
THE MUSLIM HUMANITARIAN SECTOR: THE STATE OF RESEARCH

Abbas Barzegar, Visiting Researcher at
Georgetown University

Melissa Wear, Head of Society Programs at
British Council USA

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Abbas Barzegar is a Visiting Researcher at Georgetown University's Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding and a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations. At Georgia State University, he co-directs two interdisciplinary research projects: 1) Civic Approaches to Conflict Resolution in the Muslim World, and 2) the digital archive, "After Malcolm: Islam and Black Freedom Struggle." He received his Ph.D. in 2010 from Emory University specializing on the Sunni-Shiite conflict, Islam in America, and transnational political Islam. In addition to numerous articles and book chapters, he is the co-author of *Islamism: Contested Perspectives on Political Islam* (Stanford, 2009). His work has been supported by The Carter Center, The National Endowment for the Humanities, The European Union, The US Institute of Peace, The Mellon Foundation, and the Georgia Humanities Council. His public commentary and analysis can be found in a variety of print and broadcast media outlets.

Melissa Wear is Head of Society Programs for British Council USA. The Society program is an area of work concerning policy dialogue, social cohesion, community development and religion and belief. This work includes the Bridging Transatlantic Voices project, a transatlantic project which maps and scopes civil society efforts towards countering violent extremism in the US, Europe and MENA regions. She oversees a project called Active Citizens, a leadership development program which encourages social action in communities. Melissa also oversees the Henry R. Luce Foundation-funded project, Bridging Voices, which examines the intersection of religion, international affairs and the public square across the Atlantic. She holds a Master's degree in European Politics and a Bachelor's degree in International Studies from American University.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

This policy brief provides an expanded discussion on the need for ongoing research about Muslim aid and development actors documented in the report [The Muslim Humanitarian Sector: A Review for Policy Makers and NGO Practitioners](#) (British Council, 2017). Our research over the course of two years found that although there has been a marked increase in the level of investment and discussion around the benefit of engaging religious actors in order to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, there remains a systemic lack of institutional partnerships with humanitarian and aid NGOs from Muslim backgrounds. While long-running political problems often underwrite this lack of engagement, it is also the case that practitioners and policy makers from all backgrounds simply do not have enough objective data and independent analysis of the Muslim humanitarian sector in order to make informed strategic decisions. In February 2018, a group of academics, practitioners, and policy makers was convened to identify reasons behind the existing knowledge gap on this sector and ways to potentially overcome it. In addition, a series of interviews with active researchers and practitioners was conducted to further inform the findings provided here. The contents of this document reflect a compilation of participating stakeholder perspectives, which come out of the European Union-funded project, Bridging Transatlantic Voices. These perspectives do not reflect the views of the implementing organizations, and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.

THE MUSLIM HUMANITARIAN SECTOR: THE STATE OF RESEARCH

KEY FINDINGS

- Trust and Transparency: Actors from the Muslim aid and development sector remain extremely suspicious of any and all attempts to gather data about their organizations and activities. This results in extremely limited or tightly controlled access for independent and external researchers. Much of this fear is based upon the perception that the global research and analysis community is disproportionately concerned with the subjects of extremism, terrorism, and conflict. There is also the well-founded fear that such research will be disseminated to intelligence agencies and used maliciously against these groups. This overriding climate of mistrust limits research engagement and productivity even within preexisting advocacy partnerships and coalitions meant to combat negative stereotypes of Muslim-world NGOs.
- Lack of Sustained Muslim NGO Sector Investment: Despite expressing the need for strategic research engagement needed to both improve the quality of Muslim NGO programming and provide the public with accurate information about the impact the sector, there is a lack of sustained sector investment in the area of research and development. While R&D investments are conventionally low across the humanitarian sector as a recent study by Deloitte found, they are even lower in the faith based community in general and even lower still among Muslim organizations.¹ While there are piecemeal efforts to invest in research and development by individual organizations there is no sector-wide mechanism that can influence sustained and long-term investment in research. Moreover, the research initiatives that do exist almost uniformly address technical or operational issues rather than policy or advocacy questions. The Muslim Philanthropy Initiative at Indiana University and occasional collaborative reports are an exception to this general rule.² To date, most research funding on the Muslim humanitarian sector remains sponsored by American and European institutions.
- Misaligned and competing interests: Considerable gaps exist between stakeholders on the subjects of the very value and purpose of research engagement.
 - **Muslim aid and development NGOs** prioritize monitoring and evaluation programs designed to help improve the quality of their services. They also emphasize the need for

¹ Deloitte, “The Humanitarian R&D Imperative: How other sectors overcame impediments to innovation”, March 2015, available at: https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/dttl_cr_humanitarian_r&d_imperative.pdf

² For the Muslim Philanthropy Initiative see: <https://blog.philanthropy.iupui.edu/tag/muslim-philanthropy-initiative/>. Occasional policy research with participation of the Muslim Humanitarian sector can be seen in the example of the report “[UK Humanitarian Aid in the Age of Counter-terrorism](#)”, published by the Humanitarian Policy Group and sponsored in part by the Muslim Charities Forum.

THE MUSLIM HUMANITARIAN SECTOR: THE STATE OF RESEARCH

research that will help redress what they consider to be public misperceptions about the sector, namely the overriding association with terrorism and extremism.

- **Policy makers in government and international governmental organizations** value aggregate and quantitative data that can help better inform high-level strategic planning and scalable, actionable programming. Data is also needed to help policy makers and international actors navigate the social, cultural, and political landscape that they operate in. For example, American and European embassies need tailored information for their local activities which often requires knowledge about religious orientation and links to Islamic political organizations. This information is intended to inform policy along the security and development spectrum.
- **Practitioners** favor up-to-date local, program, and organizational level research that can help inform decision making about implementing and programming partnerships. The lack of adequate information disables organizations from doing due diligence and engaging the most effective partners, especially those at the local level. For transnational civil society actors not directly connected to government or the conventional international aid and relief system, the lack of reliable and easily accessible research makes it difficult to provide services to beneficiaries in need.
- **The nature and scope of academic research** on Muslim humanitarianism is invariably determined by the disciplinary trends in which it is produced. Academic studies are often siloed within the institutional and epistemological networks of a given field and often unconnected to policy and practitioner spaces. However, research produced by development studies specialists as well as by migration and refugee studies scholars tends to have a greater degree of applicability to the practitioner and policy making community—largely due to the fact that these studies are often externally funded by governments, NGOs, or foundations. Emerging academic trends on Muslim humanitarianism taking place in cultural anthropology, religious studies, and cultural geography likewise follow the established research trajectories of their respective fields. In this case, the long-standing academic critique of humanitarian practice and the discursive logic that underpins it, has been applied to faith-based actors operating in Muslim communities.
- What is a Muslim NGO?: There is no consensus among stakeholders on what defines a Muslim NGO, which significantly impacts the ability to collect and analyze data. Does Muslim refer to an element of faith or religiosity? Or, does Muslim refer to an ethnic or demographic category? Some faith-based NGOs fear being labeled exclusively by their religious orientation given that their work is entirely secular and they do not engage in proselytizing activity. Policy makers and practitioners have also argued that identifying all civil society actors in the “Muslim world” in terms of religiosity flattens the wide-ranging differences between these groups and impedes their ability to design an effective outreach strategy. Despite these reservations, most actors concede that the current political climate effectively *creates* the category of Muslim NGOs which in turn produces policy frameworks and public discourses that impact civil-society actors from Muslim communities in distinct ways. Some stakeholders advocated the use of the term, Muslim-world, instead of the singular adjectives of Muslim or Islamic.

THE MUSLIM HUMANITARIAN SECTOR: THE STATE OF RESEARCH

Data Driven Advocacy and Evidence-Based Story Telling

- **Policy Impact.** As has been well documented by several studies, counter-terrorism finance and anti-money laundering (CTF/AML) regulatory frameworks have adversely impacted the service capacity of transnational civil society organizations.³ Advocates and practitioners actively involved in attempting to resolve this complex problem noted that their efforts were severely hampered by a systemic lack of evidence available to substantiate their claims. One interviewee at the forefront of solving the complex problem of international banking regulation and its impact on global civil society noted that quantitative data analysis conducted by independent, university based researchers has significantly helped move this policy issue forward. That is, despite the presence of years of in-depth reports, anecdotal documentation, and back channel conversations intended to raise the issue of banking regulation and civil society, it was only when aggregate financial data demonstrated a systemic problem that stakeholders in government and the private sector responded to the issue in a substantive way.
- **Public Advocacy.** Muslim NGOs and their partners from the secular and faith-based communities report that they struggle with a media and political environment that disproportionately emphasizes the subjects of extremism, political Islam, and terrorism. Stakeholders at all levels argued that there was a need for independent researchers to provide case studies and analyses for broader public consumption. They also noted the interconnected nature of the public perception and political challenges they face:
 - Muslim organizations are associated with militant activity and terrorism in online spaces which in turn,
 - Inform private sector risk analysis services such as Thompson and Reuters' World Check system or NGO Source that lead banks to
 - Drop or curtail services to Muslim organizations or those operating in the region and thereby
 - Support political narratives that seek to marginalize engagement with these actors or more directly target them as terrorist or extremist actors.

Mapping Muslim NGOs: Systemic Data Gaps

The wide-spread research practice of mapping, charting, and creating typological profiles of faith-based organizations (FBOs) operating in humanitarian and development spaces has been undertaken by

³ The most recent quantitative studies to this effect include the following reports: [“Impact of money laundering and counter-terrorism regulations on charities”](#) by the Charity Finance Group (March 2018) and Sue Eckert [“Financial Access for U.S. Nonprofits”](#) by the Charities and Securities Commission (February 2017).

THE MUSLIM HUMANITARIAN SECTOR: THE STATE OF RESEARCH

actors in academe, policy, and practice. The purpose of this research activity, in the words of one organization, is to “increase the amount of publicly available data on international development and humanitarian response by providing detailed project information through interactive maps and visualizations.”⁴ Leading examples of this research include InterAction’s [NGO Aid Map](#), the Partnership for Religion and Development’s (PaRD) [World Map](#), and Georgetown’s Berkeley Center [for Religion and Development map](#). While these and similar efforts have gathered a wide range of useful data, the existing state of research on Muslim-world FBOs and NGOs remains particularly uneven, disparate, and incomplete.

Consultations with experts and practitioners have identified the following reasons for the systemic lack of information regarding FBOs involved in the MENA region development agenda:

- **Security and Trust:** All stakeholders reported security concerns as a primary obstacle preventing the sustained and systematic gathering of data. Humanitarian actors from the region were particularly distrustful of broad research efforts fearing the potential of cooptation by security agencies and argued that research on MENA region NGOs should be led by regional actors, preferably the aid organizations themselves. American and European governments and NGO practitioners also described their hesitancy in publicizing the activity of aid actors in fragile or conflict-prone contexts, noting potential security risks that could be posed by local actors being identified as affiliated with “Western” entities.
- **Limited Utility:** Government and NGO practitioners, as well as academics, noted that general mapping projects offered limited utility because they were often detached from immediate practical utility or purpose. Although these efforts are created as informational resources for practitioners and stakeholders without a mechanism for immediate application, experts considered them to be ineffectual. At the same time, existing databases produced by development agencies such as OCHA or the UNHCR were seen as too technical or unidimensional for broader use.
- **In-Network Data Gathering:** Existing mapping initiatives rely upon information provided by organizations connected to the research entity whether through formal membership or previous institutional affiliation. It can be expected therefore that Muslim NGOs, which already operate on the margins of the conventional aid and development landscape, will not be adequately represented through this structure of data gathering.

Conclusion

Despite numerous reservations, the government and practitioner community still regard mapping, however conceived, as a useful and necessary project in need of continuing development. One recent academic critique has called upon stakeholders to move to a more systematic qualitative and case-study oriented mapping effort such as those carried out by the University College of London’s Refugee Hosts

⁴ Quote taken from [InterAction’s NGO Aid Map](#).

THE MUSLIM HUMANITARIAN SECTOR: THE STATE OF RESEARCH

project which documents and analyzes local responses to the MENA refugee crisis.⁵ While this type of research may be the most useful for medium and long term capacity building and knowledge sharing, it nonetheless fails to satisfy the primary demand by practitioners and policy makers to identify and chart the large-scale dynamics of faith-based organizations in the MENA region working on the aid and development agenda. In order for a mapping project of Muslim-world NGOs to be accurate and effective, it will need to be carried out in cooperation between Muslim humanitarian sector leaders and their counterparts in Europe and North America.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Regional MENA actors and Muslim humanitarian agencies based in American and European countries should invest in collaborative research initiatives aimed at providing international aid agencies and governments with accurate and up-to-date information about the nature and scope of local projects being carried out in the MENA region.
- Stakeholders concerned with negative allegedly inaccurate political narratives about the sector need to invest substantial resources in media partnerships and documentation projects in order to challenge and shift existing paradigms. Such partnerships can and should be carried out by independent actors outside of the Muslim humanitarian sector in order to ensure impartiality and objectivity.
- University based programs that provide a neutral platform for collaborative and transparent research should be scaled and replicated as a means of mitigating long-standing obstacles to collaborative programming between Muslim FBOs and those in the conventional international aid and development system. A university-based database or mapping project, for example, that is designed and implemented with stakeholder input can overcome the existing trust and procedural barriers in the short-term and be positioned to remedy information and analytic gaps in the medium and long-term.
- In order to overcome the precedent of exclusion and the specter of malintent, American and European aid agencies and governments must take a more proactive approach in cooperating with regional actors and those outside of their conventional institutional networks to design and implement research related to humanitarian engagement in the MENA region.

⁵ Philip Fountain and Michael Feener, “Navigating a world of religious NGOs: Ethnography, abstraction, and views from the horizon” in *Geography Compass* 11 no. 10 (2017): 1-11. For more information on the Refugee Hosts project headed by Dr. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, see refugeehosts.org.