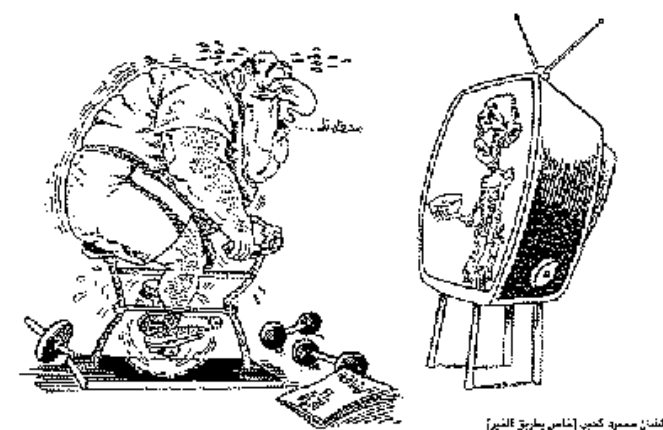


Aid

JÉRÔME BELLION-JOURDAN

The predominant conception of international aid remains anchored in a dualistic vision of the world: a 'North' considered wealthy and developed comes to the rescue of a poor and under-developed 'South'. The 'civilizing' missions that justified 19th-century imperialism were substituted by themes – such as 'third world-ism' and development aid – of the second half of the 20th century. After the Biafra war, defence of fundamental human rights begins to justify claims to the 'right to intervene' as practised by non-governmental organizations, such as Doctors without Borders, setting the tone for what humanitarian action should be.

Despite its heterogeneity, the field of international aid seems to function according to the North-South principle, the North often being assimilated with the West and the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, it should be noted that this vision of international humanitarian aid is incomplete: from the Sudan to Afghanistan, to Bosnia, Kosovo, or Chechnya, Islamic organizations have established emergency programmes and development projects. Generally ignored in the numerous publications of international non-governmental organizations, the activities of these Islamic organizations also remain unanalysed in the abundant and irregular literature devoted to Islamist mobilizations. In the latter type of publications, the role of charitable associations of Islamic reference has at times been dealt with, but the emphasis is placed on local associations that have taken charge of activities that the State does not fully assume (e.g. health care, education).



Tariq al-Kheir,
n°2, Summer
1995, p.7.

Of particular interest are organizations that develop activities at the trans-national level and that are found in different zones in 'humanitarian crisis', and more generally, where there are populations in need of assistance. Thus, in Khartoum just as in Islamabad and Sarajevo, one obviously finds offices of both Doctors without Borders and the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO). Created in 1978 in Jeddah as a branch of the Islamic World League, the IIRO is one of the many Islamic relief organizations (*al-ighatha al-islamiya*) that have come into existence since the late 70s. It was then that those Islamic organizations whose principle activity was oriented towards teaching and the *da'wa* (call to Islam) invested in the field of humanitarian aid so as to respond to two different situations. On the one hand, there was the need to face up to the humanitarian consequences of famines and the wars affecting the African continent. The Islamic African Relief Agency (IARA) was created for this reason in 1981 in Khartoum as a humanitarian branch of the Organization of the Islamic Call (Da'wa Islamiya) to come to the aid of the Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees in Sudan. On the other hand, it was also necessary to face the consequences of the war in Afghanistan that broke out after the Soviet invasion in 1979.

Islamic Relief Organizations: Between 'Islamism' and 'Humanitarianism'¹

The Afghan war

The Afghan war incited numerous mobilizations in the Muslim world, notably amongst movements that advocate the establishment of an Islamic society, such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the Jama'at al-Islami. In the mid-1980s, several relief organizations were created to come to the aid of the Afghans: in 1985, the Egyptian Union of Doctors created a humanitarian branch, the Lajnat al-Ighatha al-Insaniya (Human Relief Agency); in 1986, the Organization for Social Reform in Kuwait created the Lajnat ad-Da'wa al-Islamiya (Islamic Mission Agency) to collect funds for Afghanistan; and in 1987, Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens – pop singer converted to Islam) took the lead of a collective of associations in England and founded Muslim Aid. These organizations and others such as IIRO, the Islamic Relief Agency (international network of the Sudanese organization IARA), and Human Concern International regrouped themselves in Peshawar as the Islamic Coordination Council, in which also Kuwaiti and Saudi Red Cross associations take part.²

In order to analyse the development of these organizations, one must place value judgements aside and avoid the simple implicit or explicit oppositions in which praise is given to humanitarian aid and condescension to Islamism: humanism / obscurantism, liberalism / holism, political disinterest / interest. From all sides, the reality of the situation is obviously more complex, and the Islamic relief organizations do not escape this complexity. It is a question of looking at how they developed and entered the field of international humanitarian action. Would Islamic relief organizations be irreducibly different from their Christian or secular homologues? These organizations constituted themselves in reaction to 'Western' hegemony in the field of humanitarian action: for that reason, they claim specificity, a rooting in the Islamic tradition. But simultaneously, their insertion in the field of humanitarian action contributes to a reformulation, even a re-interpretation, of this tradition to be able to compose with the dominant norms. Also, to analyse the practices of these organizations allows one to see how they combine various registers of action.

They look to inscribe their action in the heritage of the Islamic tradition of charity. The emphasis is placed on the Qur'anic injunctions or the texts of the *hadith*, which call upon Muslims to do charitable works: whether it be by the donning of *zakat* and the *sadaqa*, or the *qurbani*, donation for the occasion of sacrificial festival. With the exception of several Muslim countries that have reintroduced an official system of *zakat* collection (principally Pakistan and Sudan), the practice of *zakat* is largely left to private initiatives. It is in this 'empty space' that different types of *zakat*-collecting institutions have multiplied: from Islamic banks to local *zakat*-collecting committees (such

as the *lajnat al-zakat* in Egypt) affiliated with a mosque or an Islamic association. On their side, the Islamic relief organizations intend to re-develop a *zakat* practice at the level of the *umma*: by a form of transnationalization of the *zakat*, they become intermediaries between donors and beneficiaries that are culturally and geographically distant. Hence organizations such as Islamic Relief or Muslim Aid instil a policy of fundraising to convince, for example, the practising Muslims of France that it is legitimate to offer their *zakat* to an organization based in England for projects in Sudan, Kosovo, or Pakistan.

Universality of aid

Do only Muslim populations benefit from the aid of these organizations? The question is recurrent and points to the problem of the universality of aid. This principle is recognized as fundamental in the field of contemporary international humanitarian action: each and every human being should be aided unconditionally. The universality of aid reveals itself difficult to realize: the logic of preference and the conditioning of aid have not disappeared from the field of international humanitarian aid. Most Islamic relief organizations do not conceal the fact that they develop projects in which priority is given to those that benefit Muslim populations. This is based on three reasons: political, pragmatic, and dogmatic. The political reason has to do with the fact that the concerned organizations hold a worldview that identifies 'Islamic causes', from Bosnia or Kashmir to Palestine, where the victims are Muslims and (it is often added) are victims precisely *because* they are Muslims. This form of 'martyrologie' justifies an aid that gives priority to the Muslim 'brothers'. This political dimension is supported by a pragmatic one: it is often repeated, as in the brochure of the International Islamic Relief Organization, that 'more than 80% of the refugees and victims of war and disaster in the world are Muslim'.³ Finally, the dogmatic reason: according to certain interpretations, the *zakat* should be collected and distributed within the Muslim community. These three dimensions seem to justify a particularistic aid in which only members of the Muslim community may benefit.

Nevertheless, according to their brochures, the organizations' intentions are to offer aid 'according to purely humanitarian criteria devoid of any ethnic, linguistic, or religious distinction'.⁴ The idea of non-differentiation of beneficiaries of aid which characterizes modern humanitarian aid seems to have become the norm for Islamic relief organizations. In fact, they do not exclude coming to the aid of non-Muslims. Intervening in zones where there are groups of various origins (e.g. refugee camps), the organizations are more and more concerned with demonstrating the universality of their actions: for Islamic Relief, the beneficiaries are all those populations in need, whether it be for projects in Bosnia or in Africa, or for the distrib-

ution of warm meals for the homeless in France.⁵

However, the displayed universality of aid does not necessarily have the same significance. Three explanatory types for this demonstrated universality can be retained. Within the Islamic relief organizations, the '*da'wa*-ist' attitude towards aid is always present: it justifies the universality of aid by the universal ambition of Islam as a religion destined for the whole of humanity. The principal of non-differentiation of beneficiaries is thus distorted in the sense that a distinction amongst beneficiaries is in fact operated between Muslims and the others, for whom there is hope of conversion. In certain organizations, universality rejoins more the problematic of the notion of 'third world': compassion for human misery marks most notably the workers who have been 'in the field' and is sometimes accompanied by bitter criticism of the inequalities and the division of resources at the global level. An example of this caricature was published in *Tariq al-Kheir*, information brief produced by Islamic Relief: an obese man struggling on his stationary bicycle to try and lose weight, is shown in front of a television report displaying an image of a rachitic African.⁶ The demonstrated universality is equally a question of marketing: just as their Christian or secularized homologues, Islamic relief organizations do not escape the market logic of the international humanitarian scene. ◆

Notes

1. This article is based on research conducted with the framework of a PhD in political science at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris, under the direction of Prof. Jean Leca. It is based on interviews held with the employees and management of Islamic relief organizations in France, the United Kingdom, Sudan, Egypt, Bosnia, and Pakistan.
2. Sometimes placed within the same category as Islamic relief NGOs, the Red Cross societies have nonetheless a specific status in that they belong to the International Federation of Red Cross Societies and the Red Cross and are expected to obey the principles of the movement founded by Henry Dunant in 1863: 'humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, universality.'
3. Brochure IIRO (in French).
4. Ibid.
5. This universality of action implies developments at the level of interpretation of the usage of the *zakat*. For certain organizations like Islamic Relief, the solution consists in differentiating funds: the *zakat* funds are destined for Muslims and other funds are allocated to projects that aim at mixed populations.
6. *Tariq al-Kheir* (1995), Summer (2), p. 7.

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