

**Afterword:
Capital, Migration, Intervention:
Rethinking Gulf Islamic Charities**

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The essays in this collection provide a counterpoint to the overheated and often misdirected public and policy debates over Islamic charities and “terrorism” that have attracted much attention in recent years. In their topical and methodological variety, they cast light in the manner of a prism scattering discrete and refracted rays over a darkened surface, gradually revealing its contours and colors. For the past decade or more, audiences in the West have demanded to know how much they should fear Islamic charities, especially from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states. This loaded question has thrived on an imagined elision between Islamic proselytism, charitable work, and armed activism, with the third concealing itself behind the other two. A great deal of scholarship, to which this volume is a useful addition, has sought to respond to this question and to challenge sensationalist or racist discourses on Muslim charities.¹

There is, however, a second set of concerns pointing to the urgency of serious research on Gulf charities: the series of uprisings that have erupted in much of the Arab world from late 2010 onward and have fallen under the general heading of the “Arab Spring.” Saudi Arabia and Qatar have taken up the banner of reaction

in sending troops to help crush the largely Shia uprising in Bahrain, while at the same time waving the flag of revolution in supporting and perhaps co-opting armed opposition groups in Libya and Syria.² In Syria especially, the link between Islamist opposition groups – including aid workers and foreign fighters – and the Gulf states has emerged as a major issue of discussion. The hazy notion of a potent combination of money and fanaticism emanating from the Gulf persists in both liberal and leftist discussions on Syria and the Arab Spring more generally. While the essays in this volume do not purport to resolve these debates, they do point toward some helpful directions for future research. The study of Islamic charities from the Gulf may be helpfully advanced by engaging with three broader questions: capital, and specifically the political economy of GCC states; migration, and specifically thinking of the labor dimensions of charitable work; and intervention, or developing frameworks to critically compare different attempts by external actors to influence armed conflicts.

1. Capital

The discussion of Islamic charities in the Gulf often assumes a kind of “black box” character in which mysterious states send religiously-inflected funds to distant locations in Africa, Asia, Europe, or elsewhere to reap uniform “Islamist” effects. In many a location where Islamism is a concern, shadowy donors from the Gulf – and especially from Saudi Arabia – are conjured with little explanation or analysis.³ Yet understanding Islamic aid cannot be understood purely in terms of “causes” located in donor countries and “effects” located in receiving ones; instead, dynamics at both ends need to be understood in relation to one another. As long as the “donor” countries in particular are not studied closely and diverse actors within them treated with analytical specificity, we are stuck with a kind of methodological nationalism – an assumption that national boundaries are natural givens – that then gives way to little more than obscurantism. This volume goes some way in remedying this problem. Aid efforts – whether perceived as benign or interest-driven – rarely produce the effects that donors intend. Donors do not always get what they pay for and may even get the opposite: this is as true for Islamic charities as it is for USAID.

An obvious next step, then, would be to ground the analysis of Gulf-based Islamic charities in the political economy of the region. A previous generation of scholarship, especially on Saudi Arabia, advanced a “rentier state” set of arguments that essentially depicted regimes as using oil wealth to maintain high degrees of autonomy from social forces and buy off dissent. In recent years, there has been an

efflorescence of scholarship on political economy in the Gulf that has significantly advanced these and related debates. Steffen Hertog's *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats* (2011) revises the rentier state thesis, unpacking its assumption of a unitary state actor to show how it is better understood as a set of overlapping clientage networks, both formal and informal. Robert Vitalis's history of the US–Saudi ARAMCO oil company, *America's Kingdom* (2006), injected questions of race and labor into the discussion, highlighting the importation of Jim Crow segregation practices to the oil fields of the Gulf. Toby Craig Jones's *Desert Kingdom* (2010) shed light on the importance of transnational networks of social science and “expertise” to the development of the Saudi state, especially in the management of oil and water. Moving beyond Saudi Arabia, Adam Hanieh's *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States* (2011) incorporates a meticulous study of hundreds of firms across the GCC region to shed light on processes of oil-driven class formation and calls attention to the importance of Asian migrant labor, more on which below.

What the foregoing studies share is a theoretically rigorous attention to the political economy of the Gulf in a transnational context, turning a fresh eye onto questions of labor and technical practice. They have provided a crucial counterpoint to perspectives – from both within and outside the region – that see everything through the lens of “Islam.” In doing so, they offer a richer analytical context for understanding appropriations of and engagements with Islam, even if Islamic practice, belief, and institutions are not the primary objects of analysis.⁴ In parallel with the political economy work that has largely emerged in US universities, a handful of political sociologists trained in France, students of Gilles Kepel, have produced monographs on Islamic institutions in Saudi Arabia: Stéphane Lacroix's *Awakening Islam* (2011[2010]) and Norwegian defense researcher Thomas Hegghammer's *Jihad in Saudi Arabia* (2010). These works have produced useful empirical data about the variety of institutions, trends, and orientations that are often grouped as “Islamist,” “Salafi,” or “Wahhabi.” But they also generally leave significant transnational questions unaddressed.⁵ Laurent Bonnefoy's *Salafism in Yemen* (2011), in contrast, directs greater ethnographic attention to religious practice while at the same time including proper attention to transnational dynamics.

The essays in this volume point to a potentially fruitful area of analysis between these two literatures on the Gulf, political economy on the one hand and (for lack of a better shorthand) “political Islam” on the other. Charity is central to the mediation of capital and Islam, at both the domestic and the trans-regional levels. Oil does not simply create the wealth that funds charitable activities in the region: it also shapes the class dynamics and institutional contexts for the development of charitable work.

Charities are at the heart of how ruling elites reconcile their dependency on oil wealth – and the relationships of political subordination to the West that it entails – with their public commitment to protecting and promoting particular visions of Islam. It seems clear that the debates over “professionalization” and “institutionalization” of Islamic NGOs referenced in this volume should be understood in the context of how Gulf regimes operate in general: capital does not so much “capture” the state as permeate it through kinship networks and other interest groups. Even the debate referenced by some pieces in this volume over whether charitable giving is best understood as “altruistic” or “interest-driven” in a way misses crucial questions about the changing mechanisms for elite legitimization – and the efflorescence of charities that are neither strictly governmental nor helpfully understood as “civil society” groups when they are pet projects and extensions of ruling families.⁶ Even debates about comparative “effectiveness” – the idea that Gulf NGOs may be less professional but by the same token less bureaucratic and hence more flexible and more in touch with popular needs – reflect how the political economy of the Gulf often entails significant dynamics of “private” resource mobilization not well captured by either the state or corporate forms.

2. Migration

The essays in this volume are in many ways about mobility: the circulation of capital, of ideas, practices, and individuals. Taking mobility as an analytical category, with particular attention to diasporas and empires, has been a helpful framework for moving beyond methodological nationalism, as well as beyond “globalization” as a kind of catch-all or residual counterpart to the nation-state (Ho 2006, Eickelman and Piscatori 1990). Typically, the Gulf is treated as an exporter of funds and religious ideas and an importer of labor, especially from other Arab countries as well as from south and south east Asia. Foreign residents are now a major proportion of the populations of several GCC states; they are a majority in the United Arab Emirates. Scholars of the Gulf, especially anthropologists, have in recent years turned their attention to this phenomenon (Kanna 2011, Gardner 2010, Vora 2013, Kamrava and Babar 2012).⁷ This migration cannot be simply understood in terms of deterministic “push-pull” factors or problems of social integration and population management; they also speak to a broader history of trans-regional connections across the Indian Ocean. All of the GCC states, with the partial exception of Saudi Arabia, were within the political orbit of British India at one point or another. India supplied troops, currencies, and laws, before it became known primarily as a labor

source (Onley 2007, Metcalf 2007). Even today, any notion that Islam is something only produced in the Gulf for export elsewhere is belied by the significant presence of the Tablighi Jamā‘at movement – which originated in India – in the Arab world (Noor 2012:42, 103–106, 64, 73, 90; Tozy 2000).

This volume’s focus on charitable organizations, however, points to another dimension of mobility: the networks of circulating preachers and aid workers who come with ideas and money. By looking at charity workers and volunteers moving through and out of the Gulf, we can understand forms of migration in terms of both religious practice and meaning as well as concerns over labor and economy.⁸ In this respect, Gulf charities also provide a useful counterpoint to the large literature on critiques of the “aid industry” in the West. Aid workers and organizations have become objects of critical scholarship over the past decade, much of which has rightfully drawn attention to the disparities in power and lifestyle between a jet-setting, cosmopolitan class of aid workers and the populations they ostensibly serve (Crewe and Harrison 1999, Lewis and Mosse 2006, Jackson 2005, Redfield 2013). Examining the actual operations and peoples involved in Gulf charities overseas can usefully push beyond this work’s focus on Western NGOs. At the same time, it would help us think about the Gulf as more than a destination for migrant labor, but also as an exporter of sorts. Here it is important to draw attention to the hierarchical heterogeneity of Gulf charities: many of their employees are citizens of the GCC countries where these charities are based, but a great many are local employees or nationals of third countries. In my own research on Arab Islamist activism in the 1992–1995 Bosnian war, I found that Gulf charities operating in the Balkans were just as transnational as institutions, firms, and households back “home.” Typically, the operations of large Gulf charities⁹ were headed by employees from the home country. Yet many of the positions, including administrative ones, were held by Arabs from non-GCC countries such as Algerians, Palestinians, or Egyptians, who often had specialized skills or professional training that their supervisors lacked, while sharing a common language with them. Finally, locals were often employed as drivers, guards, loaders, and cleaners. Conditions of war and uncertainty did not erase tensions over payment of salary or workplace decisions: I interviewed several non-Gulf Arabs who moved from one Islamic NGO to another during the war over such disputes. Gulf charities were sites in which a putatively common “Islamic” project was experienced through differences of race, nation, and class in ways that can be productively compared and contrasted with NGOs from western Europe and settler states such as the US, Canada, and Australia.

The growing scholarly literature on NGOs and the aid industry has noted that hierarchies of race and class are integral to understanding this field of work, and the example of Gulf charities in the Balkans in particular presents a striking counterpoint. On the one hand, Arab aid workers endowed with wealth and a sense of rectitude in their approach to Islam presented themselves as benefactors – both financial and spiritual – to local Bosnian Muslims. On the other hand, Arabs continued to operate in global hierarchies of racial privilege, at risk of profiling, detention, and mistreatment as perceived “foreign fighters.” Many Bosnians, including practicing Muslims, regarded them as backward and uncivilized, and accused Arabs of imposing forms of religious practice deemed unsuitable to the local context. Perhaps the most fraught cross-cutting of race and wealth was in the issue of interracial marriage: Arab aid workers, fighters, and preachers in the country took Bosnian brides – couplings that were stereotypically framed as a match between Arab desires for white women and Bosnian desperation for material comfort or escape from a wartime situation. Thus, because Islamic charity workers are often in a more ambivalent position of power vis-à-vis local populations than their counterparts from the West, they help us analyze aid workers more generally as socially and historically embedded actors. This can only be a welcome perspective, given that prevailing approaches toward the aid industry tend to remain bifurcated between ethical concerns on the one hand and links to extractive war economies on the other (Andreas 2008, Nordstrom 2004). Again, Islamic charities provide an analytically useful site to think across the aid literature’s implicit divide between a focus on ethical “values” and economic “value.”

3. Intervention

Finally, these essays allow us to return to the question of intervention. In the decades since the end of the Cold War, the notion of an “International Community” has crystallized, most starkly in relation to situations of armed conflict. Unlike its more pointed predecessor, “the Free World” – which gestured to the putatively un-free Communist bloc – the International Community enjoys more pervasive, if anodyne, pretensions to universality. It is dominated by “the West” (an only slightly less unstable category) but not reducible to it. The rise of the International Community has also exerted a strong gravitational pull on activities typically understood under the headings of charity, development, or even humanitarianism, seeking to redefine them in terms of “security” (Duffield 2001, Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). Diplomats, politicians, technocrats, and commentators often speak now of expansive and vague

notions such as “human security,” or frame humanitarian or development concerns in terms of their destabilizing impacts. The discourse around the “responsibility to protect” has been key in this regard. The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), a quasi-official body of influential elites, has proclaimed that military means should only be a last resort, instead favoring prevention as a key element of the responsibility to protect (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty 2001:19–27). Far from limiting the scope of intervention, the move toward prevention seeks to expand it, radically transforming the logic and justifications behind a wide range of activities, including charity. Aid activity, even when private, is now often understood as a tool of conflict management and therefore a major component of the International Community.

Islamic charities present an important potential counterpoint to dominant notions of the International Community. Through the scope of their activity and the scale of the resources employed, Islamic aid groups call into question the presumed ability of Western actors to define universal values and decide how they are to be put into practice.¹⁰ They are seen as part of the International Community but also are characterized as rejecting it through their alleged prioritization of religious values over secular ones. Indeed, Islamic NGOs are especially important in understanding that the role of Islam in the International Community is much affected by the relative geostrategic weakness of Muslim states. Western NGOs often work in the shadow of the hegemony exercised by Western states, one part of a large assemblage of entities and practices associated with the West, including journalists, diplomats, and sometimes soldiers. In contrast, Islamic NGOs play a relatively larger role in the projection of the “soft power” of their home states in the eyes of others, especially in areas where their governments exercise less official influence.¹¹ This difference is also reflected in the challenges they face in relation to armed action. Western NGOs may be regarded as tools of Western armies and intelligence services, while in contrast, Islamic NGOs are dogged by accusations that they provide cover for illicit jihad activity. The former is more often than not an open relationship, reflecting a kind of public power; the latter is an allegation (often unfounded or not provable), concomitant with the more precarious official status of Islamic solidarity work.

Some of the contributions to this volume seek to show the alleged compatibility of the *umma* (global Islamic community) and “humanity” by exploring the extent to which Islamic aid organizations are complying with standards that Western actors set for them (whether those standards are adhered to in the West itself is of course far from clear). The continued reliance of some of these contributions on the *umma*/

humanity distinction, however, is also a reminder of the need to critically interrogate – following Talal Asad (Asad 1993, Asad 2003) – the distinction posited between secular and religious. Asad famously argued that secularism should be thought of not as a fixed category but as marking a particular kind of power premised on policing the boundaries between private and public spheres, allegedly relegating religion to the former. In many of the debates around aid work, the terms “human” or “humanitarian” often play a role similar to the secular as analyzed by Asad: a category whose power partially lies in its putative neutrality and naturalness. Instead of asking how Islamic NGOs can serve both humanity and the *umma*, we can instead ask: who defines “humanity” – the content of this category, as well as its interests – and how is such authority generated and sustained? This seems like a much more analytically fruitful question since the values promulgated by the International Community – as noted above – are themselves hardly coherent or fixed enough to be usefully labeled as “Western.” This is not to engage the longstanding debate as to whether universal values truly exist or are possibly discernible. Nor is this simply a matter of hypocrisy, of the West proclaiming universality while enacting exclusions or of double standards. What is at stake here is the ability to redefine what is considered universal, which in turn also helps reshape the contours of hypocrisy.

One could argue that the International Community is still inherently a more universal category than the *umma*, since the former already includes all of humanity through the mechanism of (near-)universal state membership in the UN whereas the latter only includes humanity through the teleology of conversion, the hope that one day all people will accept Islam. But this distinction is dubious at best: it is not at all clear that the proportion of people in the world who identify with the International Community in any meaningful sense is necessarily much greater than the proportion of those who identify themselves with Islam and accept its basic tenets of faith. In other words, universalist projects are best understood in terms of the scope of their claims and their ability to normalize those claims among others – *not* whether those claims are scrupulously adhered to. In this respect, the International Community as imagined by Western NGO practitioners and the *umma* as imagined by Muslim charities are structurally homologous and hence comparable, even if they operate on very different scales and involve some different forms of power.

Shifting our understanding of such universalist projects – whether they act in the name of the International Community or the *umma* – is crucial for questions of intervention, especially of the armed variety. For much of the

post-Cold War era, intervention in war zones from Bosnia–Herzegovina in the early 1990s to Syria¹² today has largely been framed as a stark choice between intervention from the West or “doing nothing.” Of course this framing is deeply misleading, since hegemonic powers are often already deeply involved in such conflicts and are often exacerbating them. But in the public debates, intervention from the West is presented as the only viable choice on offer (even if one decries them as hypocritical or ineffective) with the alternative being inaction. At the same time, intervention in the name of the *umma* – be it aid work or armed jihad – is treated as not only presumptively suspicious, but representing a global Islamist threat indistinguishable from Al-Qaeda’s war against the United States. So the invocation of armed Islamist groups endows “doing nothing” with a more ominous tone. This contrast between intervention in the name of the International Community and intervention in the name of the *umma* can be usefully questioned. Troops sent by the International Community are regarded as “international forces” while those fighting in the name of the *umma* are “foreign fighters”; yet international forces are obviously just as foreign, and traveling Islamist fighters are often just as multi-national (Li 2010). This state of affairs contrasts sharply with the bipolar Cold War world order, when forms of armed intervention not authorized by the West were not automatically deprived of legitimacy in large part because they could still take place through nation-states, as with Cuba’s decision to militarily defend Angola against apartheid South Africa (George 2005). The prominence of non-state forms of pan-Islamist activism must be understood in significant part as a reaction to the relative weakness or co-optation of Muslims states in the international system.

What is most needed in evaluating interventions by universalist projects – be they armed or unarmed, and whether undertaken in the name of the International Community or on behalf of the *umma* – is more rigorous thought about the criteria involved. This is especially necessary for better understanding relationships between Western and Islamic interventions, as they shift between competition, conflict, and collaboration. The current dichotomy, in which the International Community’s basic right to intervene is largely taken for granted and the *umma*’s is summarily demonized, is clearly inadequate. Instead, questions of political responsibility, accountability, and values in contexts of class formation and other social fractures must be examined afresh in order to critically evaluate them both. In the context of the current Syrian crisis, the point is not to determine whether the Western powers or the Gulf states are more legitimate – indeed, both share considerable blame for exacerbating the bloodshed – but in developing a clearer analysis moving forward.

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Endnotes

- 1 See also Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003, Bano 2007, Dugger 2011.
- 2 Jones 2012, Ryan 2012. For a recent illuminating discussion on Gulf studies scholarship, see the online roundtable organized by Jadaliyya on "Theorizing the Arabian Peninsula," 22 April 2013, available at <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11300/theorizing-the-arabian-peninsula-introduction-to-t>.
- 3 Some scholarship has sought to understand the effects of Gulf-based charities on local political conditions and Islamic practice. See, for example, Ghodsee 2010 and Kroessin and Mohamed 2008.

- 4 Mandana Limbert's ethnography about Oman, *In the Time of Oil* (2010: 82–114), stands out for its attempt to contextualize issues of Islamic practice – women's Qur'an study circles, particular – in broader cultural changes related to the rise of an oil-based political economy.
- 5 For some tentative attempts to engage some of these questions about transnational links between Saudi Arabia and the Muslim world, see some of the contributions in Al-Rasheed 2008.
- 6 I am indebted to Mayssun Sukarieh for making this point in relation to ruling family-driven NGOs in Syria and Jordan. "The First Lady phenomenon: Women's empowerment and the colonial present in the contemporary Arab World," Lecture at Columbia University, 27 March 2013.
- 7 The Gulf migration experience has also become an object of literary investigation. *Goat Days*, a novel in Malayalam by an Indian resident of Bahrain, Benjamin, was translated into English in 2012. The 2013 International Prize for Arabic Fiction was awarded to Sa'ūd al-San'ūsī's novel *Bamboo Stalk* (2012), about the son of a Kuwaiti man and a Filipina domestic worker.
- 8 This is also true, of course, of migrants in the Gulf countries, significant numbers of whom have converted to Islam. See Ahmad 2010.
- 9 Two of the most important Gulf charities active in the Balkans during the wars were the Saudi Arabia-based International Islamic Relief Organization (al-Hay'a al-'Ālamiyya lil-Ighātha al-Islāmiyya, referred to throughout this volume as IIROSA or IIRO) and the Saudi High Commission for Bosnia-Herzegovina (al-Hay'a al-'Uliyā li-Jam' al-Tabarru'āt lil-Būsna wal-Harsak). Also active on the ground – and more openly supportive of Arabs waging jihad in the country – was the Kuwaiti Salafi organization, the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (Jam'iyyat Ihyā' al-Turāth al-Islāmi, RIHS). Of various Salafi movements in the Arab world, RIHS arguably has the longest history of state institutionalization: it has participated in Kuwaiti parliamentary politics for decades and stayed within the parameters set by the ruling regime. Therefore its support of armed jihad in Bosnia-Herzegovina did not extend to armed uprisings against Muslim regimes such as Egypt or to Al-Qaeda's armed campaign against the United States.
- 10 It should go without saying that for these same reasons, the terms "Western" and "Islamic" do not refer to fixed mutually exclusive entities.
- 11 This is compounded by the ambiguous status of larger Saudi charities such as the Muslim World League, which can also be thought of as quasi-governmental entities. The Saudi High Commission in Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, was both a charitable organization that solicited private donations as well as the primary vehicle for Saudi foreign policy towards Bosnia.
- 12 Reliable data on foreign Islamists fighting in Syria is quite rare at this time, given the intense propaganda around the issue by all concerned. See International Crisis Group 2012.