

Situating Muslim Philanthropy in Time and Place

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At the launch of this journal to deepen research and understanding of Muslim philanthropy, it is worth looking back over past experience in the field. The path toward a more coherent, empirical approach to the study of Muslim faith and giving has not always been without bumps in the road, some of which I will examine in this essay. For the small but growing group of contemporary scholars, this journal is a welcome initiative. It holds the promise of drawing a fresh cohort of researchers from diverse disciplines into our ranks. Through symposia and online discussion, it may also reinvigorate past efforts to link our scholarly community worldwide.

One such effort worthy of evaluation is the Muslim Philanthropy Network (MPN), which several members of the editorial board of this journal helped to initiate in 2008. While that formal network is currently dormant, many of the professional ties it spawned remain active.² In this essay, I will attempt to understand the dynamics underlying that network and efforts to expand its membership and scope of action in Muslim-majority countries.

MPN was the initiative of a young academic center at the American University in Cairo³ dedicated to the study of philanthropy and civic engagement throughout the Arab region, in partnership with Indiana University's long-standing Center on Philanthropy.⁴ From its founding in 2006, AUC's Gerhart Center set about documenting the array of deeply-rooted religious

² A collection of documents, studies, and the proceedings of the founding meeting are accessible online at the American University in Cairo portal, DAR: <http://dar.aucegypt.edu>.

³ Now the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy, Civic Engagement and Responsible Business, American University in Cairo.

⁴ Renamed and expanded in 2013 to become the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.

practices of giving and conceptions of social responsibility throughout the Arabic-speaking region. In books and working papers, an effort was launched to identify emerging trends in institutional giving and to advocate for a more strategic vision of what philanthropy might accomplish in the world.⁵

Similarly, under the leadership of Dean William Plater at IUPUI, the Center on Philanthropy began promoting a new program of graduate training and research on Muslim philanthropy. My relationship with the Center on Philanthropy dated to previous residence for a PhD program at IU Bloomington. In 2006, I met Dean Plater and discovered our mutual interests in the philanthropy of the Muslim world. Over the next two years, we developed the idea for an international network that would link scholars sharing an interest in research, teaching, and advocacy for Muslim philanthropy. A concept note soon followed. We set out in search of universities and individuals who might become founding members, and of course, for donors. What follows is an account of that journey.

I firmly believe that lateral networks are an emerging feature of how our digitized world operates and will increasingly operate in the future. Elsewhere I have linked the network model

⁵ In 2011, the Gerhart Center initiated an annual conference called Takaful, focusing on philanthropy and civic engagement. Takaful has become an established venue for scholars and practitioners from across the world to exchange knowledge and experience as it relates to the Arab region. You can find a selection of papers at

<http://schools.aucegypt.edu/research/gerhart/rprogram/takaful/Pages/TakafulPub.aspx>.

to recent social movements and civic initiatives in the Arab region.⁶ From the worlds of business to politics to academia, networks are proving to be powerful vehicles for sharing information and mobilizing around a collective goal. This journal itself provides a new venue for understanding how the emerging field of Muslim philanthropy is networked digitally and in geographic space.

The one-sentence summary conclusion I have reached about our early endeavors with the Muslim Philanthropy Network is this: gathering individual scholars and practitioners is relatively straightforward – we had nearly 140 members and an impressive number of active participants toward the end of the process. However, getting universities, foundations, and think tanks to join in a collaborative network around Muslim philanthropy was much more difficult. The reasons behind this disparity are worth reflecting upon for those who pick up the baton and promote similar networks in the future.

The challenges were in part related to funding, or more accurately the lack thereof, despite extensive efforts to find support in the Arab region and beyond. As a result, institutions – especially universities – were hesitant to participate in our new initiative. Administrators are understandably wary of overstressing their faculty and resources with new projects that do not have adequate seed money.

Our problems raising capital were two-fold. First, very few donor organizations recognize the potential of programs seen as involving ‘infrastructure’ rather than actual projects with tangible products and outcomes that can be measured. We argued that building a network

⁶ Ibrahim, B. L. (2017). Higher Education in Contested Settings: the Global-Local Challenge. *Higher Education in the World. Towards a Socially Responsible University: Balancing the Global with the Local*. Retrieved from <http://guninetwork.org>.

takes time and patience. Ultimately, we aspired for a high-impact outcome – a linked set of academic institutions prepared to exchange curricula, students and faculty, to engage in interdisciplinary research, as well as organize convenings and publications. That was a big dream, but one that seemed to us worth working toward, even while taking small steps in the beginning.

We also struggled to find donors who were willing to make multi-year grants to maintain and grow the network and support its activities. After an initial and very successful founding seminar in Pocantico, supported by the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation at their conference center in New York, and despite multiple proposals to US, European and MENA region donors, only one foundation came on board to support the network. In response to a proposal to build a global consortium of universities, the Gerhart Center received instead a modest contribution for one year of core support for the Center from the Prince Alwaleed Foundation.

Dean Plater was determined to keep the MPN viable and connected. He allocated funds at his disposal to hire a young graduate of the Masters program in philanthropy to coordinate a newsletter among members. During that period, IDRC provided a one year grant to set up and populate a digital library at AUC to support the MPN. We stretched that over two years to form a steering group, hire an active coordinator and begin the process of collecting materials for the digital library. As envisioned, the Muslim Philanthropy Digital Library would not only contain published research but also archival-type materials such as *waqf* accounts, charters for foundations and endowments, video interviews with philanthropists, conference proceedings and so forth.⁷

⁷ This process was facilitated by cooperation with IUPUI's Payton Philanthropic Library.

Receiving permission to digitize was the most difficult task of all, not because of reluctance to allow access, but because communication with libraries and research centers in the Middle East and Asia was painfully slow. Most of our requests received no response at all. Recent news that the library of the University of Tehran, with extensive collections on *awqaf* and *zakat* in Iran, is interested to cooperate on such a project is indeed welcome. It suggests that with time, university libraries and perhaps others are becoming more responsive to efforts to create global repositories of digitized materials.

In retrospect, however, I believe it would be misleading to attribute the primary challenge faced by MPN to inadequate funding or lack of interest in digital repositories. Networks, by definition, are laterally organized and non-hierarchical structures that should be able to survive lean years if members are motivated to engage with their peers. Indeed, there were enthusiastic responses from individual scholars and a robust growth in membership for several years. Members exchanged research papers and met in side meetings at conferences. We were able to encourage junior scholars by including them in AUC's Takaful conference and other opportunities to gather with peers. At least two PhD students at IUPUI pursued dissertation topics related to Muslim philanthropy and one now teaches on their faculty. The Muslim Philanthropy Digital Library coordinator provides another example of a PhD student who wrote her dissertation at Oxford on philanthropy in post-revolutionary Tunisia. On an individual level, the network succeeded. We need, then, to look elsewhere for the major obstacles to sustainability for the MPN.

As mentioned before, our ultimate vision was of a global network of universities that would collaborate on research, offer student exchanges, and develop curricular materials that might someday make possible a circulation of specialized faculty and jointly-offered graduate

degrees. While recognizing the ambitious nature of this goal, we wanted to lay the groundwork - and students were excited about the prospect of greater international exposure during their graduate studies. In the early stages, we anticipated that the main obstacles would come from administrators, who often object that graduation requirements must be met in residence on their own campuses or voice concerns about the costs of faculty and student exchange programs. Yet when we began to raise the idea of a consortium on the theme of Muslim philanthropy among universities in the Middle East, we were greeted by reluctance or outright resistance, with very few exceptions

We do not believe the resistance was because philanthropy as an academic field is still in its infancy. Several of the vice chancellors and provosts we met with were enthusiastic about the idea of philanthropic studies at their institutions. Rather, we had to conclude that the term “Muslim” as a qualifier was at the heart of our failure to gain interest from university leaders, and even many faculty members, with whom we discussed the Muslim Philanthropy Network. Early on, we defined Muslim philanthropy more broadly than religiously-motivated giving. Our definition embraced the wide range of beliefs and practices around giving in Muslim-majority countries and their Diasporas. A topic that we thought would be fresh and attractive in the MENA region, instead invoked various degrees of concern or polite disinterest. The same academics who routinely decry the dearth of indigenous research and theory were not prepared at that juncture to entertain the idea of devoting a special program to Muslim philanthropy.

To understand this response, it is necessary to place it within the contemporary context of national debates in Egypt and Turkey, the two countries we canvassed initially. Each country in 2008 was at a different stage of response to the resurgence of political Islam. For Turkey, there was a growing realization that an elected Islamist government was chipping away at well-

established secular foundations of the society. In Egypt, where Islam has formed a pillar of the state for years, in word if not in deed, a similar religious movement was not in power, but growing rapidly. Egyptians we spoke to were particularly sensitive to the large amount of Gulf funding that supported both Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood through schools, mosques, and publishing houses. Both countries were thus in the throes of an intense struggle over faith and national identity.

It had become virtually impossible by 2008 to keep politics out of the debates. In the MENA region, the fault lines were drawn sharply, as conservative strands of Islam sought to shape communities to mirror their vision of a Muslim society. They condemned the ‘godless Arab state’ and provided social services to poor communities neglected by the government. Those who favored liberal, more tolerant interpretations of Islam, embracing ethnic and religious diversity for example, were (and are) accused by Islamists of western pollution and of embracing a diluted form of the faith. Films, school texts, dress for women and the segregation of public space became arenas for contestation. Many believing Muslims, especially a younger generation in the academy, turned away from engagement in any form of religious discourse or public debate. They argued that the lines were so firmly drawn that no one ever convinced another to shift position; it was much better to avoid religious topics altogether. In that atmosphere, a new academic program with the word ‘Muslim’ in its title stood little chance of acceptance.

In 2008, the IU-AUC team⁸ visited Turkish and Egyptian universities to elicit interest in the consortium. The fault lines of that debate formed a subtext of every conversation we had

⁸ The delegation was made up of Bill Plater, Dwight Burlingame, and Patrick Rooney from IUPUI and myself.

about the consortium and its goals. We visited mainly private universities and semi-autonomous ones with a liberal arts tradition such as Boğaziçi University in Istanbul. In each visit, we argued that a fuller understanding of the rich history and current innovation in Muslim giving was actually a bulwark against extremism.⁹

As we encountered them, universities offered clear reflections of the political milieu of the times, in which faculty and administrators felt a need to hold the line against insertion of religious-political ideology into the independence of their institutions. Even university presidents who were interested in pursuing a joint program of work with us faced other geopolitical problems, such as tensions around inviting scholars from Israel to visit their campuses. Two university presidents attended the organizing meeting in Pocantico - and still the consortia of universities never made it off the ground.

I would argue that the term ‘Muslim’ was being reduced from its historical and cultural meanings to become a code for something else. To qualify any noun with ‘Muslim’ was to be suspected in some quarters of insinuating political and conservative Islam into the academy. In Turkey in 2008 (as in Egypt following the election of a Muslim Brotherhood president in 2012), the widespread view was that the ruling party was systematically dismantling the secular foundations of the republic. We probably appeared somewhat naive to many Turks, who were

⁹ Liberal thinking within Islam is usually framed around openness to diversity and acceptance of reinterpretations regarding gender, science, and personal rights that make the faith more consistent with modern society. It is distinct from secularism, which supports the complete removal of religion from public life, although this term is widespread in framing the debate in Turkey and to a lesser degree in Egypt.

living every day with the policy changes instituted by the AKP. However, Erdogan's government still appeared to many both in the Arab region and beyond as a promising example of 'moderate Islam.'

As we dug deeper into the resistance to our project, it became clear that it had little to do with philanthropy as practiced by Muslims at all. Many felt compelled to protect their universities from the rising political discourse on Islam. Faculty pointed to the frequent news reports from around the region of extremist funding being used for the spread of terror or political recruitment. From Turks, we heard accounts of a government that was trying to influence what books could be taught and of ministries where it had become impossible to be hired unless a woman wore the headscarf. Of course, Turkish university administrators and faculty were not actors in a cultural vacuum. They were deeply influenced by the modernizing and secularist mission of Kemal Attaturk and the historical moment in which post-Ottoman Turkey was founded. Kemalism was the dominant national discourse for decades before the rise of the AKP - and it was Kemalists in power who had first politicized the headscarf by barring it in public institutions, including universities.

As we became more nuanced in our understanding of the layers of meaning attached to Muslim philanthropy, we began to appreciate this irony: the region which gave birth to the central institutions of Muslim philanthropy, including *zakat*, *sadaqa*, *waqf* and *qard el hassan*, is now among the most contested spaces for its study. We recognized that much of the controversy is only peripherally about philanthropy per se, stemming instead from region-wide political struggles between Islamists and the more liberal groups who oppose them. In an attempt to diffuse the debates, we stepped back and reviewed the way we presented our definition of Muslim philanthropy. These internal debates were intense, sometimes heated, and revealed that

even within the Gerhart Center at AUC, we did not always agree on the identity of our program. One outcome was to begin using a messier mouthful to describe our intent. “Philanthropy and Social Investing in Muslim-majority Societies” became the program title and we stressed an interest in non-Muslims, as well as Muslims in the diaspora.

As readers may already have guessed, these changes made little or no difference in the reception of our ideas. Until the present time, the polarization on university campuses in the Arab region continues. In 2012-13 when Egypt was briefly governed by the Muslim Brotherhood party, societal divisions reached a new high. During that chaotic period we faced lobbying from some at AUC to change the title of our Muslim Philanthropy Digital Library; the term “Muslim” was dropped and only remains as part of a descriptive blurb on the home page.

Looking ahead, this is not a challenge that will go away soon. Nevertheless, we have an opportunity as scholars and others who care deeply about the field to move ahead. We can build on the early membership roster of MPN and add to it from the promising new cohort of scholars, especially from the Arab region, Africa and Asia. One goal should be to demonstrate through research and documentation that the mutual demonization of the other side in these debates is harming everyone. In this task we have several important allies, including leaders at the World Congress of Muslim Philanthropists and the newly-formed program on Muslim Philanthropy at the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at IUPUI.¹⁰

It is also helpful to remember that the politicization of giving is a phenomenon elsewhere in the world. The Clinton Foundation was attacked for its manner of soliciting donations during the 2016 U.S. presidential debates. George Soros is opposed for his work to strengthen

¹⁰ This initiative draws on earlier support from the Lake Institute on Faith & Giving.

democracy around the world, paradoxically with claims that he is trying to make money when he announces that he is giving most of it away. No region is immune to criticism of its philanthropic practices. However, and partly for that reason, the idea of discouraging further teaching or research is one that we should vigorously oppose.

The prospects for reviving an international Muslim philanthropy network among academics are robust. IUPUI's Symposium on Muslim philanthropy in September 2016 was inspiring. It promises to reinvigorate the scholarly network and research production. Early wins would be possible in growing the Philanthropy Digital Library at AUC and seeking translation funds for the excellent studies to be published in this journal. The global philanthropy support organization, WINGS, is launching an affinity group for academics interested in the research-to-practice nexus. Their mapping exercise turned up over 50 university departments or centers outside North America with teaching, research, or consulting activities around philanthropy, several of these in Muslim countries.¹¹

In summary, we are challenged to live 'in interesting times.' For the field of Muslim philanthropy to thrive, all of us must use our talent, resources, and commitment to scholarship to push ahead. The early sojourn of the Muslim Philanthropy Network can become one of the signposts along the way.

¹¹ WINGS' affinity group will hold its first meeting in Amsterdam in July 2018. Once launched it may provide a good incubator for the revived Muslim Philanthropy Network.