Section II:
Mapping RNGOs in Diverse Religious Traditions

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Islam and Development: International Muslim NGOs

Introduction

The last three or four decades have seen the emergence of an increasing number of international Muslim NGOs engaged in the provision of aid to the poor. This chapter is about two of them—the British Islamic Relief and the Saudi Arabian International Islamic Relief Organisation (in the following IIROSA).[1] Despite similarities in their names, the two organisations present two very different understandings of religion and its role in the provision of aid, and—consequently—of their own role in the field of development and humanitarian aid. Based on micro-sociological case studies of these two organisations, this chapter explores some of these differences, identifying and analysing dominant narratives on the nexus between Islam and aid. What is the role of religion in the work and identity of these organisations?[2] The purpose of the analysis is not to provide a comprehensive mapping of the field of international Muslim NGOs as such, but to present emblematic examples, or what Flyvbjerg (2006) calls paradigmatic cases, of different kinds of contemporary international Muslim NGOs and their conceptions of aid and Islam.[3] For this purpose, the selection of Islamic Relief and IIROSA seems apt, insofar as these two organisations represent two 'typical' examples of international Muslim NGOs; positioning them-

1 This chapter builds in large part on previously published work, in particular the article 'Islamizing Aid', published in Voluntas 2011, and my book For Humanity or for the Umma, Hurst 2015. I would like to thank Voluntas and Hurst for permission to reprint.

2 Recent years have seen a surge in literature on Islam and aid provision. For literature on international Muslim NGOs, see e.g. Kaag (2016; 2017), Kirmani and Khan (2008), Palmer (2011), Lacey and Benthall (2014), Clarke and Tittensor (2016), Juul Petersen (2011; 2012a; 2015). For literature on local Muslim charities and aid organisations, see e.g. Harmsen (2008) and Wiktorowicz (2001) on Jordan, Sparre and Juul Petersen (2007) on Jordan and Egypt, Clark (2004) on Jordan, Egypt, and Yemen, or Salehin (2016) on Bangladesh.

3 Paradigmatic cases are, according to Flyvbjerg (2006: 232) cases that highlight more general characteristics of the societies in question, in this case the group of transnational Muslim NGOs after 9/11. As such, the selected cases are not paradigmatic in the sense of being 'average' or 'representative', but in the sense of containing the most information, the richest narratives, the broadest range of characteristics.

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selves (and being positioned) in different ways in the aid field.[4] The first two sections of the chapter give a brief history of the emergence and contemporary context of transnational Muslim NGOs, outlining some of the main events and developments that have shaped the trajectories of these organisations. The third and fourth sections present the case studies of the two Muslim NGOs, analysing dominant organisational narratives on the role of religion in the provision of development and humanitarian aid. Finally, the conclusion sums up the main points of the analysis.

The Emergence of International Muslim NGOs

Naturally, international Muslim NGOs are not the first institutions of aid provision in the history of Islam.[5] Although not direct equivalents of contemporary development aid, traditions of charity (sadaqa) have existed since the birth of Islam, and historically, zakat and waqf have been important institutions for the redistribution of wealth in Muslim societies. Contemporary Muslim aid organisations, however, grew first and foremost out of a general Islamic resurgence. Starting in the early 20th century, the Islamic resurgence denotes a global movement of renewed interest in Islam as a relevant identity and model for community, manifested among other things in the introduction and strengthening of Islamically defined organisations and institutions (Lapidus 2002: 823). The Muslim Brotherhood and the Jama'at-e Islami, the transnational and pan-Islamic missionary movements of the Gulf, and the Muslim migrant organisations in Europe and North America were forerunners to today's international Muslim NGOs, contributing in different ways to shaping conceptions of aid provision. For the Muslim Brotherhood and Jama'at-e Islami, aid was about moral education, or *tar-*

4 The majority of data for the analysis was collected during field visits to the headquarters and country offices of the two organisations. The visits were carried out in 2008 and 2009, each lasting between one and five weeks, altogether a period of approximately four months. During my visits I conducted a total of approximately 100 interviews, including interviews with headquarter staff in Britain and Saudi Arabia, and country office staff in Bangladesh, Jordan and Lebanon; as well as background interviews with representatives from other Muslim NGOs, Christian and secular NGOs, governmental donor agencies and intergovernmental organisations. Alongside interviews, observations were also carried out, in particular at project sites but also at staff meetings and meetings with partner organisations. Finally, documents about and by the organisations were collected, including, for example, website information, project documents, reporting formats, annual reports, brochures, policies, promotion videos, photos and newspaper articles.

5 For a more thorough account of the history of international Muslim NGOs, see Petersen (2012b), and Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan (2003).

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biya, aimed at building up the individual Muslim and strengthening the Muslim umma, understood primarily in a national context. The organisations from the Gulf, on the other hand, emphasised a more transnational approach, expressed in the provision of relief, missionary activities, networks and conferences on a transnational level. Finally, migrant Muslim organisations in Europe and North America introduced a focus on community activism, informal practices of transnational giving as well as professional NGOs, modelled after Western NGOs.

The end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s saw the emergence of some of the first international Muslim NGOs. As Yaylaci (2008: 14) notes, contemporary forms of Muslim aid mostly originate from a rally to support Muslims in catastrophic situations, essentially those in war and natural disasters. One of the first disasters to attract the attention of Muslim organisations was the famine in the Horn of Africa, motivating the establishment of several NGOs with the purpose of providing food aid, medicine, and other kinds of emergency relief to people in affected countries such as Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad and Somalia. Islamic Relief, founded in Britain in 1984, was one of these new organisations; IIROSA was another, established in Jeddah in 1979. Parallel to the involvement in Africa, Muslim NGOs increasingly got involved in other areas of the world, especially the war in Afghanistan—interpreted by many as an attempt by an atheist Soviet to intimidate a pious Muslim population. Drifting into civil war, the Afghan conflict was later replaced by the war in Bosnia as the Muslim cause par excellence, leading to another wave of Muslim NGOs. Financially, the surge of Muslim NGOs was partly facilitated by the explosion of oil prices in 1979, meaning that huge funds were suddenly available to Middle Eastern regimes, intergovernmental institutions, businesses and individual donors (Ghandour 2004: 329). Some of this money was channeled through Muslim NGOs, in particular the Gulf-based ones. Another flow of funds had its origin among Muslim immigrants in Europe and North America, who would pay their zakat to Muslim NGOs. Today, the aid field accommodates around 400 transnational Muslim NGOs. The majority of these are established in Europe and North America, in particular Great Britain, while the Gulf countries have also fostered a large number of organisations. Recent years have also seen the emergence of a number of Turkish NGOs.

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International Muslim NGOs in the Post 9/11 Aid Field

International Muslim NGOs and the Global War on Terror

In the first decade or two of their existence, international Muslim NGOs were living an almost parallel life in the periphery of the aid field. Getting most of their funding from Muslim individuals, businesses and sometimes governments, they did not need European or North American donors; they cooperated little with UN and other international institutions; and they did not participate in international forums for NGO cooperation, placing themselves outside the reach of common mechanisms for control and accountability. Suspicions of involvement in militant activism would surge from time to time, in particular in relation to the work of Muslim NGOs in Afghanistan and Bosnia. Here, several NGOs were suspected of funding militant camps and facilitating logistical support to the mujahedeen. While US and other governments would initially turn a blind eye to such relations, seeing the mujahedeen as their ally in the fight against the Communists, this changed with the end of the Cold War and the shifting political dynamics. The alleged involvement of a number of Muslim NGOs in the 1993 and 1998 attacks on American territories—first the World Trade Center and then the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania—only strengthened this negative attention to Muslim NGOs, leading to increased control, arrests of individuals and bans of certain organizations. Muslim NGOs were increasingly seen Muslim NGOs were increasingly seen as de facto accomplices in radical Islamist terrorism. This assumed linkage intensified with the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers and Pentagon in 2001. Within a year of the attacks, a number of transnational Muslim NGOs had been designated by the US government, accused of supporting Al Qaeda. Several other governments followed suit, banning transnational Muslim NGOs from working in their territory. In the following years, a wide range of new laws, policies and regulations were introduced, attempting to prevent and obstruct NGO involvement in terrorist activities. Some of the most important measures in what came to be known as the War on Terror have been the so-called designation lists of organizations and individuals with alleged links to militant Islamist networks, including Al Qaeda, Hamas and Hizbollah. Aside from these lists, governments and intergovernmental organizations have introduced a number of strategies, policies and regulations, aimed at strengthening financial accountability and transparency of NGOs (Cotterrell and Harmer 2005: 19).

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Religious NGOs in the Field of Development and Humanitarian Aid

These 'hard' measures to crack down on 'terrorist' NGOs were coupled with 'softer' counter-terrorism approaches seeking to encourage cooperation with Muslim NGOs in order to prevent radicalisation (Howell and Lind 2009: 47) and to strengthen relations with potential bridge builders. In this, governmental aid agencies have played an important role. In particular the British Department for International Development, DfID, has been active in strengthening cooperation with Muslim NGOs, and supports several organisations financially. In Switzerland, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs established an initiative titled 'Towards cooperation with Islamic charities in removing unjustified obstacles', also known as the Montreux Initiative (see Lacey and Benthall 2014); and in Germany, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, GTZ (in English, German Agency for International Cooperation), launched a range of projects focusing on Islam and development aid, including 'Islam and Development Cooperation in Africa', and 'Instruments of Development Cooperation and Islamic Values in Asia'.

This focus on Muslim NGOs coincided with a general interest in religious NGOs (or faith-based organisations) among governmental and intergovernmental development agencies, as the chapters in this volume show. While religious organizations have historically played an important role in the provision of aid (see the chapter by Hoffmann in this volume), their efforts for many years went largely unnoticed among mainstream development agencies. Shaped by narratives of modernisation, dominant conceptions of development have historically been largely secularist, based on an understanding of religion as a traditional and conservative force, and as such an obstacle or, at best irrelevant, to development. Ver Beek's 2000 survey of the policies of several major development agencies testifies to this, concluding that none of them had any policies on religion or spirituality, and that they sought to avoid the topic in programmes and projects. Religion was, he claimed, a 'development taboo' (Ver Beek 2000: 31). Today, the taboo has been broken (de Kadt 2009). Failures in mainstream aid provision, among other things, have forced development agencies to look for alternative ways of providing aid—and in this, many have turned to religious NGOs, seeing them as the new panacea. Underlying this new interest is an understanding of religion as an 'added value' to development. Building on large constituencies and enjoying trust and credibility in local communities, religious NGOs are expected by development agencies to have great

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potential as promoters of development and humanitarian aid, capable of galvanizing moral commitment, translating principles of aid into the idioms of faith and mobilizing popular support for donor initiatives (Clarke 2007: 80). In this perspective, the religious identity of organisations is considered an instrument in the effective implementation of aid activities, primarily serving as a tool for access to and communication with constituencies that may otherwise be unreachable.[6]

To sum up, this is (part of) the context in which contemporary transnational Muslim NGOs find themselves today. Historically, they have been largely invisible in the aid field, getting funding from individual Muslims, and avoiding European and North American donors. In particular, since 9/11 and the War on Terror, this parallel life is no longer possible—everybody is watching the Muslim NGOs, navigating in an environment of increasing regulation and control, but also with openings for cooperation and funding. Different NGOs have reacted differently to this situation. Some have withdrawn or have been pushed to the periphery, isolated from mainstream development actors, while others move still closer to the centre, cooperating closely with other actors in the field. The remainder of this chapter takes a closer look at two organisations that have had very different trajectories since 9/11, exploring the ways in which they understand religion and its role in development and humanitarian aid as well as the ways in which they understand their own position in this field.

International Islamic Relief Organisation: 'It's all in Islam!'

Established in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in 1979, IIROSA is the oldest of the two organisations discussed in this chapter—and one of the oldest transnational Muslim NGOs in the world. The IIROSA is formally part of the Muslim World League whose secretary general is the chairman of the IIROSA General Assembly. IIROSA has its headquarters in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, with fundraising offices all over the country. The organisation is firmly anchored in a conservative Muslim environment. Founders, board and assembly members are all 'Islamic dignitaries' with strong personal and professional relations to key Islamic organisations and persons. All staff members in the organisations are practicing Muslims; many have experience with other Muslim organisations; and a few have experience with Western development organisations. Likewise, the vast majority of donors are Kuwaiti and Saudi Muslims wishing to pay their obligatory religious tax,

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6 For a critical discussion of religion as an 'added value', see e.g. Jones and Petersen (2011).

zakat, voluntary alms, or sadaqa; partners are primarily other Islamic organisations and institutions such as the OIC, the International Islamic Council for Da'wa and Relief, national Ministries of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, as well as local Muslim organisations; and recipients are mainly Muslim majority countries or Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries.

The IIROSA used to be one of the biggest and most influential Muslim organisations. In the 1990s, it had more than 80 country offices all over the world—including Latin America—and a budget close to $100 million USD, employing several thousand staff members. By 2010, the budget had been cut to less than $20 million USD (IIROSA 2011: np), and several country offices and programmes had been closed. Since then, IIROSA's activities have diminished further; there are even rumours that the organisation is largely defunct today. One of the main reasons for this downfall is the persistent suspicions of links with Al Qaeda and other militant Islamist groups, leading to severe restrictions on the organisation's activities. These suspicions have surrounded the organisation since its early years, in particular in relation to its activities in Afghanistan and Bosnia, where the organisation was suspected of supporting the mujahedeen,[7] but intensified after 9/11, when IIROSA was accused of financing the instigators of the attacks. In 2006, the Philippines and Indonesia branches were accused of ties to terrorist organisations by the US, claiming that they were 'facilitating fundraising for al Qaeda and affiliated terrorist groups'. At the same time, the IIROSA has been subject to increasing control by its own government. The organisation has, in other words, been subject to a wide range of 'hard measures' in the name of the War on Terror, leading to its deterioration and isolation.[8]

7 Later, the IIROSA was suspected of involvement in the 1998 bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, leading to the ban of the organisation by the Kenyan government.

8 In August 2002, the organisation was, together with seven other NGOs, seven international banks, the Sudanese government and a number of individuals, sued by a group of families of the 9/11 victims (Saudia Online 19 August 2002, cf. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2003). The case is still ongoing. The director of the Philippines office, Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, is the brother-in-law of Osama bin Laden and was considered by the US to be a senior Al Qaeda member. The Indonesia office was accused, among other things, of financing the establishment of training facilities for use by al Qaeda associates.The purpose of this analysis is not to determine whether this treatment is justified or not (to date, the organisation has not been convicted of any crimes).

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A dignified life and a strengthened umma

Through its work, IIROSA "aims to alleviate the suffering of distressed and needy people worldwide".[9] As stated in one of the organisation's reports (IIROSA 2006: 8):

> "IIROSA drives inspiration from the blessed land of the Two Holy Mosques, adopting the prophetic guidance in relieving the distressed, helping the needy and consoling the grieved. It strives to provide food for the hungry, medical care for the sick, clothes for the unclothed, helps wipe tears of the orphans, provides shelter, social and educational care for those who have lost their homes due to wars or natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods and drought. […] Allah Almighty said in His Holy Scripture: {And they feed for the love of God, the indignant, the orphan and the captive (Saying), "We feed you for the sake of God alone: No reward do we desire from you. Nor thanks} (Verses 8 & 9, Sura 76/Holy Qur'an)."

Through the provision of aid, the organisations seek to enable the poor and needy to take care of themselves, so that they will no longer be humiliated and ashamed, but will be able to re-gain their God-given dignity, living "a decent and useful life" (IIROSA 2008b: 10). For IIROSA, poverty is not only about hunger, diseases, and lack of education; it is also about religious ignorance, humiliation and backwardness. Poverty is, in other words, both spiritual and material and as such, markedly different from secular development conceptions of poverty. This understanding of poverty builds on conceptions of the inseparability of the material and the transcendent, underlying most contemporary Islamic movements and groups.

By assisting individual Muslims, ensuring their right to Islamic education and encouraging "observance of Islamic morals, sharia virtues, [and] activation of da'wa" (IIROSA 2008a: 40), IIROSA not only ensures their self-reliance and a dignified life, they also contribute to strengthening the Muslim umma (see also Kaag 2008: 5). The umma is threatened at different levels: from within, by 'immoral' and 'ignorant' Muslims on one side, and religious extremists and fanatics on the other; and from the outside, by what is seen to be strongly proselytizing Christian NGOs, as well as by "baseless allegations" launched against Muslim NGOs by "some people in the West" in particular after 9/11 (IIROSA 2007: 2f). To be a good Muslim is not only about individual piety and dignity, but about rescuing and maintaining the distinctively Islamic character of society. As such, the moral reform of the individual is linked to that of society (Hatina 2006: 182),

9 IIROSA, website, http://www.egatha.org/eportal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2&Itemid=2 (last accessed, 28 April 2018).

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strongly echoing Hassan al-Banna's ideas of Islamic activism. Aid provision, in other words, is not only for the poor individual, but for society. This is what Thaut (2009), in her analysis of Christian NGOs, calls an evangelistic humanitarianism: "they provide relief and development assistance largely with the goal of helping to extend the church, build up the community of Christians globally, and serve the spiritual needs of humanity" (Thaut 2009: 342).

For IIROSA, then, aid entails not only access to health, education, food and housing, but also religious education and facilities for worshipping. Aid is at once spiritual and material. As such, Islam is not restricted to a specific 'Islamic' department or programme for 'seasonal activities', but influences and shapes all sectors of the organisation's work. This is very visible and concrete in the Engineering Department, responsible for building and maintaining mosques, and in the Holy Qur'an and Dawa Programme, offering Qur'an memorization courses; but practices of aid and religion also merge—albeit in more intangible and indirect ways—in other programmes. An example is the Social Welfare Programme, which—at least at the time of the current study's fieldwork—offered financial support, education, medicine and basic necessities to almost 100,000 orphans across the world with a budget of almost $15.5 million USD. "The Prophet Muhammad himself was an orphan and he said that whoever took care of an orphan would be like this with him in heaven", people tell me, illustrating the closeness between the sponsor and the prophet by holding together two fingers. "That's why we have this programme". The purpose of the programme was to provide the orphans "with comprehensive care including food, medical care, social care, religious care" (IIROSA 2006: 18). Religious care was just as important as other kinds of care—this was reflected, among other things, in the annual evaluation of the child's welfare, sent to the child's sponsor. Here, staff members listed information as to the religiosity of the child, his/her ability to memorise the Qur'an (and if so what parts of the Qur'an), the name of the Qur'an centre he/she goes to, along with information as to his/her health situation, education and hobbies. Through lectures, sports and creative activities, IIROSA staff taught the children about topics such as social skills and good manners, health and hygiene, praying and fasting—"and it's all in Islam", I was told. A staff member of the orphans programme explained: "We show the orphans what Islam is like in an indirect manner, through our examples, through the way we do things". Through this lifestyle evangelism (Bornstein 2003), IIROSA staff sought to "build good people". "We teach them how to deal with other people", the staff member said, adding: "For me, it's about showing the children that Islam is

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not just about praying and going to the mosque, it is about dealing with people in a good way".

"Islam is about the spiritual and social matters"

As can be inferred from the above description, then, aid in this context is not only about building wells, distributing medicine or teaching children to read and write; it is also about building a mosque, preaching, and teaching children to memorize the Qur'an. This understanding of aid as inherently religious is based on a particular understanding of Islam. Islam is not just about praying, going to the mosque and dressing the right way—it is also about education, social welfare services and relief. As one staff member said: "Islam is not just about the spiritual, it is about the spiritual and social matters". As such, the Islam promoted by the IIROSA is an all-encompassing and pervasive Islam, or, to use Lincoln's (2003: 59) terms, a maximalist religion, constituting the central domain of organisational community and influencing all organisational discourses, practices and structures. This means that Islam is a source of social action as much as individual piety, echoing ideas of Hassan al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood. As people repeatedly say, "helping is better than praying". But it is not social action understood in political terms; instead, it is about education, culture, economy, social welfare, relief. The vision of the strengthened umma is not a vision of a concrete political umma, a rejection of the nation-state in favour of a transnational pan-Islamic political unit. It is a normative, moral vision, positing the umma as a transnational community of values.

Underlying this understanding of Islamic action are notions of solidarity and brotherhood. All Muslims are part of the same religious brotherhood, bound together in a global umma, and as such, closely connected, mutually interdependent and obliged to help one another. Muslims should engage in the provision of aid to the poor, because they are part of the same religious community, and as such, are obliged to help one another. Using terms such as an 'Islamic society', an 'Islamic brotherhood' and a 'Muslim nation', IIROSA nurses a strong sense of solidarity (Bayat 2005), emphasising "ties of interdependence, compassion and tender sympathy" (IIROSA nd) between members of this community and pointing out the responsibility of members to take care of one another. The donor gives to a fellow Muslim brother (or sister) in a country far away, because he sees himself and his fellow brother as members of a deep horizontal brotherhood, the umma (Kochuyt 2009: 106). By receiving the gift, the recipient likewise aligns him

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or herself with the umma (Kochuyt 2009: 110). As an IIROSA publication notes, "the Islamic society is a closely knitted society where the well-off helps the poor and the elder cares for the younger" (IIROSA 2008b: 13), and furthermore, helping the poor and needy "illustrates the principle of solidarity that Islam encourages and calls for" (IIROSA 2010: 4).

"They don't have the same feeling of family as we have"

This particular conception of aid and Islam as closely intertwined, based on notions of solidarity and family, makes Islamic aid markedly different from other kinds of aid, staff would argue. As a former IIROSA staff member said, describing his experiences in Sudan:

> "When we went to Sudan, we would wear the same clothes as the Sudanese, we would eat the same food, do the same things—and many people there speak Arabic. So they felt that we were closer to them. We gave aid with no strings attached, we considered ourselves brothers in humanity. I felt that we were much closer to them—because we share the same life habits. Likewise, in Afghanistan, people received us with deep respect and love. They might have received the Christian organisations with respect as well—but not necessarily with love."

Other staff members agreed on this distinction. As one person said: "[Other organisations] don't have the same feeling of family as we have, that the orphans are a part of our family, that it's about humanity, family, about making the orphans feel important. For them, it's routine, it's just a job they need to do, it's about finishing work to get home to your own family". Another person added: "We have a different way of dealing with people. We make people feel the importance of their existence. People can contribute to building society, they are special. The poor are not just somebody you can treat like you want to. They deserve respect". This difference was explained by reference to Islam: "We take this from a hadith by al Hakim, it says that you can't buy people with your money. You have to deal with them in a respectful way, with good manners and a smile". Others mentioned the Muslim tradition of making sure that the person receiving the money has the upper hand as a symbol of the uniqueness of Muslim organisations: "The recipient should not have the lower hand. We care about these details, this is important to us". As such, IIROSA staff constructed a dichotomy between Muslim aid which is warm, caring and per-

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sonal, and non-Muslim aid which is characterized by a somewhat cold and distanced professionalism.[10]

The War on Terror only seemed to intensify this dichotomy, adding a geopolitical dimension in terms of a war between Islam and the West. To most staff, the increasing control, restrictions and designations of Muslim NGOs were not seen as legitimate measures to ensure greater transparency of financial transactions, but as illegitimate attempts at destroying innocent organisations as part of the West's continued war against Islam. As one staff member said: "after [9/11], they wanted to crush the backbone of the Muslim world and they thought the most obvious was the charity organisations".[11] Further underlining the cruelty of the US authorities, people often emphasize the consequences of the War on Terror, directing attention to ways in which the ultimate costs of anti-terrorism measures are often borne by the poor (Kroessin 2007). "The orphans were crying", a person said, telling me about the Bangladeshi government's closing-down of a number of orphanages in Bangladesh (allegedly following pressure from the US government), which left more than 9,000 children without assistance. "We used to provide them with everything—food, school bags, medicine, clothing. And suddenly we cannot help them anymore. You feel very sad because of that". In the context of aid provision, then, the War on Terror is

10 See e.g. Bornstein 2009 for a discussion of this dilemma in an Indian context. She writes: "To coerce the impulse to give into rational accountability is to obliterate its freedom; to render giving into pure impulse is to reinforce social inequality" (2009: 643). According to this rationale of religious solidarity, personal care and compassion are more important qualities than efficiency and professionalism; in fact, professionalism may even be counterproductive to the sense of solidarity. An illustrative example of this is an incident an IIROSA top manager tells me about. He had been invited to a coordination meeting with other organisations working with orphans to discuss possibilities for coordination and cooperation: "Some suggested to make a control mechanism, to make sure that orphans don't get money from two different organisations. But I didn't like this idea, I was the only one who protested. I don't think we should minimise the income of the orphans. This is their only salary, and 20 or 30 dollars is not a lot. Some of them need more, they might have bigger families or different circumstances. You can't give the same to all. I don't think we should give all the same. So we cancelled this coordination. One sponsor for each orphan is not enough, they need more sponsors, at least two. […] I was the only one who thought this way, but I have worked with orphans for 18 years, and I feel like their father, I feel responsible for them".

11 In an IIROSA Bulletin, published shortly after the ban of the IIROSA branches in the Philippines and Indonesia in 2006, Adnan Khalil Basha, then Secretary General of the IIROSA, scorns the US government, claiming that "[t]hese actions are aimed at preventing Muslim relief activities around the world" (IIROSA 2007).

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seen as a war between Islam and the West, between the caring and the cruel.

To sum up, in IIROSA we find an aid that is at once spiritual and material, expressed e.g. in the construction of mosques and Qur'an education, but also more subtly in the provision of care and education for orphans, aimed at once at facilitating a 'dignified life' and strengthening the Muslim *umma*. Underlying IIROSA's conceptions of aid is an understanding of Islam as all-encompassing and relevant to all spheres of aid provision. As such, religion comes to be a defining factor in IIROSA's aid provision, making it radically different from the aid provided by non-Muslim organisations, whether secular or Christian.

Islamic Relief: "We have an understanding of religion that gives us an advantage"

Islamic Relief was established by Egyptian immigrants in Birmingham, UK, in 1984, making it one of the world's oldest international Muslim NGOs. With a budget of more than $130 million USD, it is arguably also one of the world's largest—if not the largest—Muslim NGOs (Islamic Relief 2017: 46). The organisation has its headquarters in Birmingham, with partner offices and branches in 18 countries, and activities in more than 30 countries. Staff and trustees make up an eclectic mix, including both people with little or no development expertise or training, as well as people with several years of experience and development-related training. Most are Muslim, but Christian and secular staff members also work in the organisation. Apart from individual donations, Islamic Relief also relies—increasingly—on institutional funding from donors such as DfID, ECHO and various UN agencies as well as organisations from the Middle East. Islamic Relief has formal partnerships with a number of Muslim, Christian and secular development NGOs, and is a member of a wide range of networks, including BOND, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership and the Disasters Emergency Committee. Recipients are both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Since the early 2000s, Islamic Relief has become increasingly integrated within the field of mainstream development and humanitarian aid, reflecting an increasing interest among development donors in cooperating with religious NGOs in general, as well as their desire to reach out to 'moderate' Muslim organisations within the context of the War on Terror. As a staff member in Islamic Relief noted with some amusement: "In these times, people want to be seen to be involving Islam". These developments

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have been paralleled by an increasing interest within Islamic Relief to engage more actively with mainstream development actors. In this, the organisation was motivated not simply by a prosaic quest for additional sources of funding, but also—and perhaps more importantly—a desire to move from what they considered to be short-term charity and relief work towards more long-term approaches to "address the root causes of poverty", as noted on Islamic Relief's website.[12] Institutional funding was seen as an important tool in facilitating this change. The organisational involvement in long-term development was further facilitated by the inclusion of new kinds of staff. While few first-generation staff members had development experience, the organisation started employing more development professionals, many with previous work experience from other development and humanitarian NGOs. As one staff member from Islamic Relief said, there had been a shift in staff from "people wanting to work in a religious organisation to people wanting to work in a development NGO". Simultaneously, a new type of individual donor took stage, consisting of young, well-educated second or third generation immigrants. Contrary to older, more conservative donors, they were not satisfied with traditional religious activities such as Qurbani sacrifices and Ramadan food packages: they expected Muslim NGOs to be modern, professional organisations, on a par with mainstream development organisations such as Oxfam and CARE.

"Lasting routes out of poverty"

Unlike IIROSA, the primary language of Islamic Relief is that of mainstream development and humanitarian aid, for example as reflected in its mission statement:

> "Exemplifying our Islamic values, we will mobilise resources, build partnerships and develop local capacity as we work to: Enable communities to mitigate the effect of disasters, prepare for their occurrence and respond by providing relief, protection and recovery; Promote integrated development and environmental custodianship with a focus on sustainable livelihoods; Support the marginalised and vulnerable to voice their needs and address root causes of poverty."[13]

12 Islamic Relief, website, http://www.islamic-relief.org/about-us/ (last accessed, 3 January 2018).

13 Islamic Relief, website, http://www.islamic-relief.org/about-us/ (last accessed, 3 January 2018).

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Underlying this is an understanding of poverty as a question of individual vulnerability and lack of capabilities: 'Many people are stuck in a poverty trap because they do not have the resources to develop their skills and work their way out of destitution' (Islamic Relief 2007: 19), Islamic Relief noted in its previous strategy. In 2008, Islamic Relief's research and policy department developed a *Policy Stance on Poverty*, defining poverty as

> "a multidimensional phenomenon, best understood in terms of capability deprivation, encompassing not only material deprivation (measured by income or consumption) but also other forms of deprivation, such as unemployment, ill health, lack of education, vulnerability, powerlessness, and social exclusion". (Islamic Relief 2008: point 2.8)

This understanding of poverty reflects mainstream development approaches found in organisations such as UNDP and Oxfam. But it also differs little from an Islamic understanding, the paper argues, outlining "five groups of activities and things which make up the human needs in Islam. These are: (a) Religion, (b) Physical self, (c) Intellect or Knowledge, (d) Offspring & Family, and (e) Wealth" (Islamic Relief 2008:point 3.0) "In particular", the paper notes, "the last four types of basic activities and things that make up basic human needs in Islam are similar to the indicators in the Human Development Indices, which stress the importance of income, education, and health" (Islamic Relief 2008: point 3.1). What is more problematic, is the first type of human need—that of religion, understood as the "ability to know about and practice one's religion". The paper states somewhat ambiguously that this is "not commonly part of the development and relief 'package', and Islamic Relief's willingness to consider religious deprivation and its measurement warrant discussion" (Islamic Relief 2008: point 4.1). It is difficult to align conceptions of poverty as—at least partly—spiritual with secular development conceptions of poverty. Instead, Islamic Relief discusses religion as part of poverty in the form of lack of religious freedom and discrimination against religious people; topics that do not challenge development principles of neutrality and non-confessionalism. In this perspective, a multi-dimensional notion of poverty does not, as in IIROSA, refer to the equal importance of spiritual and material needs. Instead, it is about including considerations as to rights and capabilities rather than relying on a strict monetary understanding of poverty.

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Responding to poverty, then, does not require ‘religious’ activities such as mosque building or Qur’an education.[14] Instead, Islamic Relief’s activities include mainstream development and humanitarian activities, including ‘innovative disaster-risk reduction’, ‘climate-change adaptation’, microfinance programmes, projects to fight ‘disability exclusion’, women’s empowerment projects, and advocacy campaigns against gender-based violence. In the concrete implementation of these activities, Islam does not seem to play a major role. “When we work, we don’t go to the Qur’an to see what to do. We work from a development perspective”, noted a project manager, responsible for a water and sanitation project in Bangladesh. Visiting one of Islamic Relief’s project sites in Bangladesh, I met with a group of women, the beneficiaries of the project who gathered for their weekly meeting with the ‘village motivator’. Here, they learned about topics such as ‘group dynamics’, ‘income generation activities’, and ‘disaster preparedness’, all of them (stereo)typical activities of mainstream development aid. “This way, we try to develop their capacity, so they can join the development mainstream”, one staff member explained. When the women were asked if they talked about Islam at their weekly meetings and they all laughed and shook their heads. “We talk more about practical things”, a woman said. A staff member added: “Our main objective is to provide an input to beneficiaries—what they are doing in relation to Allah, to their God, that’s their own business, that’s not really our business”.

Likewise, religion does not restrict the choice of beneficiaries. As stated in an annual report (Islamic Relief 2008: 2): “We provide help where it is needed most and wherever we are best placed to assist. We do this regardless of race, colour, political affiliation, gender or belief and without expecting anything in return”. The orphan sponsorship programme includes Christian children and donors; several recipients of microfinance loans are Hindus; even Ramadan food packages are distributed to non-Muslims. A staff member told me: “We tell people that we have come to work for them, whether they are Muslim, Hindu, Christian, it doesn’t matter to us. The important thing is that you are a human being”. In this, Islamic Relief bears strong resemblance with certain Christian NGOs, such as DanChurchAid and Christian Aid, which also have religious roots but

14 The few specifically religious activities that Islamic Relief does engage in—primarily slaughtering of Qurbani meat for Eid al-Adha and distribution of food packages during Ramadan— are ‘developmentalised’, justified with reference to their function as tools for promoting Islamic Relief and introducing activities such as microfinance and health programmes to new areas.

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whose operations do not have a religious goal, characterised as 'accommodative-humanitarian' (Thaut 2009: 333) organisations.

The advantage of religion

Unlike in IIROSA, then, the religion we find in Islamic Relief is not a maximalist religion, tangible and visible and influencing all aspects of aid provision. Instead, we might characterise the religiosity of Islamic Relief as minimalist (Turner 2003: 59), relegated to the sphere of underlying values and principles. Islamic Relief is, in its own words, "guided by the timeless values and teachings of the Qur'an and the prophetic example (*Sunnah*)".[15] More specifically, the organisation lists five values, explaining how these influence conceptions of aid:

> "Sincerity (Ikhlas) In responding to poverty and suffering, our efforts are driven by sincerity to God and the need to fulfil our obligations to humanity.
> Excellences (Ihsan) Our actions in tackling poverty are marked by excellence in our operations and the conduct through which we help the deserving people we serve.
> Compassion (Rahma) We believe the protection and well-being of every life is of paramount importance and we shall join with other humanitarian actors to act as one in responding to suffering brought on by disasters, poverty and injustice.
> Social Justice (Adl) Our work is founded on enabling people and institutions to fulfil the rights of the poor and vulnerable. We work to empower the dispossessed towards realising their God-given human potential and develop their capabilities and resources.
> Custodianship (Amana) We uphold our duty of custodianship over Earth and its resources, and the trust people place in us as a humanitarian and development practitioner to be transparent and accountable."[16]

Religion is not only a question of values. According to staff, Islamic Relief's religious identity gives the organisation a certain advantage compared to other, secular, organisations in terms of implementation. A common religion, they would argue, creates a symbolic sense of community with beneficiaries. Muslim NGOs are in other words better suited (than secular or Christian organisations) to work in Muslim areas and with Muslim actors because, as one staff member said, "We have an understanding of the culture and religion that gives us an advantage". Because of their religious identity, for instance, Islamic Relief claims to be able to access 'hard-to-

15 Islamic Relief, website, http://www.islamic-relief.org/about-us/ (last accessed, 3 January 2018).

16 Islamic Relief, website http://www.islamic-relief.org/about-us/ (last accessed, 3 January 2018).

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reach communities' that others have difficulties in accessing. Likewise, their religious identity allegedly gives them an advantage in terms of communication. Staff members expressed how religion can be a helpful tool, facilitating communication of development principles to a pious population. As noted by a top manager in Islamic Relief's headquarters, referring to the organisation's health activities: "The effect is much stronger if Islamic Relief says the prophet Muhammad encouraged breast feeding than if someone says that professor so and so encourages it". Finally, many also mentioned sensitivity and provision of culturally appropriate services as an organisational strength, compared to other, secular or Christian, organisations. Discussing the work of Islamic Relief in Pakistan, one person from the headquarters explained:

> "When we work there, we respect for instance gender separation and we have to make sure that only women teach women. We worked in South Pakistan, which is very, very conservative, and we first worked with the male community organisation and it took two years before we were allowed to work with the women. I don't think other organisations would have been allowed."

"They are perhaps not the most sophisticated"

In their descriptions of the 'added value' of Islamic Relief, staff invariably compare themselves to secular or Christian organisations, thus seemingly relying on the same dichotomy as IIROSA between Muslim and non-Muslim organisations. But while for IIROSA, religion makes a fundamental difference between organisations, for Islamic Relief religion is what gives the organisation an added value rather than what makes it fundamentally different. Islamic Relief is, in many ways, similar to other mainstream development organisations, whether Christian or secular. The values that the organisation builds its work upon are aligned with the values of mainstream development and humanitarian aid as the activities they engage in are the same and the recipients they target are the same. Staff in Islamic Relief often express close allegiance with Christian and secular organisations, just like partnerships and cooperation with these organisations are promoted in organisational material and on the website.

The dichotomy between 'charity' and 'development' seems to be much more important for understanding the ways in which Islamic Relief positions itself in relation to other organisations: "The classical way of doing charity is about building a mosque, digging a well, distributing sewing machines", one person explained to me. "This is fine, it is helpful. But in Islamic Relief, we have decided not to build mosques. We find that funds

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can be used to something more important such as reducing poverty, building capacity". This dichotomy is often exemplified in a distinction between Islamic Relief and the Middle Eastern NGOs: "The Middle Eastern NGOs are very narrow-minded in their approach. Its only relief, only about Qurbani, distribution of food, those kinds of things. We do that as well, of course, but only as a small part of our programme. Our main focus is development". According to staff in Islamic Relief, 'good' development is not only about sustainability, it is also about transparency, accountability and professionalism—something which is not always found in the Middle Eastern NGOs. As one person said: "They are perhaps not the most sophisticated, they don't use LogFrame and all these things". Others tell me that their organisational set-up is not professional and that certain NGOs have had problems with corruption. Some people connected this lack of professionalism with the role of religion in the organisations: "The [Middle Eastern NGOs] are led by religious people—not development professionals. They are good people, but they don't know". Here, the War on Terror discourse on 'moderate' and 'fundamentalist' Muslims also plays into the dichotomy, introducing a relation between secular religiosity and development on one hand, and pervasive religiosity and charity on the other. According to many people, Middle Eastern NGOs may do a valuable job helping the poor, but they are also missionary and discriminatory, presenting a 'strict' image of Islam. Islamic Relief, on the other hand, is 'neutral', 'universalist', and 'tolerant', promoting a 'moderate' image of Islam: "We will present Islam with a better image. We need another face, we need to represent Islam from a different side", a staff member said.

In sum, the aid we find in Islamic Relief is in many ways indistinguishable from that of other, mainstream, development and humanitarian organisations, predicated on notions of sustainable development, professionalism and neutrality. In this, religion is not a defining factor, but an 'added value' facilitating access, communication and a religiously sensitive approach to recipients. As such, Islamic Relief does not consider itself fundamentally different from non-Muslim organisations; many staff members consider themselves closer to Christian and secular NGOs than to other Muslim NGOs, seen to be too charity-oriented and un-professional.

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Bridgebuilders or defenders of Islam?

The above analysis of Islamic Relief and IIROSA has provided empirical insights into the organisational identities of contemporary international Muslim NGOs, exploring the ways in which these organisations understand Islam and aid and the nexus between the two. IIROSA presents a kind of aid that responds to material as well as spiritual needs of recipients, aiming to ensure individuals a 'dignified life' and contributing to the strengthening of the umma. Insisting on an intimate connection between Islam and aid, the organisation displays a pervasive organisational religiosity embedded in and influencing all aspects of aid provision, from the choice of recipients to the kinds of activities and sources of funding. In the perspective of IIROSA, this connection is what makes their aid 'warm', 'caring' and 'personal', in contrast to Western, secular, aid practices which are seen as 'cold', effective' and 'routine'. Islamic Relief on the other hand promotes aid that is coined in terms of 'sustainable development', aimed at 'empowering' recipients and building up their—largely material—capacities. In this, religion is almost invisible, shaping neither the choice of recipients, the kinds of activities nor the sources of funding. Religion does play a role, there is no doubt about that—but not in a way that is dichotomous to secular aid. Instead, religion comes to serve as an 'added value' to an aid that is otherwise almost identical to mainstream development and humanitarian aid. The real difference for Islamic Relief, it seems, is between organisations that engage in 'charity' and those that engage in 'development'.

The insights from these two international Muslim NGOs, detailed in this paper, show wide differences in how they operate and how they view their role within the aid field, leading to the proposal that Muslim NGOs cannot be seen as a homogenous group. This therefore raises the question of whether it is in fact counterproductive to rely on terms such as 'Muslim NGOs' as an analytical category. As this analysis has shown, in the case of Muslim NGOs, the divides between the 'Muslim' and the 'non-Muslim', or between the 'religious' and the 'secular' for that matter, are far from always the most relevant divides if we want to understand the ways in which these organisations understand and position themselves in the field of development and humanitarian aid. Instead, other divides, such as that between minimalist and maximalist kinds of religiosity, seem to be much more relevant. This is not only a relevant dichotomy in relation to Muslim organisations, but is mirrored among Christian NGOs, supporting the argument that differences between kinds of religiosity internally among Christian or

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Muslim organisations are more important than differences between Muslim and Christian NGOs, or between religious and secular NGOs, for that matter. In her typology of Christian aid organisations, Thaut (2009) places so-called accomodative-humanitarian organisations such as Christian Aid at one end of her spectrum, and evangelistic-humanitarian organisations such as Samaritarian Purse at the other. While Christian Aid and other accommodative-humanitarian organisations argue for a sharp distinction between aid and religious mission, Samaritan Purse and other evangelistic-humanitarian organisations have an express goal to save lives and souls through their work (Thaut 2009: 325).

Furthermore, some kinds of religiosity seem to be more easily aligned with mainstream development and humanitarian aid. The normative and regulatory forces of mainstream development and humanitarian aid are incredibly strong, leaving little room for different kinds of religiosity. IIROSA's maximalist religiosity, insisting on the inseparability between religion and aid, is difficult to align with mainstream development ideals of non-confessionalism, universalism and neutrality. In Islamic Relief, on the other hand, religion is an 'advantage', facilitating access, communication and context-sensitivity but without radically shaping the ways in which aid is provided or to whom it is provided. This minimalist religiosity fits well with donor expectations of an 'added value' while at the same time adhering to principles of non-confessionalism, universalism and neutrality, opening up for inclusion into the field of mainstream development and humanitarian aid. Over time, this inclusion seems to further strengthen dichotomies and alliances, reflecting the strongly-homogenizing tendencies of the field of mainstream development and humanitarian aid. Those Muslim NGOs that are included in the field come to look and act more and more like any other mainstream development NGO. As noted by a staff member from another Western Muslim NGO, also firmly positioned within the field: "[T]he donor funding is the same, the reporting mechanisms are the same, the places we work are the same, the way we implement projects is the same. So how could there be any differences [between us and secular NGOs]?" Thus, if we want to ensure greater religious pluralism in the field of development and humanitarian aid, perhaps we should not focus so much on breaking up the religious/secular divide, but more on revisiting dominant principles and practices in the field of development, opening the field up not only for different religious expressions, but for different kinds of aid and different kinds of organisations.

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