



الإغاثة الإسلامية  
*Secours Islamique*

Research Article  
March 2008

# **Does Faith Matter?: An Examination of Islamic Relief's Work with Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons**

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Published by Islamic Relief Worldwide  
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## Introduction

This paper analyses the experience of an international non-governmental organisation (INGO), Islamic Relief, in working with and for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Although much relief work is carried out by faith-based organisations worldwide, and although religious identity is often an important factor in understanding communities, little work has been done to examine the work of faith-based organisations in the field of development in general (see Tomalin 2006; Thomas 2005), much less in terms of refugee assistance in particular. This paper attempts to fill part of that gap by examining the work of Islamic Relief as a faith-based organisation (FBO) providing assistance to refugees and IDPs in multiple and diverse contexts. Discussions with Islamic Relief staff working in various contexts have demonstrated that in many cases Islamic Relief has an advantage over secular, Western and non-Muslim faith-based organisations in working with Muslim communities. However, in certain contexts, being identified as a ‘Muslim organisation’ may also complicate the experience of gaining entry into communities, especially with regard to local authorities and other INGOs. After providing a brief background of the issue of refugee protection in Islam as well as an overview of Islamic Relief’s work and the topic of faith in refugee studies, this paper will look more closely at these issues.

## Islam and Asylum

Since Islamic Relief is guided in its work with refugees by Islamic humanitarian values, it is important to briefly outline the concept of asylum in Islam and the obligations incumbent upon Muslims in receiving refugees. Many scholars have pointed to the presence of humanitarian values within Islam (see An-Na’im 1990; Mirbagheri 2006). With regards to refugees in particular, the issue of forced migration has a particular resonance in Islam, especially in view of the fact that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was himself a refugee who fled Mecca with his followers in order to escape persecution in 622. This event, known as the *Hijra*, actually marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. The refugees who fled Mecca at that time are given an honoured place in the Qur’an and are known as *Muhajirun*. Furthermore, those people who gave them a good reception are also highly respected and are known as the *Ansar* or supporters of the Prophet and his followers (see Abu Sahlieh 1996). It should also be mentioned that Muslims fleeing religious persecution in Mecca were advised by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to travel to Abyssinia where they sought and received sanctuary from the Christian ruler Negus. The story of the *Hijra* itself and its centrality in terms of the foundations of the faith indicates the importance given to the concept of the protection of refugees and the provision of asylum in Islam.

The Qur’an speaks explicitly about the issue of asylum seekers and refugees:

*And if anyone of the disbelievers seeks your protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the word of Allah, and then escort him to where he will be secure.*  
(*Surah 9:6*)

Islamic law or *Shariah* affirms the practice of providing sanctuary to persecuted persons and the sacredness of some places, such as the Kaaba in Mecca. Anyone who sought refuge in a mosque or in the home of a companion of the Prophet Muhammad was safe and secure. However, asylum according to *Shariah* law is not confined only to sacred places – it is also

granted in homes and designated communal places under the protection of Islam. Asylum should be provided without discriminating between free persons and those who are enslaved, rich and poor, men and women, or Muslims and non-Muslims.

In Islam, asylum is a right of anyone seeking protection. In his study of asylum in the Arab-Islamic tradition, Arnaout (1987: 49) argues that asylum 'is an integral part of the Islamic [sic] conception of human rights'. The concept of '*aman*', which is intrinsic in *Shariah*, encompasses the rights of refugees and asylum seekers and the duties incumbent upon their hosts (ibid). The medieval theologian Ibn al Arabi suggests that asylum is obligatory from states where there is injustice, intolerance, physical persecution, disease, and financial insecurity (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990). Additionally, Zaat (2007: 11) has argued that while the Qur'an implies that worldly consequences will befall those who do not give humanitarian assistance to those in need, those who do provide protection and assistance will achieve a 'special legal status' in Islamic law. Therefore, Zaat claims that 'Muslim states and non-state actors ... have an obligation to guarantee the safety, security and unfettered access of those offering protection and assistance' (ibid). It is clear, therefore, that Islamic law encourages a humanitarian approach to refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons. It is upon these Islamic humanitarian values that Islamic Relief takes its inspiration.

However, Zaat (ibid) claims that the principles of Islamic law that relate to refugees have largely been ignored in academia and misunderstood as defective in international law. Consequently humanitarian policy models are mostly derived from Western religious and secular principles. For example, whereas Islamic law is based on the sovereignty of God under which all refugees are treated equally, the Western model is based on the nation-state system and classifies refugees into categories with varying rights. Therefore, Western humanitarian models are frequently unfamiliar to those they aim to assist. Furthermore, due to their inflexibility they are often unable to adapt to non-Western cultures and accommodate local perspectives (ibid).

### **The Nature and Scope of Islamic Relief's Work with Refugees**

Islamic Relief is an international relief and development organisation, with its headquarters in Birmingham in the United Kingdom. It was founded in 1984 in response to the famines that affected countries in the Horn of Africa. Since its inception, Islamic Relief has expanded its operations considerably and the organisation now has emergency relief and long-term development programmes in over 25 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. An integral part of its activities, in conjunction with agencies such as the World Food Programme and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), has been the provision of basic needs to refugees and IDPs in regions affected by conflict and natural disasters. Islamic Relief's area of work in refugee and IDP camps varies according to the particular situation but can include camp management and providing basic health services. In recent years, Islamic Relief has worked with refugees and IDPs in countries as diverse as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Chechnya and Ingushetia (Russian Federation), Sudan, Mali, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Pakistan.

Many of the areas in which Islamic Relief operates are predominantly Muslim or have a significant Muslim minority and the organisation tends to work in those countries where it

has pre-existing programmes and operations. However it does not discriminate on the basis of religion, and therefore also provides assistance to non-Muslim communities often channelling aid through partner organisations if it does not have pre-existing operations in that area. On occasions its humanitarian assistance has been relatively short-lived, lasting only a few months, while on other occasions it has developed more complex programmes that have provided assistance to refugees and IDPs over a period of several years.

Islamic Relief has provided several different types of assistance to refugees and IDPs including the provision of water and sanitation facilities, the provision of shelter, the distribution of food, non-food 5 items (NFIs) and basic health services, and the sponsorship of orphans. Whereas other INGOs have specialised in particular types of interventions, Islamic Relief has tended to operate on a needs-basis, responding to the best of their capabilities according to the context. However, in recent years Islamic Relief has become increasingly specialised and has focused upon particular sectors where they are able to provide the most effective assistance. For example, in Ingushetia it operated three health centres, while in the Darfur region of Sudan it has focused upon the provision of water and sanitation facilities. Increasing sector speciality is perhaps a reflection of the growing maturity of the organisation and the expertise of its staff.

Islamic Relief's humanitarian aid is adaptable to changing circumstances, so that when the emergency phase of operations is completed the focus may be shifted to more long-term development programmes – rarely does Islamic Relief cease operations in an area once the immediate emergency phase is over. Islamic Relief's work in Bosnia and Herzegovina is one such example. Islamic Relief first began providing humanitarian assistance to refugees/IDPs fleeing conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992. The provision of food and NFIs continued throughout the Bosnian War of 1992-95. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Islamic Relief's focus was on promoting the return of refugees through the reconstruction of war damaged homes, schools and health clinics. In more recent years, the focus has again shifted, and the organisation has focused on long-term development by supporting the establishment of small-scale businesses, particularly in areas of return, through a successful microfinance programme based upon Islamic financing principles. This has been complemented by post-traumatic stress disorder therapy for those refugees still suffering from their experiences during and after the war. Islamic Relief remains one of a relatively small number of INGOs still working in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which demonstrates their long-term commitment to the communities it serves.

In contrast to the employment policies of many other FBOs, Islamic Relief employs both Muslim and non-Muslim staff. In their field offices the majority of the staff will be recruited locally and will work alongside several expatriates. The ratio of Muslim to non-Muslim staff varies greatly depending on the location and demographics of the region. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that the meaning ascribed to the term "Muslim" is not singular or unambiguous - it is often used (without distinction) to imply general cultural norms or more specific religious beliefs. In considering the factors encouraging individuals to work with Islamic Relief, it cannot be denied that religion is a significant motivator for some as the organisation offers solidarity in terms of cultural and religious principles as well as a respect for an individual's religious practices (such as prayer, and fasting). However it has also been suggested that other factors, including the basic need to work or a

particular interest in the humanitarian field regardless of the organisation, are equally as important.

Discussions with those working for Islamic Relief have revealed that the degree of religious piety of staff members, who represent the organisation, can also be an issue in the field. For example, in some religiously conservative areas communities have certain expectations concerning the religious commitment of Muslim staff precisely because they work for a Muslim organisation. Whereas a non-Muslim staff member will be exempt from religious expectations, Muslim employees may be viewed critically if they are not seen to be practicing or following the religion closely enough. It has been observed that, in these situations, staff members tend to exhibit a higher level of religious commitment to appease the community.

### **The Value of Faith in Refugee Studies**

Jean-Francois Mayer (2007: 6-10), in his introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, points to the importance of religion in understanding the experiences of refugees and IDPs. Gozdziaik laments the lack of analysis on the role of religion in the field of refugee studies:

Religious and spiritual beliefs and practices sustain many refugees and internally displaced in their process of uprooting, forced migration, and integration into the host society. And yet religion and spirituality are virtually absent in policy debates and programming for refugees and forced migrants (2002: 136).

As Gozdziaik's study of Kosovar Albanian refugees demonstrates, for many refugees and asylum seekers, faith clearly does matter. Finding themselves in disorientating situations and trying to cope with extreme suffering, refugees can rely on religion and its rituals as a supportive framework which can then become a source of solidarity and personal strength. In some instances adherence to a reified notion of religion provides comfort through its link to 'home', the reassurance of the familiar and a sense of stability (see Mayer 2007). In light of the significance of faith for many refugees, Gozdziaik argues that religion should inform interpretations of and responses to the refugee experience.

Some have argued (see, for example, Shahrani 1995 and Zaat 2007) that the definition of a refugee in international law, does not acknowledge a refugees' own definition of his or her experiences within political or religious frameworks. Shahrani discusses the migration of Afghan refugees to Pakistan and Iran during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and argues that the tendency of the refugees to describe themselves with the term '*muhajirin*', which is defined in the Qur'an as '*those who leave their home in the cause of Allah, after suffering oppression*' (16:41), reveals the political and religious agency located in their decision to seek refuge. Refugees do not necessarily see themselves as victims but tend to locate their suffering in a wider political or religious context. Shahrani argues that being a refugee has meaning beyond that accorded to it by international organisations which recognise only a limited institutionalised definition as a way of legitimising humanitarian aid. This in turn informs policy and determines its exclusive emphasis on humanitarian needs only, as well as the perception of a 'true' refugee as passive and obedient and not politically motivated by his or her religion (1995: 187-202).

The work of Liisa Malkki (1995 and 1996) further highlights the multiplicity of meanings informing the self-definitions of refugees in contrast to the de-historicised universal figure of the refugee created by humanitarian organisations, official bodies, the media and academia. These groups support the assumption that by leaving his/her territorial homeland a refugee becomes ‘a powerless being with no consciousness of history, traditions, culture or nationality’ and is therefore humanity at the most basic level (1995: 5-16). This is reinforced through carefully selected visual imagery and official narratives which are used to evoke a sense of shared humanity, aiming to de-historicize and de-politicise refugees and recreate them as ‘anonymous bodies’ embodying ‘abstract and universal suffering’ (1996: 388-90; 1995: 13)<sup>1</sup>.

The inaccuracies of this definition are even more apparent in consideration of the increasing politicisation of religion through the violent opposition of religious groups, such as the Shi’a and Sunni Muslims in Iraq. Such conflicts are often the fundamental cause of migration and are consequently inextricably linked to a refugee’s perception of his or her own experience. As a result of a religious conflict, refugees may feel a heightened sense of affinity to their religion and distinctions between different religions (or factions of the same religion) may be exaggerated. If this is informed by the experience of suffering it may lead to feelings of hostility and intolerance. Therefore understanding the relevance of faith to refugee studies involves looking at the importance of faith in the experiences of refugees themselves and assessing the assistance that FBOs can provide to refugees in religious matters.<sup>2</sup>

Although many of the organisations at the forefront of refugee support work are faith-based organisations, there is very little academic work available that examines their work in any depth. Additionally, other INGOs and those in the field of refugee studies often shy away from looking at the issue of religion either because they feel it is irrelevant or because they are afraid of stirring controversy.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, because development thinking—at least at the level of Western policy makers and academics—has largely been driven by a secular agenda, FBOs have for the most part been ignored in terms of their role in the provision of development aid. However, as discussed above, there is a strong need to understand the importance of faith in order to provide more effective assistance to traumatised peoples in sensitive situations. In relation to this, there is clearly much to be offered by faith-based organisations that may have an extra understanding and sensitivity to the religious frameworks within which many refugees view their situations.

## **The Experience of Islamic Relief as a Faith Based Organisation**

A variety of faith-based organisations are active within the field of refugees and IDPs and they work closely with UNHCR in many contexts. This paper looks at Islamic Relief as an

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<sup>1</sup> Malkki’s (1995) work looks at the meaning ascribed to identity and history in the refugee experience in her comparison of two groups of Hutu refugees in west Tanzania. Whereas the ‘camp’ refugees rely on a reified sense of national identity in their desire to reclaim their homeland, the ‘town’ refugees develop shifting identities in order to integrate.

<sup>2</sup> Nawyn (2005) looks at the role of FBOs in refugee resettlement in the United States. In terms of US-based FBOs, most are Christian or Jewish, while many of the refugees arriving in the US are Muslim. Her work suggests a possible expansion of the role of Muslim FBOs in refugee resettlement in the West.

<sup>3</sup> Malkki (1995) argues that within the ‘national order of things’ (in which classification and control are based on the nation-state system), refugees are interpreted as a polluting and dangerous threat to national boundaries.

example of a Muslim faith-based organisation working with refugees and IDPs and attempts to bring some issues together by exploring its experiences. Although we will argue that having a faith base can be an advantage for an organisation, it is important to note that any organisation primarily needs to work effectively and professionally in order to be respected. There are many FBOs which do not fulfil minimum standards of professionalism. They may have particular religious or political agendas or may not have a long-term commitment to the development of local communities.

The main question addressed by the authors in this paper is: How does being a faith-based organisation influence Islamic Relief's work with refugees and IDPs both in terms of the communities themselves as well as in the organisation's dealings with other stakeholders? The answers to this question emerged through discussions held with Islamic Relief staff both in the field offices as well as in the organisation's headquarters. Information was also gleaned from Islamic Relief's internal reports and evaluations. The research demonstrates that, because Islamic Relief works in diverse contexts, with Muslim and non-Muslim refugees, there is no single answer to this question. As the examples presented in this paper demonstrate, being a faith-based organisation affects the work of Islamic Relief in a variety of ways depending on the situation.

In their critical examination of the refugee camp, Voutira and Harrell-Bond (1995: 219) identify the restorative properties of 'trust' in the refugee process. However, they claim that the refugee camp (and the social power relations which are played out in the provision of humanitarian aid) is not a location of trust but one of 'competition, suspicion and mistrust'. It is interesting here to discuss ideas of 'trust' and 'mistrust' in the relationships between refugees and INGOs, with specific reference to religion. Some suggest that all FBOs, regardless of their religious affinities, are respected by refugees because religion supposedly guarantees honest values. Others highlight the fact that refugees are often in such desperate need that the religious basis of an organisation is immaterial and trust will only emerge when a reliable service is delivered over time. However, many of Islamic Relief's staff members have mentioned the fact that, as a Muslim FBO, Islamic Relief may have an advantage over non-Muslim organisations (either faith-based or secular) in terms of gaining trust amongst Muslim communities based on a sense cultural or religious solidarity.

Furthermore, Islamic Relief is sensitive to the spiritual and religious needs of its beneficiaries, which are essential for building trust, and perhaps distinguishes it from other non-Muslim INGOs. For example, Islamic Relief staff have commented that while employees from non-Muslim organisations generally respect religious and cultural differences, inappropriate behaviour in the field is not uncommon and can be upsetting to Muslim refugees' religious or cultural values. Such behaviour, often as simple as dressing inappropriately, may be understood to derive from a lack of understanding concerning basic Muslim values.

As a Muslim FBO, Islamic Relief maybe able to utilise its position even more effectively in terms of working on sensitive issues with refugees and IDPs—areas which are usually the preserve of secular, Western INGOs. In areas related to women and child protection, HIV/AIDS, and reproductive health, Islamic Relief could possibly use its status as a trusted organisation in order to provide culturally sensitive education and service delivery amongst Muslim refugee communities. Rather than focusing only on uncontroversial service



delivery, Islamic Relief has the ability to make an important contribution in terms of dealing with sensitive development concerns amongst Muslim refugees.<sup>4</sup>

It has also been suggested that Islamic Relief may be granted easier access to Muslim areas. This has been the case in Somalia where the majority of the population now consists of internally displaced people, and where Islamic Relief's offices are relatively new. Despite the recent entry of Islamic Relief into this conflict-ridden area, it has managed to make important in-roads in various parts of the country, especially in the south and central districts. Those familiar with Islamic Relief's work in Somalia point to the importance of being identified as a 'Muslim organisation' in terms of gaining access in Muslim communities as compared to secular INGOs or non-Muslim FBOs working in the region.

In these contexts, the factors by which Islamic Relief is identified as a Muslim organisation are significant because they initiate the trust-building process between the organisation and refugees. In the first instance, in contrast to many other FBOs, Islamic Relief's name provides a clear indication of its religious status. This is consolidated by the organisation's symbol (a mosque with two minarets) which is especially useful as a non-literate means of communication. The unambiguous religious nature of the name and symbol, which are displayed everywhere from vehicles and offices to staff clothing and flags, reveals that Islamic Relief believes it is beneficial to announce their Muslim identity. More pragmatic examples of factors for identification include the Muslim rituals and practices organised for the refugees by Islamic Relief, the culturally familiar greetings used by staff, and the performance of religious rituals by Muslim staff, such as prayer. In reference to individual members of staff providing a source of identification, it has been noted that this is somewhat limited due to the high rate of staff turnovers in humanitarian work. Consequently it is assumed that the permanency of the organisation provides a more consistent means of identification.

During Ramadan and other festivals, it is often difficult for those who have been uprooted from their communities to participate in religious and cultural rituals, which can further dishearten those who are already dealing with the pain and trauma of displacement. For this reason, Islamic Relief often delivers food parcels during Ramadan (the Muslim month of fasting) as well as coordinating the *Qurbani*<sup>5</sup> and distribution of meat during *Eid ul-Adha*. While many other INGOs avoid taking part in such religious and cultural events, for Islamic Relief, facilitating the community's performance of such rituals recognises the importance of such events in maintaining the spiritual well-being of beneficiaries – indeed the Ramadan and *Qurbani* food distributions have always formed a core part of Islamic Relief's emergency relief programmes. Furthermore, the delivery of religious and cultural services significantly strengthens Islamic Relief's bonds with local communities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Part of the reason it has not become involved in such interventions, is that many of Islamic Relief's donors have traditionally felt reluctant to fund such programmes. Furthermore, Islamic Relief has not felt entirely comfortable with such activities because of the controversy that this might raise. However, this is changing as Islamic Relief has begun formulating policy positions following consultations with Islamic scholars on such sensitive issues as HIV/AIDs and reproductive health.

<sup>5</sup> '*Qurbani*' means 'sacrifice' and refers to the ritual slaughter of animals, which can occur at any time of the year, but is a requirement amongst Muslims during the religious festival, *Eid ul-Adha*, commemorating the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son, Ismail, in the name of Allah.

<sup>6</sup> On occasions it has also been Islamic Relief's experience that Muslim refugees/IDPs have extra expectations because of its identification as a Muslim FBO. For example, Islamic Relief has on occasion been approached by refugees/IDPs to provide Qurans or to construct mosques. Because of the risk that they will be accused of

However, Islamic Relief staff have acknowledged that recently in some areas, non-Muslim organisations have also started supplying assistance in this way, following the initiative of Islamic Relief.

Islamic Relief has tried to utilise the value of its status as a Muslim FBO in war-torn regions in terms of its refugee resettlement efforts. For example, in the aftermath of the Bosnian War, Islamic Relief opened a field office in the eastern town of Zvornik which had been 'ethnically cleansed' of its *Bosniak* (Muslim) inhabitants. Due to the risk of intimidation and even physical attack, many Bosniaks were afraid to return to the town following the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995 and the cessation of open hostilities. By opening a field office in the centre of the town and recruiting both Serb and Muslim staff, Islamic Relief exemplified the possibility of both return and inter-faith cooperation. As well, by assisting both communities with relief and rehabilitation efforts, Islamic Relief contributed to gradually building trust between Bosniaks and Serbs. Many Muslim IDPs who had been afraid to return to Zvornik gained the confidence to return to their homes from seeing Islamic Relief operating relatively unhindered in the area.

Jonathan Benthall's (2007) research points to the positive contributions of Muslim FBOs and argues that those Western donors, INGOs and academics who might be suspicious of Muslim FBOs' possible 'terrorist links' in the post-9/11 context are overreacting. He writes:

Survey evidence suggests that they [Muslim FBOs] enjoy a high degree of popular trust and approval, being run with minimal administrative costs and having unrivalled grassroots knowledge about the needs of the most vulnerable (ibid: 7).

There is, therefore, a growing recognition of the work that Muslim FBOs perform in the field, and of the importance in understanding the role of such organisations to development efforts. Islamic Relief has long-recognised the value of being a Muslim FBO. Recently, this has also been acknowledged by other stakeholders working in the field of refugee assistance. While many secular or Christian FBOs and donor agencies are at times viewed with suspicion and are often themselves fearful of working in Muslim areas, due to hostility stemming from religious, ethnic or political issues, Islamic Relief has an advantage in terms of the level of confidence it enjoys amongst Muslim communities. Many of these organisations have also recognised this advantage and have begun to partner with Islamic Relief in order to deliver aid and assistance to refugees and IDPs in areas beset by conflict and insecurity. In Somalia, for example, the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) recently paired up with Islamic Relief when they visited Mogadishu. This partnership not only helped ECHO gain access amongst potentially reluctant local communities, but it made the ECHO staff themselves more comfortable to have partners such as Islamic Relief who had an intimate familiarity with the field and who enjoyed the trust of local communities.

Partnering with secular INGOs or with non-Muslim FBOs can also serve as a positive illustration of inter-faith cooperation in regions that have experienced conflict. In Ingushetia, for example, Islamic Relief has undertaken joint field operations with other

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proselytizing and because this may also threaten their neutrality, the organisation has refrained from such initiatives.

faith based organisations such as the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), in providing services in camps for Chechen refugees. Such collaboration has been well received by refugees—providing a much-needed example of interfaith cooperation in otherwise polarised areas. A survey of Chechen refugees who have benefited from such collaborations demonstrates the positive impact of such partnerships:

*I think it is great, because nowadays some people are trying to sow seeds of discord among representatives of these religions. By working together they could show that is not at all true.* (Comments of Chechen refugee, Alina Refugee Camp Ingushetia, 2004)

*It shows that no matter what religion we confess, we all assume responsibility for the vulnerable members of our society. Moreover, we are willing and ready to work together for the common cause.* (Comments of Chechen refugee, Alina Refugee Camp Ingushetia, 2004)

The comments of these refugees are indicative of the value of inter-faith cooperation amongst FBOs. In this way, Islamic Relief is able to use its status as a Muslim FBO in order to contribute to peace-building efforts in post-conflict situations.

## **The Complexities of Being a Muslim FBO**

In a few instances, being identified as a Muslim organisation has also added difficulties to Islamic Relief's work. There is often a failure to differentiate between the activities of faith-based humanitarian aid organisations and other 'religious' bodies that may have political objectives. Such suspicions may cause reluctance on the part of government authorities to grant visas, delay the transport of relief supplies, and may lead to repeated investigations into organisational activities and the harassment of staff. In Ingushetia, for example, where Islamic Relief has been working with Chechen refugees, the local Russian authorities view the organisation with suspicion. This attitude has been fostered by the Russian government, which frames Chechnya as Russia's front in 'the war on terror'. While many NGOs face problems in this region, as a Muslim organisation, Islamic Relief 11 most likely faces greater obstructions in their work than secular INGOs.<sup>7</sup> It is not uncommon for local Islamic Relief staff working in non-Muslim areas to request that the name of the organisation and the logo (which are so easily identified as Muslim) be altered in order to simplify their work. However, these requests and the issues behind them are becoming increasingly rare as the name, logo and reputation of Islamic Relief becomes more established and recognised.

In Sudan as well, where millions of people have been displaced by the conflict in Darfur, being a Muslim organisation has further complicated Islamic Relief's efforts to provide refugee assistance (despite the fact that almost all those involved in the conflict are themselves Muslims). This is due to the suspicion, harboured especially by other INGOs and Christian FBOs working in the area, that Islamic Relief has links with the government

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<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, being a Muslim FBO can also be an advantage when working in areas where Muslim governments are in place. For example, visas and other permits for Islamic Relief's staff working in Darfur are often approved by the authorities in Sudan relatively quickly, whereas for other secular Western INGOs, such documentation may be delayed for days or even weeks. Local authorities in predominantly Muslim countries also tend to feel more comfortable approaching Islamic Relief with requests for assistance. However this can governments to expect loyalty from Islamic Relief and therefore make lobbying and advocacy work more difficult.

or with the militant *Janjaweed* (armed militia), who are alleged to have been perpetrating massacres in Darfur since 2003. In order to combat the false assumption that Islamic Relief is an ‘Arab’ organisation and therefore associated with the government, Islamic Relief Sudan has preferred employing non-Arab staff from countries such as Pakistan and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In sensitive regions such as Darfur and Ingushetia, Islamic Relief has therefore had to work even harder in order to prove that they are a non-partisan and non-proselytising organisation and that they are only interested in providing humanitarian assistance to communities, regardless of their religious orientation.

It is also worth stressing that Islamic Relief not only faces suspicion from non-Muslim FBOs but often faces problems in conflict-stricken areas in which there are multiple Muslim factions. In Afghanistan, for example, Islamic Relief was able to provide humanitarian aid relatively easily under the Taliban regime. However, once the Taliban fell and were replaced by the Northern Alliance, the organisation had to re-think their strategy in order to carry on their work in the region. Islamic Relief chose to remove their staff-members who were from Pakistani or Arab backgrounds in order to emphasise their non-partisan nature and quell any fears that they were associated with the Taliban.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have outlined the significance of faith for refugees and highlighted the benefits to be gained through an increased respect for the religious values and practices of refugees. In 2006 a UNHCR statistical survey revealed that 4.9 million refugees of the 10 million worldwide, originate from the Muslim world. Additionally, 15 million IDPs are displaced within the Muslim world (see Zaat 2007: 3). Therefore we would argue knowledge of the Muslim faith and culture needs to inform humanitarian policy and practice in order to make relationships between refugees and INGOs more effective. Zaat (2007) calls for international bodies to acknowledge the Islamic perspective claiming that it could provide a powerful and beneficial transformation of international law and humanitarian practice, especially in the Muslim world. She argues that this is particularly necessary now in the current post-9/11 climate of fear, in consideration of the frequent leverage of human rights over state sovereignty, the increased preference to assist refugees in their “regions of origin” and the reluctance of developed countries to grant asylum.

The cases examined in this paper demonstrate that being a Muslim FBO does have a significant impact on Islamic Relief’s ability to effectively work with refugees. In general, Islamic Relief has found that being a Muslim FBO has increased the level of trust and acceptance from Muslim refugees/IDPs. The organisation is often able to forge deeper bonds with Muslim communities because of its image as a Muslim organisation as well as through its efforts to serve the spiritual needs of Muslim communities. However, in certain situations, such as in Sudan, Afghanistan and Ingushetia, being identified as a Muslim FBO has further complicated Islamic Relief’s work. Therefore the effects of faith on Islamic Relief’s experience of working with refugees vary depending on the context.

Furthermore, as a Muslim FBO with a growing reputation, Islamic Relief has made important strides through its partnerships with secular INGOs as well as with non-Muslim FBOs. Such partnerships have generally been mutually beneficial and have allowed non-Muslim organisations to gain access and trust amongst Muslim communities and thus

expand the scope of their service delivery. As well, inter-faith partnerships in areas such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ingushetia have contributed to refugee resettlement efforts and peace-building in ethnically polarised communities.

In a global context in which Muslim organisations are increasingly being viewed negatively and with suspicion, Islamic Relief's experience has shown the possibilities of positively utilising the value of faith in order to more effectively serve communities in need.

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