

Sleeping with the Devil?

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There has been quite a flow of euros and dollars earmarked for non-governmental organizations south of the Mediterranean over the past decade and a half, and many hundreds of cooperative ventures between Atlantic and Arab NGOs.¹ Apart from the eye-catching example of the shared humanitarian mission of the Red Cross / Red Crescent Societies and the work of some ecumenical missions in the Holy Land, however, the large number of Islamic charities and think-tanks seem conspicuously absent from Western-funded activities. Even before September 11 very rarely did religiously oriented Muslim organizations access international monies available for what donors call civil society organizations in the Arab world, although Islamic NGOs provided medical care, education, welfare, emergency relief, intellectual outlets, and other services throughout the region. With remarkably few exceptions, the overall pattern persisted into the twenty first century: among the many Arab NGOs that rely on foreign funding for at least some of their projects, few are grounded in Islam; and among the even larger number of Arab associations that are Islamic in their orientation, the proportion getting Western assistance for any of their programmes seems low.² Why is this? Are the two kinds of humanitarian organizations so much at cross purposes that they cannot cooperate, or are there institutional and political barriers as well? Here I speculate on several alternative explanations, or hypotheses, suggesting, respectively, that donor prejudices, Arab or Islamist biases, hurdles imposed by Arab governments, institutional incompatibility between international agencies and grassroots movements, alternative sources of hard currency for Muslim organizations, and/or restrictions imposed by the “war on terror” may discourage Islamic-Northern humanitarian liaisons.

A clash of ideologies

First, perhaps Orientalist preconceptions and essentialist stereotypes are at work. One plausible hypothesis is that Western institutions are averse to associate with Islamic associations, even in the provision of welfare or emergency assistance; and, conversely, that donors seek like-minded partners. After all, public opinion in Europe and the United States tends to take a dim view of Islam in general and (to the extent that the distinction is recognized) the Islamist movement in particular. Faith-based or values-driven Western NGOs, charities, and development contractors, especially institutions with Christian or Christian democrat orientations, groups with Jewish constituencies,

secular humanists, and feminists may refuse to collaborate with partners whose values are or are assumed to be anathema to their own moral vocation. Short of pervasive Islamophobia, even a few naysayers among the staff, board of directors, or donor base of some agencies could be enough to dissuade the group from cooperating with Islamists, or, indeed, any Muslim NGO on ethical grounds. European or North American women’s organizations whose undertaking is to fortify feminine participation or rights protection in the public sphere might eschew solidarity with interlocutors whose central mission is to promote family welfare in the private sphere, even where the two sets of goals overlap in mother-child health care. Or Northern NGOs might consider embrace of family planning a litmus test for cooperation, or focus on campaigns against genital cutting or honour killings that define Islam as the culprit. Organizations dedicated specifically to serving Muslims may be disqualified by some secular Northern institutions on the nor-

This article analyzes the multiple reasons that underlie the lack of cooperation between Western development organizations and Muslim NGOs. The author argues that there is no singular cause for this state of affairs. Instead she demonstrates how existing biases and prejudices, government-imposed obstacles, institutional incompatibilities, and burgeoning distrust mutually reinforce the unlikelihood that Western-Islamic humanitarian cooperation will gain ground.

mative grounds that services should be nonsectarian, while religiously oriented humanitarian organizations based in Europe or North America may have traditionally worked in Latin America and Africa through churches and Christian charities. It is not surprising, for instance, that among Egypt’s many religious charities, the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS) and the Upper Egyptian Christian Association have historically been

favoured by European and American over their Muslim counterparts. Ideological favouritism for “peace camp” Palestinians, capitalist solutions, or buzz-words like civic, women’s, or human rights may further narrow eligibility by Islamic and popular organizations.

Self-righteous indignation cuts both ways, of course, along with demonization of the binary “other.” The second possibility is that Arab Islamist groups (or, for that matter, on the opposite end of the spectrum, progressive Arab organizations) might demure from association with Western philanthropies and aid brokers on ideological grounds of their own. Within the Muslim Middle East, the issue of foreign funding is divisive. Controversies rage about the ethics of “accepting dollars and euros,” and accusations are sometimes hurled at the liberal NGOs most dependent on external financing that they are stooges of Euro-American imperialism. Arab Islamist NGOs that define themselves in terms of the community of Muslims and indigenous cultural authenticity (or any group espousing the rights of the Palestinians, opposing the war in Iraq, or objecting to Crusaders and colonialists) might well be wary of the strings attached to collaboration. Some activists find the ample quantities of technical advice and values training that accompany modest financial subsidies more vacuous than repugnant. Although by no means do all Arab NGOs decline, or even debate, foreign financing, plenty do, and nativism and Occidentalism run deepest among the neo-conservative Islamist movement. Some West-baiting Islamist ideologues may be captive of their own xenophobic posturing against governments and organizations that benefit from foreign largess, while others categorically reject secular humanism, Christian missionaries, feminist agendas, or Western hegemonic discourses. Some simply believe Muslims must help themselves, or rely on other Muslims. As among Northern associations, again even a vocal minority insisting it is simply wrong to partner with the devil can squelch prospects for alliance. On both sides, it seems to me, some objections are simply obstreperous, whereas others are more substantive.

Corporatist politics

The barriers to Western organizations’ cooperation with Islamic charitable NGOs may not be entirely, or even mainly, about a clash of ideologies, however. A third hypothesis is that Arab governments stymie such partnerships with bureaucratic red tape. The rulers of Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, Algeria, and the Palestinian Authority all jealously guard access to the international donor monies that are their lifeblood through Byzantine regulations and a practice known as “corporatism” whereby the state centralizes administration of associational life. Charities are required to register, often with a Ministry of Social Affairs, and often in a way that limits the range and scope of their programmes and fundraising activities. In addition, the Ministry or a National Confederation of some sort positions itself as an intermediary between international aid agencies and local NGOs and attempts to capture the disbursement of foreign donations. Egypt’s corporatist strategies for monopolizing access to donor funds and at the same time outlawing activities connected to the Muslim Brotherhood are notoriously odious. Observers in Cairo and throughout the southern Mediterranean have described how governments create what are known as “clones” or GO-NGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations, or the variant, RO-NGOs for royally-organized NGOs in Jordan and Mo-

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rocco) in order to appropriate donor funds earmarked for NGOs and, just as importantly, to represent their countries at international NGO conferences. Since the principle rivals to ruling establishments across the Arab world come from the Islamist current, it is not improbable that governments reroute donor funds to their own acolytes.

Alternately, perhaps transnational organizations' own bureaucratic procedures favour certain kinds of counterparts. Large transnational funding agencies' intricate guidelines for book-keeping, the legal liability of boards of directors, the submission of bids or proposals, the credentials of those offering the service, and other matters might not pose impediments to the large urban Islamic NGOs of the twenty first century but certainly did rule out partnership for many loosely-run groups in Yemen, Palestine, and rural villages elsewhere as late as the nineteen nineties. For all the ostensible effort in assisting the downtrodden, a requirement for Excel spreadsheets can put foreign finance out of the reach of barefoot or ad-hoc community self-help even today. It is not only that international donors' favourite Egyptian partner, CEOSS, was a Coptic charity, this hypothesis suggests, but also that it was a professionally-run organization with a full-time accountant, a good filing system, and a staff fluent in English and French. Arab NGOs that successfully compete for grants and contracts from complex transnational organizations most closely approximate the form, substance, institutional culture, and business attire of their patrons. Different organizations may not match the definitions of "NGO" or "women's group" established by administrators in Brussels, Amsterdam, Washington, or New York; registering with the United Nations to attend international conferences is no mean feat, for instance. Indeed, there are plenty of times when European, North American, and UN agencies sponsor new NGOs with complimentary organizational structure, accountancy methods, and declarations of purpose rather than deal with existing potential partners' idiosyncrasies. In some instances, this counter-corporatist policy is explicitly designed to get around Arab or Israeli government restrictions, whereas in others it is an administrative directive. "Donor-organized" NGOs, including franchises of Western-based organizations and self-standing local enterprises, are dubbed DO-NGOs, and occasionally BYO-NGOs for "bring-your-own-NGO." (The popular press in both Arabic and English sometimes calls them "fronts.") Under this hypothesis it is not outside the realm of possibility that international donors and development brokers would clone Islamic counterparts to replicate their own structures and procedures.

Transnational financial networks

In addition to ideology and bureaucratic corporatism, there are at least two other possible explanations for a disjuncture between Western and Muslim humanitarian and welfare projects. The fifth hypothesis is that Muslim NGOs, whether welfare societies, private charities, or think-tanks, do not really need dollars and euros because alternative sources of philanthropy for Arab and Islamic causes are available in riyals. Specifically, both public coffers and private financiers in the oil-rich Persian Gulf region have supported Islamic hospitals, schools, and charities in the more poverty-stricken and war-ravaged parts of the Arab region. The Saudi and sometimes the Iranian government bank-rolled mosque construction across the region and the globe, and all the Arab kingdoms of the Gulf have generous official aid packages with a strong welfare component (and, probably, by the logic of hypothesis 4, above, their own ideological and organizational criteria for partnership). Individual millionaires in the Gulf, including Gulf princes, princesses, and citizens as well as expatriate Arab migrants, presumably tithe a portion of their fortunes to needy Muslims. Migrants in the West also send remittances to mosque-based associations back home. Individuals and families have established charitable foundations. Small and large personal contributions peak in Ramadan; massive fundraising drives are held at moments of greatest catastrophe, as when bombs are pummeling Lebanese slums or bulldozers demolishing Palestinian homes, or during the crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It is almost condescending to add that the Arab Muslim world has a rich tradition of philanthropic giving in the form of waqf foundations, zakat tithes, and sadaqa donations, and that beneficent impulses are equally common among Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Image not available online

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Suspicious about elements of this transnational philanthropic network form the basis of a sixth hypothesis: that in prosecuting the "war on terror" and freezing channels of "terrorist financing" the United States and its allies have found ways to block flows of funds to any kind of Islamic charity and warn organizations based in the North Atlantic away from even indirect contact with them. Gifts to alleviate Palestinian and southern Lebanese Shia refugees' suffering seem to be mixed up with funding for Hamas and Hizbullah, and by the same logic many Islamic charities are somehow linked to a transnational Al-Qaida network. Osama bin Laden himself was quite the philanthropist in his day, after all. Thanks to massive U.S. efforts, the banking transactions or accounts of some Islamic charities have been jammed, others are under investigation, and all are tainted by some level of suspicion. This is bound to have a chilling effect on international donations to Arab, and especially Muslim, charities. Fear of being discovered in any partnership tainted by an affiliation deemed to be sympathetic to Islamist militants could likewise affect the thinking of European and North American foundations, aid agencies, and development professionals about whether and how to liaise with faith-based organizations in the Muslim world. Perhaps, even, the many professional development and humanitarian organization staff working in Arab countries who had recognized and studied steps to alleviating the clearly anti-Islamic bias in their funding patterns before the turn of the millennium will have put those plans on hold for fear of being caught up in the dragnet. This brings us nearly full circle. There's an element of naked Islam-bashing in the war on terror, to be sure, yet by the same token, like all conspiracy theories, including Arab perceptions of a Western war on Muslim institutions, it draws on at least some empirical evidence.

The gap between the good scholarship on Islamic associations and the equally large body of research on donor financing of NGOs in the Arab world is itself evidence of the scarcity of examples of both. Perhaps explaining the null set of Western-Islamic humanitarian cooperation is like analyzing why strange bedfellows do not mate. Most likely, different but mutually reinforcing ideological, institutional, and geo-political factors operate in various local and national contexts, amidst fluctuations and swirls of globally travelling anxieties and preoccupations, until the very idea of misogynist ventures becomes virtually unimaginable, or terribly risqué.

Notes

1. This is an edited version of a talk entitled "Is there Room for Cooperation between Western Donors and Islamic Organizations?" given at the conference on "Islamic Charitable NGOs: Between Patronage and Empowerment" organized by ISIM and co-sponsored by Hivos in Utrecht in 2007.
2. Federica Bicchi, "Want Funding? Don't Mention Islam: EU Democracy Promotion in the Mediterranean," *CFSP Forum* 4, no. 2 (2006): 10–12 at, <http://www.fornet.info/documents/CFSP>.

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