamović (Birmingham: Islamic Relief, 1993).

⁶⁹ See Bellion-Jourdan, "Prédication, secours, combat," 378–91, 416–18; and Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan, *The Charitable Crescent*, 84, 156; also, *IIRO Newsletter* 1.4, December 23, 1994, 1–5.

⁷⁰ See Victoria Palmer, "Analysing 'Cultural Proximity': Islamic Relief Worldwide and Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh," *Development in Practice* 21, no. 1 (2011): 96–108; Jonathan Benthall, *Islamic Charities and Islamic Humanism in Troubled Times* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 3, 6, 38, 51–2, 55–6, 122.

memorization classes, and sometimes setting up funds to help young men to marry. The cause of relief aid for refugees is rooted in the story of the Prophet Muhammad's hijra, or exodus, to Medina. But one of the most favored objects for Muslim charitable works is the care of orphans—generally defined as children who have lost their fathers, because, in principle, the father is regarded as head of the family with all the attendant duties. The term “orphan” is sometimes a euphemism for a child who is rejected by a family for one reason or another. Arguably a concern for the welfare of orphaned children, considered in a long historical perspective, may be seen as part of a strategy for extending and consolidating the spread of Islam.

My own fieldwork in Jordan in 1996 included a visit to a day center, catering for two hundred girls and boys up to age fifteen, run by IIROSA in Amman just outside one of the oldest Palestinian refugee camps. In one respect, the policy of the day center, whose Jordanian supervisor had been trained by UNRWA, the UN body with responsibility for Palestinian refugees, was in harmony with current professional thinking in Western countries: she was opposed to residential orphanages, arguing in favor of sponsorship of the children within their extended families. But the emphasis on rote memorization of the Qur'an, with tuition in reading delayed until age eight or nine, was clearly an expression of the conservative approach to education that Saudi Arabia has done much to encourage and facilitate in many countries. Another point I registered from my visit to this IIROSA branch was that its allocation of resources in a given country depended as much on the priorities of the host government as on IIROSA's own independent assessment of needs. For example, IIROSA was in the process of bringing to an end projects to benefit Palestinians in northern Jordan after the Jordanian government argued there were greater needs among Transjordanians resident in the south of the kingdom.

The only available analysis of IIROSA's operations in a single country was published by the economic historian Rajeswary Ampalavanar Brown, and covers

the 1999 to 2006 period in Thailand.⁷¹ The proportion of Muslims among the Thai population as a whole is reported as between 5 and 6 percent, but in the three southern border provinces they outnumber non-Muslims by about three to one. Brown contends that IIROSA's activities in Thailand were authentically religious and charitable, and that "such Islamic resistance as there is in Thailand is not imported but due to local grievances. . . . For the Thai Muslims, *jihad* is only an emotional weapon, a fantasy. Saudi religious transnationalism in Thailand could only provide a weak ideological fraternity, not martyrs, since the enemy is ubiquitous and changing. . . . Neither anti-Americanism nor an anti-Western ideology gained a foothold among Muslims in Thailand."⁷²

Brown points out some of the negative features of IIROSA's work during this period. Its conservatism with regard to gender relations was incompatible with the liberal social norms of Thailand, and limited the acceptability of its health and medical projects. Micromanaging its projects from Jeddah, it allocated only subsidiary managerial positions to Thais, formed few links with local charities, and made no serious efforts to uplift the impoverished but resource-rich, Muslim-dominated south.⁷³ Brown's account of IIROSA's work

⁷¹ Kroessin and Mohamed provide some limited information on IIROSA's extensive programs in Somalia, which became a "collapsed state" since the demise of the Barre regime in 1991. They claim that there was no evidence that IIROSA was complicit in supporting subversive activities in Somalia. Mohammed R. Kroessin and Abdulfatah S. Mohamed, "Saudi Arabian NGOs in Somalia: 'Wahabi' da'wah or Humanitarian Aid?" in *Development, Civil Society and Faith-based Organizations: Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*, eds. Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 198–202. See also Andre Le Sage, "Islamic Charities in Somalia," in *Understanding Islamic Charities*, eds. Jon B. Alterman and Karin von Hippel (Washington, D.C.: CSIS Press, 2007), 147–65. Ould Ahmed Salem briefly describes the work of IIROSA in Mauretania before it was banned in 2003. Its management "reflected a sort of subtle blend of charity and ideology." It constructed a boarding school for 120 orphans, primary schools and a clinic, and supported 500 orphans in Nouakchott. Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, "Islam in Mauritania Between Political Expansion and Globalization: Elites, Institutions, Knowledge, and Networks," in *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, eds. Benjamin F. Soares and René Otayek (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 37. Kaag surveys the work of IIROSA and other transnational Islamic NGOs in Chad, in Mayke Kaag, "Aid, Umma, and Politics: Transnational Islamic NGOs in Chad," in *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, eds. Benjamin F. Soares and René Otayek (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), and in Africa more generally, in Mayke Kaag, "Gulf Charities in Africa," in *Gulf Charities and Islamic Philanthropy in the 'Age of Terror' and Beyond*, eds. Robert Lacey and Jonathan Benthall (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014), 79–94.

⁷² Brown, *Islam in Modern Thailand*, 191, 197.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 200. It appears from Brown's research that, in order to conform to the requirements of Thai government regulators, IIROSA produced more detailed and meticulous annual reports on its work within Thailand than was its custom in most other jurisdictions.

during this period is a valuably nuanced corrective to the facile generalizations that have circulated about its worldwide footprint. The directors in Jeddah would have been obliged to act with caution because of the extreme sensitivity of the religious question in Thailand, where the king was revered as a model Buddhist but is also ex officio the “upholder of religions.”

IIROSA’s core projects in Thailand, costing the equivalent of around \$21–28 million dollars per year, included the construction of mosques and orphanages, establishing madrasas and Islamic universities, publishing religious texts, and a range of disaster relief, health, and welfare operations that generally overrode the religious or ethnic affiliations of beneficiaries. However, anxieties among Thai and US officials about the motivations underlying Saudi charities preceded 2001, and intensified after the 9/11 attacks.

Islamic Charities after 9/11 and the Al-Aqsa Intifada

The world-shattering attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 resulted in a cloud forming above Islamic charities that has not been completely lifted almost two decades later. Since fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi nationals, the George W. Bush administration, supported by the US media, chose to scapegoat Saudi institutions—though the scrutiny of Saudi charities was complicated by the commercial and military ties linking Saudi Arabia with the US. A number of Saudi charities, including Al-Haramain and Benevolence International, were designated as terrorist entities by the US government and forced to close down. Two branches of IIROSA, but not the institution as a whole, were similarly designated as such.

A leading US researcher on Middle East politics concluded that, despite local aberrations and abuses, “thus far, publicly available evidence does not suggest that Saudi charities act as a wholesale front for sowing global terror,”⁷⁴ and another major expert on terrorist finance concluded in 2011 that Al-Qa`ida and its associates had increasingly relied on dispersed acts of crime to self-finance their activities.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, IIROSA and its parent, the MWL, were

⁷⁴ Jon B. Alterman, “Saudi Charities and Support for Terror,” in *Understanding Islamic Charities*, ed. Jon B. Alterman and Karin von Hippel (Washington, D.C.: CSIS Press, 2007), 76.

⁷⁵ Thomas Biersteker, “Sources of Terrorist Financing: Placing Charities Diversion in Perspective,” Internal report for Islamic Charities Project (Geneva: CCDP, Graduate Institute, 2011), 22.

named as co-defendants in many civil cases brought by victims and families of the 9/11 attacks.⁷⁶ These cases were still making slow progress in the New York courts in 2018. The Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA) passed by Congress in 2016 narrows the scope of the immunity of sovereign states from civil prosecution, so that the kingdom could in principle be sued directly. Under US criminal laws—originally enacted in 1998 but later reinforced—providing “material support” for terrorism is deemed equivalent to terrorism itself and can incur serious punishment, including life imprisonment.

Similarly, although no connection was ever convincingly argued between global operations of the Al-Qa`ida kind and Palestinian nationalist militancy, the US justice system has made little distinction of principle between the two.⁷⁷ Even though IIROSA seems to have had little direct commitment in Palestine itself until much later (2008–12), it was enrolled among thirty-six Islamic charities—including three in Britain that proceeded to expand and develop with the full approval of the British regulatory authorities—as a member of an umbrella body, the Union of Good (*i'tilāf al-khair*). This organization was founded in 2001 under the presidency of Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, the prominent cleric who was a spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, and who, at that time, was an outspoken apologist for suicide bombings in certain circumstances,⁷⁸ including the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories. The Union of Good was founded as a response to the suffering of Palestinians after the Al-Aqsa Intifada in October 2000 and the subsequent clashes during Israel's

⁷⁶ See, for instance, United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, “Appellants’ Consolidated Brief with respect to Personal Jurisdiction,” January 20, 2012, pp. 17, 104 and *passim*, www.motleyrice.com/sites/default/files/documents/AT_HR/9-11/Docket%20298%20-%20Appellants%20Consolidated%20Brief%20with%20Respect%20to%20Personal%20Jurisdiction.pdf.

⁷⁷ The most successful criminal case brought against Islamic charities in the US was against a Texas-based charity, the Holy Land Foundation, whose directors were convicted in 2008 of material support for Hamas on the grounds that local Palestinian charities, to which they had remitted funds, were facades for Hamas. The literature on punitive steps taken against Islamic charities in the US includes: ACLU, “Blocking Faith, Freezing Charity: Chilling Muslim Charitable Giving in the ‘War on Terrorism Financing’” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2009), www.aclu.org/files/pdfs/humanrights/blockingfaith.pdf; Jonathan Benthall, “Experto Crede: A Legal and Political Conundrum,” in *If Truth Be Told: The Politics of Public Ethnography*, ed. Didier Fassin (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 160–83.

⁷⁸ Magdi Abdelhadi, “Controversial Preacher with ‘Star Status,’” BBC News, July 7, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3874893.stm>.

suppression of the revolt, with a stated aim of alleviating distress and poverty. Some of its members were politically active in the Palestinian cause, while others were merely names on the membership list, but the whole organization and all associated with it came to be criticized as supporting Hamas, which had been an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine.⁷⁹ One consequence was a succession of legal cases, both criminal and civil, in Europe and the US that hinged on the question of the integrity (or otherwise) of individual charities either associated with the Union of Good or beneficiaries of its activities.

Also as a response to the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the Saudi government expressed indignation and contributed large sums to humanitarian relief in Palestine. Among other steps taken, Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz Al Saud set up a “Support Committee for the Al-Aqsa Intifada” in October 2000, assisted by telethons that brought in large private donations.⁸⁰ Critics of this committee have alleged that it was in part designed to provide an incentive for suicide bombers and other Palestinian fighters, in that some payments were made to families of those who died. Given that the committee itself was beyond the reach of US jurisdiction, one Middle East financial institution with a US branch, having provided services for the committee and for its facilitating local Islamic charities, became a proxy target for litigation.⁸¹ The kingdom has stood aside from such civil lawsuits on account of its sovereign immunity, but this was threatened by the passing of JASTA in 2016.

Revival and Decline of IIROSA

IIROSA appointed a new secretary general in 1996 in succession to Qurashi: Adnan bin Khalil Basha, a university professor who attempted to restore IIROSA to its former position of leadership during the 1990s in the face of adverse publicity emanating from the US. Every possible link with intergovernmental and other important institutions was pursued, and donors

⁷⁹ In 2002, the Israeli government declared the Union of Good an “unlawful organization.” In July 2008, all its members were also banned in Israel. In November 2008, the US Government declared the Union of Good a terrorist group.

⁸⁰ Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, 80. This committee was a member of the Union of Good.

⁸¹ *Linde et al. vs. Arab Bank, PLC* – a case that was initiated in 2004 and finally settled in 2018. See the Opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, February 9, 2018, No. 16-2119-cv (L). <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/ca2/16-2119/16-2119-2018-02-09.html>.

to IIROSA were honored.⁸² Basha's ambition was to set a standard in laying down a "strategic basis and principles for charity work,"⁸³ and, by 2011, he was able to initiate a new period of expansion, publicized with Arabic-language bulletins distributed to newspapers, and by means of a lavishly illustrated English-language magazine *Egatha* (Arabic *ighātha*).⁸⁴ These efforts recorded the patronage since IIROSA's foundation of King Abdullah (1924–2015), Crown Prince Sultan (1928c.–2011), and Prince Nayef (1934–2012), but also showed how the organization was reaching out to garner support from all possible influential sources. Though IIROSA did not seem to be engaged any more in large-scale relief efforts, it recorded many meetings with dignitaries and testimonials to its work. The magazine also provided an outlet for imaginative articles on global topics such as environmental protection, rationalization of water use, hydroponics, urban horticulture, the maltreatment of old people, the health dangers of smoking, and social media as a marketing tool.⁸⁵

IIROSA's reported scale of operations in 2011–12 is hard to assess in retrospect, although a summary of IIROSA's "urgent relief program" in thirty-six countries in 2006 reports a total expenditure of only about \$4.7 million.⁸⁶ In addition, IIROSA provided free meals for 10,000 poor families in Mecca during the month of Ramadan, took part in International Disability Day in Mecca, and provided relief assistance for victims of floods in the Bisha region of southwestern Saudi Arabia—evidence that IIROSA was now responding to needs within the kingdom as well as overseas. Basha published a figure of 105,000 orphans currently sponsored by IIROSA in the kingdom and abroad—and he was aiming to raise this number to 250,000—but this must be a mistranslation into English: he may be assumed to have meant the total number of orphans ever sponsored by IIROSA.⁸⁷ Its British counterpart, Islamic Relief Worldwide, was sponsoring about 30,000 orphans at about

⁸² *IIRO Annual Report*, cited by Marie Juul Petersen, *For Humanity or for the Umma?*, 91.

⁸³ Marie Juul Petersen, *For Humanity or for the Umma?*, 77.

⁸⁴ As in the Arabic name of IIROSA: *hai'at al-ighātha al-islāmiyya al-`ālamīyya*. During the Bosnian war, IIROSA had used the name IGASA, the local pronunciation of *ighātha*.

⁸⁵ E.g. Houssam Youssef Ezz Eldin, "IIROSA in the Virtual World on the Internet," *Egatha* 2, no. 5 (February 2012): 30–1.

⁸⁶ International Islamic Relief Organization, *IIRO Bulletin*, 2007, www.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/8Pagesfromiirosamarch2007color2.pdf.

⁸⁷ "IIROSA Sponsors 105,000 Orphans in the Kingdom and Abroad," *Egatha* 1, no. 1 (2011): 20.

the same time, and a later IIROSA report for the same year (under new management) recorded 37,195 orphans in twenty-six countries as the total.⁸⁸ The number of orphans sponsored was cut in January 2015 to 5,258, all within the kingdom. Basha also reported on a number of innovative programs including pediatric open-heart surgery at the University of Aleppo, carried out by a Saudi medical team from Jeddah.⁸⁹

During the second half of 2012, Basha retired and a new regime took over. An IIROSA report for 2011–12 makes implausible claims for its importance as “the first reference of relief and humanitarian work in the Islamic world,” and stating as its chief (and extremely bold) objective “to be among the first three organizations that provide relief for the disaster-stricken areas around the world.”⁹⁰ Between 2013 and 2015, IIROSA continued to circulate bulletins, but, by 2015, the scope seems to have been sharply reduced.

Soft Power through Humanitarianism: Secular vs Islamic

Caught in the web of the “war on terror” declared by President George W. Bush, those Saudi international charities that escaped being closed down were forced to downsize because of the difficulty of raising funds. For instance, donations to WAMY were reportedly down by forty percent in 2006 from five years before,⁹¹ and IIROSA’s income was reduced by a similar proportion.⁹² By contrast, many British Islamic charities grew successfully since the beginning

⁸⁸ *IIROSA Overall Performance Report 2011/12*, 19.

⁸⁹ “Saudi Medical Team Sponsored by IIROSA Performs Open-Heart Surgeries in Syria,” *Egatha* 1, no. 1 (March 2011): 25.

⁹⁰ *IIROSA Overall Performance Report 2011/12*, 9, 11. The Acting Secretary General is named as H.E. Ehssan Saleh Taieb. Named as Secretary General in press reports in 2015 and 2016, he was succeeded in December 2016 by Hassan Darweesh Shahbar (see footnote 1). Taieb was formerly director of social affairs in the western province of Saudi Arabia, “Saudis Tough on Begging,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1997, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1997-05-04/features/9705040361_1_saudi-arabia-hajj-begging. King Abdullah, Crown Prince Salman (Deputy Prime Minister), and Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud (Second Deputy Prime Minister) lead the list of patrons, followed by Abdullah bin Abdul Mohsin Al-Turki, Secretary General of MWL.

⁹¹ Alterman, “Saudi Charities and Support for Terror,” 74.

⁹² IIROSA’s budget in 2010 was about SR150 million or \$40 million. P.K. Abdul Ghafour and Syed Abdul Aziz Shamsuddin, “IIROSA Vows to Carry on with Global Humanitarian Programs,” *Arab News*, April 4, 2010, www.arabnews.com/node/341402. Despite the drop in donations, IIRO had been able to accumulate investments, including six tower blocks in Mecca constructed between 1998 and 2009. International Islamic Relief Organization, *IIROSA Overall Performance Report 2011/12 (1432/33H)*, www.egatha.org/pdf/annualreport/iirosa_annualreport_3233_en.pdf. See footnote 3.

of the twenty-first century, partly as a result of their decision to abstain entirely from religious activities. This enabled them to establish good working relations with Christian and secular NGOs, and to secure funding from governments and other non-Islamic sources. Such a secularizing policy was not adopted by international Saudi charities—with a few exceptions such as the Al-Basar International Foundation, which provides specialist eye care in Asia and Africa, and which was still permitted to work abroad in 2017. However, as intimated in the introduction, the recent remodeling of a reduced IIROSA represents a shift towards secularization. Many of the domestic charities in the kingdom that exhibit a “vibrant culture of benevolent giving and community support” are inspired by Islamic principles but strikingly lack emphatic religiosity.⁹³

IIROSA was primarily a relief agency with a strongly Islamic component. Marie Juul Petersen has characterized its aid ideology as “sacralizing aid,” as opposed to the British Islamic charities such as Islamic Relief Worldwide, which on the contrary were “secularizing Islam,” aiming to subordinate the charitable precepts of the religion to the predominantly secular ethos of relief and development, and thus to gain allies and supporters with such success that they could ignore the protests of some Muslim traditionalists that they were betraying the faith (a charge that they have vigorously rejected). Another prominent and comparable Saudi-based charity, WAMY, was also for practical purposes greatly reduced in 2017, though its British branch WAMY UK still survived in vestigial form. WAMY was primarily concerned with its extensive orphan programs and with education, including practical warnings about the dangers of narcotics and other addictions, but it also embarked on some emergency relief operations. Founded in 1972, it claimed in its heyday to have branches in fifty-six countries and affiliations with some five hundred youth organizations all over the world. It aimed to “preserve the identity of Muslim youth and help overcome the problems they face in modern society,” and to “introduce Islam to non-Muslims in its purest form as a comprehensive system and way of life.”⁹⁴

⁹³ Nora Derbal, “Domestic, Religious, Civic? Notes on the Institutionalized Charitable Field in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia,” in *Gulf Charities and Islamic Philanthropy*, eds. Robert Lacey and Jonathan Benthall (Berlin: Gerlach, 2014), 145–67.

⁹⁴ This wording had been removed from the website in May 2017, www.wamy.co.uk.

In keeping with much of the religious teaching disseminated by the Saudi religious establishment through mosques and a variety of communication media, WAMY's rambling branch structure sometimes allowed sentiments to escape that could be held against it by critics.⁹⁵ A booklet attacking the Shi`a faith as "false and baseless," published in 1995, argued that the foundation of Shi`ism resulted from a Jewish conspiracy to sow division in Islam.⁹⁶ WAMY's motivation for publishing such literature stemmed from its perceived role as a primarily educational organization. It is more surprising that IIROSA, dedicated as it has been to humanitarian relief, published a booklet in 2002 on "the rights of non-Muslims in the Islamic world," concluding with an absolute affirmation, based on the authority of the Qur'an and hadiths, of the duty of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to forbid public expressions of any other faith within its borders. This publishing venture was aimed to "fortify the nation and faith and [link] the contemporary Muslim with his Islamic pure roots."⁹⁷

Whereas the quest for ideological purity may be regarded, in comparative social science, as a cultural universal—and rules relating to physical and/or spiritual pollution are fundamental to most, if not all religions—the Wahhabi-Salafi interpretation of Islam may be seen as manifestation of "hyper-purism."⁹⁸ Yet, as noted above, and as exemplified by texts emanating from IIROSA and WAMY, material assistance and *da`wa* were presented since the 1970s as a comprehensive whole, *shumūliyyat al-islām*—a position specially associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. It is easy to explain why this kind of humanitarian diplomacy became an important part of Saudi foreign policy during this period—easier, indeed, than to explain how the kingdom came to distribute much larger amounts of official, entirely secular inter-governmental aid without apparently securing a substantial dividend in "soft power."

⁹⁵ See Evan F. Kohlmann, "The Role of Islamic Charities in International Terrorist Recruitment and Financing," Working Paper no. 2006/7 (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2006), 4–5.

⁹⁶ Saeed Ismael, *The Difference between the Shi`ites and the Majority of Muslim Scholars* (US office, World Assembly of Muslim Youth, 1995), 32, 1.

⁹⁷ Saleh Hussain Al-Aayed, *The Rights of Non-Muslims in the Islamic World* (Riyadh: Dar Eshbelia, 2002), 63–70, and back cover.

⁹⁸ Benthall, *Islamic Charities*, 115–34. A relevant distinction between "purist" and "activist" Salafis in Kuwait is made by Zoltan Pall in "Kuwaiti Salafism and its Growing Influence in the Levant" (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014).

Why the Disengagement from the “Comprehensive Call?”

The policy of rationalization and centralization of all aspects of Saudi institutional life under the Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, is enough to explain why KSRelief was granted a monopoly over all foreign aid, with the exception of some programs initiated by MWL. Reportedly, Mohammad bin Salman has established control over all important branches of the administration, including personal appointments, while the religious establishment has been gradually but consistently losing its authority. The removal of all religious content from this foreign aid was doubtless a response to the widespread criticism of the kingdom’s policy over four decades of disseminating Wahhabi-Hanbali interpretations of Islam worldwide. These interpretations—however qualified by injunctions that good Muslims should be obedient to the ruling power in their places of residence—can demonstrably provide ideological nutrients for violent extremism, when mixed with uncompromising calls to jihad inspired by ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb.

In the spring of 2017, the war in Yemen elicited a major humanitarian response from Saudi Arabia, intended to compensate for the ravages caused by the war in which the kingdom was a protagonist since its intervention in 2015 to oppose the Houthi insurgency. KSRelief is now the only foreign aid agency in the kingdom allowed to intervene, consolidating government allocations together with private donations under its motto *naḥwa al-insāniya bilā ḥudūd* (towards an unrestricted humanity). In May 2017, it claimed to have given billions of dollars in aid to Yemen, in association with thirty-six partner organizations. It insisted that its relief operations in Yemen were impartial and consistent with International Humanitarian Law.⁹⁹ At this time of writing, any credit given to Saudi Arabia for its humanitarian efforts—the Yemen Comprehensive Humanitarian Operations Plan, announced in January 2018—is heavily overshadowed by accusations of indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets, and dire warnings of the worst humanitarian crisis since

⁹⁹ Video interviews with the Supervisor General of the Foundation, Abdullah Al Rabeah, an eminent surgeon well known for his work on the separation of conjoined twins of many different nationalities. “KSRelief’s Supervisor General Al Rabeah on Saudi Arabia’s Humanitarian Aid and Relief Program,” Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Brussels, October 21, 2016, <http://ksmissioneu.net/ksreliefs-supervisor-general-al-rabeah-saudi-arabias-humanitarian-aid-relief-program>.

1945, partly as a result of a blockade of the ports of Hodeida and Saleef, with the world's worst cholera outbreak and eight million Yemenis facing acute food insecurity. Though the causes of the war are complex, a leading political scientist has argued that the Saudi leadership is more seriously threatened by its own "missteps, most notably walking hurriedly into the minefield that is Yemen" than by the various structural challenges that it faces.¹⁰⁰

KSRelief's reports are typical of Saudi Arabia in giving quantifications of beneficiaries reached with food aid, tons of dates distributed, numbers of wounded Yemenis treated, and the like. Humanitarian aid in the West has been subjected to searching professional critique since the 1990s, but this seems completely absent in Saudi Arabia. There appears moreover to be no inclination on behalf of the KSRelief management to build up operational expertise. Another point that emerges clearly from studying KSRelief's reports is that the *da'wa* aspect of Saudi humanitarian aid—integral to the ideology and practice of IIROSA and its sister organizations—is entirely excluded.

It would seem that the current leadership of the kingdom has had no confidence in the ability of Saudi citizens to develop humanitarian institutions that could adapt to accepted international norms such as nondiscrimination and accountability, and/or that it did not wish to see the growth of any international NGO sector that might risk becoming a danger to the stability and prestige of the state. Yet, the outward-looking approaches adopted by IIROSA Secretaries General Qurashi in the 1990s and Bashar in the 2000s suggest that IIROSA did have considerable potential to adapt as a member of the comity of international NGOs, a potential that was encouraged by neutral intermediaries such as the Swiss government.¹⁰¹

The lack of coverage of these issues in the Saudi media is notable. It would appear that, as of 2018, the Saudi press never mentions the kingdom's foreign aid other than KSRelief,¹⁰² which receives donations only when there is a telethon or public appeal. The press does, however, describe the strict measures the kingdom has taken to eliminate corruption in charities and the

¹⁰⁰ Kamrava, *Inside the Arab State*, 197. See also Peter Beaumont, "A Cynical PR Exercise: Critics Round on \$3.5bn Plan to Allay Yemen Suffering," *Guardian*, March 1, 2018.

¹⁰¹ Benthall, *Islamic Charities*, 81–98.

¹⁰² Information from a resident Saudi interlocutor; an exception is the IIROSA program in Comoros.

funding of terror. Prince Mohammad bin Salman's blueprint for the country's future, Vision 2030, published in 2016, contained but one passing reference to overseas aid.¹⁰³

Conclusion: Consequences of the Disengagement

Saudi Arabia has earned some reputational credit for its bankrolling of governmental and intergovernmental institutions in their humanitarian and developmental programs. However, the policy of centralizing all foreign aid does not conduce to playing a significant role amid the current international ferment of debate about the future of aid from wealthy countries to the global periphery. One consequence is that donors such as Saudi Arabia can be seen by the oligopoly of Western aid agencies as mere providers of financial aid flows. "Opportunity knocks: why non-Western donors enter humanitarianism and how to make the best of it" was the title, perhaps too candid, of an article in a leading journal in 2011.¹⁰⁴ The "cultural proximity" thesis suggests that, whereas some kinds of foreign aid—for example, public health programs or large-scale reconstruction after disasters—can be provided only by governments or other large organizations, there is also an important role for donors that can engage with local civil society, including religious networks whether Christian churches or mosque committees. One of the outcomes of the World Humanitarian Forum, held in Istanbul in 2016, was a call for "localization," urging that local responders should receive a much higher proportion of international humanitarian assistance than they receive at present.¹⁰⁵

Bottom-up civil society within Saudi Arabia is extremely circumscribed, but a wide spectrum of domestic charities does testify to a degree of active

¹⁰³ "The values of giving, compassion, cooperation and empathy are firmly entrenched in our society. We have already played an influential role in providing social aid locally, regionally and globally. In the future, we will formalize and strengthen the organization of our social and compassionate work so that our efforts have the maximum results and impact," Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "National Vision 2030," <http://vision2030.gov.sa/en/node/12>. The National Transformation Program 2020 (2017) aims at an expansion of domestic voluntary organizations as a proportion of the national economy, e.g. increasing the percentage of the national labor force working in third-sector organizations from 0.6 to 1.4 (against a global benchmark of 9.7), and increasing the number of volunteers in "third sector" organizations from 35,000 to 300,000. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "National Transformation Program 2020," 54–5, http://vision2030.gov.sa/sites/default/files/NTP_En.pdf.

¹⁰⁴ Andrea Binder and Claudia Meier, "Opportunity Knocks: Why Non-Western Donors Enter Humanitarianism and How to Make the Best of it," *International Review of the Red Cross* 93, no. 884 (December 2011): 1135–49.

¹⁰⁵ *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2017*, 74.

voluntarism that mitigates the absolutism of the state.¹⁰⁶ The steps taken under the authority of King Salman since his accession have had the effect of inhibiting Saudi citizens from carrying out their zakat obligations as they see them. Zakat is the third pillar of Islam, and so closely linked in the Qur'an with prayer that if it is not paid, all prayer is considered to be ineffective. In May 2017, many Saudi citizens were paying zakat informally, for instance to individuals in need who are known to a friend or family member. This has always been a common practice, in the kingdom as in many other Muslim-majority countries. But there was widespread mistrust of tightly controlled official channels for paying zakat, because of fear that they were subject to political decisions and/or irregular diversion. Donors wished to give anonymously without the risk of their being traced and profiled—partly for reasons of political caution, and partly because zakat donations are held to be a matter between the donor and God. There was no clear way in which zakat donations could be sent in response to the most urgent needs: for instance, to Somalia. Conversely, some private remittances have probably been sent as zakat to foreign extremist causes that the Saudi authorities have undertaken to starve of funds—an unintended consequence of their policy of total centralization of aid.

Debates about the proper use of zakat go to the heart of current debates within Islam. In an interview, a resident of Mecca told me of his sadness that in “a country that was founded upon and seeks its legitimacy via the concept of servitude to God and then to the *umma*,” the very charitable and educational projects that would underpin the unity of the *umma* seem to be vanishing.¹⁰⁷ Meanwhile, organizations such as IIROSA have absented themselves from conflict zones and disaster areas where they were formerly prominent. In their study *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failure, 2011–12*—probably the most thorough retrospective analysis published to date of a famine and ensuing relief programs—Maxwell and Majid devote considerable space to the interventions by Muslim aid agencies from Turkey and the Middle East. These were less professionalized than their Western counterparts, but many of their fieldworkers showed a strong solidarity with affected communities. “Non-

¹⁰⁶ Derbal, “Domestic, Religious, Civic?,” 162 and 167.

¹⁰⁷ Personal communication, May 2017.

Western actors—particularly Islamic actors—put the issues of charity and of voluntary action squarely back in the centre of humanitarianism, at least in terms of intention.”¹⁰⁸

The new Saudi policies resulted in what we may call a “humanitarian deficit.” This was already evident as a result of the forced cutbacks after 9/11; but a disconcerting feature of Gulf-based charities has been their lack of interest in collecting documentation as evidence of this deficit. Their attitude has been more that no evidence was needed to substantiate or defend their fundamental right to raise and distribute funds.

We may also identify a “humanitarian vacuum,” created when legitimate humanitarian actors are absent. Photographs taken in 2015 appear to show UN/WHO food aid rebranded as coming from the so-called Islamic State’s “Department of Relief.”¹⁰⁹ And the following is an extract from a letter written by the leader of Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian peninsula (Nasir Al-Wuhayshi) to his counterpart in Mali on May 21, 2012, recovered from a safe house in Mali:

Try to win them [the population] over through the conveniences of life and by taking care of their daily needs like food, electricity and water. Providing these necessities will have a great effect on people, and will make them sympathize with us and feel that their fate is tied to ours. This is what we’ve observed during our short experience [in Yemen].¹¹⁰

A contrast can be drawn between Islamists in the mold of the Muslim Brotherhood, who with various degrees of determination—sometimes shading into violence—have used social service provision to oppose from within existing political systems, and jihadist organizations that try to use social service

¹⁰⁸ Daniel Maxwell and Nisar Majid, *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011–12* (London: Hurst, 2016), 196.

¹⁰⁹ “Photos Suggest ISIS Rebranding U.N. Food Aid,” *Al Arabiya News*, February 2, 2015, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2015/02/02/Photos-suggest-ISIS-rebranding-U-N-humanitarian-aid-.html>. This and other similar photographs were posted on ISIS-affiliated websites, describing the aid as “zakat.”

¹¹⁰ “Al-Qaida Papers,” Associated Press, 3, www.longwarjournal.org/images/al-qaida-papers-how-to-run-a-state.pdf; and Steven Brooke, “The Muslim Brotherhood’s Social Outreach after the Egyptian Coup,” Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, August, 2015, 11, www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Egypt_Brooke-FINALE-2.pdf.

provision to contest the very existence of the state, with a view to undermining and destroying it.¹¹¹ In September 2017, the Al-Qa`ida affiliate in Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (an offshoot of the Al-Nusra Front), was administering the northwestern province of Idlib as a de facto statelet, wooing civilians with a “hearts and minds” approach that included the dispatch of convoys of bread for the poor.¹¹²

The record of organizations such as IIROSA and WAMY has been mixed and controversial. Even though they failed to produce exemplary, charismatic leaders of Islamic charities of the caliber of Hany El-Banna in Britain or the late Abdul Sattar Edhi in Pakistan, their collapse has aggravated the humanitarian deficit and the humanitarian vacuum in many crisis-torn regions of the Muslim-majority world. Meanwhile, other states have bid to take over the leadership of humanitarian diplomacy in the region. In 2014, the United Arab Emirates joined the world’s largest twenty humanitarian donors,¹¹³ and it has formed a close association with the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).¹¹⁴ But the UAE has shown no inclination to engage with civil society organizations, or to join in transnational exchanges on the efficacy and ethics of humanitarian action. This leadership role, at a time of glaring humanitarian needs, has been assumed in the Middle East by Qatar and Turkey, but their commitment and influence are constrained.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Steven Brooke, “The Muslim Brotherhood’s Social Outreach,” 12.

¹¹² Louise Callaghan, “Al-Qaeda Quietly Tightens its Grip in Syria while US ‘Obsesses’ about Isis,” *The Sunday Times*, September 17, 2017, www.thetimes.co.uk/article/al-qaeda-quietly-tightens-its-grip-in-syria-while-us-obsesses-about-isis-98fg8xm6q.

¹¹³ *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2015*, 32.

¹¹⁴ Kimberly Smith, “United Arab Emirates Statistical Reporting to the OECD Development Assistance Committee,” OECD, March, 2011, www.oecd.org/dac/stats/47283752.pdf.

¹¹⁵ With some sponsorship from the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva and participation by a range of international organizations and by individuals prominent in the humanitarian field. As for Kuwait, for an account of its longstanding and extensive record of foreign aid, mainly delivered bilaterally to recipient states, see Mara A. Leichtman, “Kuwaiti Humanitarianism: The History and Expansion of Kuwait’s Foreign Assistance Policies,” Changing Landscape of Assistance to Conflict-Affected States: Emerging and Traditional Donors and Opportunities for Collaboration, *Policy Brief 11*, George Mason University/Stimson Center, August 2017, www.stimson.org/sites/default/files/file-attachments/Kuwaiti%20Humanitarianism-%20The%20History%20and%20Expansion%20of%20Kuwait's%20Foreign%20Assistance%20Policies_0.pdf.

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