

# The Idea of Philanthropy in Muslim Contexts

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by



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## I. Introduction:

In recent years, the U.S. government has sought new modes of interaction with non-governmental institutions and organizations in Muslim-majority countries. This heightened activity is partly the consequence of a perception that traditional civil society institutions tend to be weak in such countries. It is also the result of a reevaluation of the U.S. government preference to support secular elite institutions that closely resemble the sort of model institutions that helped establish democracies in the U.S. and European contexts.

The present exercise was intended to examine the idea and practice of philanthropy in the Muslim world, in order to discern new opportunities, avenues and approaches for interaction. The topic was chosen because philanthropy is an idea that has a long and vital history as an indigenous phenomenon in Muslim culture. Whereas social scientists' notions of how civil society is constituted and interacts with state institutions are deeply grounded in the Western experience, philanthropy is an idea that has long existed in Muslim communities and needs no Western referents.

There is neither a single, simple definition of "Muslim philanthropy" nor a clear estimate for its magnitude. Do all the charitable donations of a Muslim constitute "Muslim philanthropy," even if neither the donor nor recipient is driven by explicitly religious motivations? Is a religious school that relies on both public and private funds a "Muslim charity"? How can one begin to trace the value of cash and food donations from wealthier individual to poorer ones, all around the globe?

To avoid this complexity, this study aims to explore the idea of philanthropy in Muslim communities—ideas and practices that are influenced by religious ideas and support religious institutions, but which should not be seen strictly as an expression of religious faith. Still, these ideas are often understood through a religious prism, and understanding this context can help identify opportunities and pitfalls in interacting with this sphere. The magnitude of philanthropic giving in Muslim communities is unclear, but given estimates of per capita giving in some countries, religious injunctions to donate at least 10 percent of one's income to charity, per capita incomes in Muslim-majority countries and other factors, total giving of the kind described here likely falls between \$250 billion and \$1 trillion annually.

The exercise has two primary goals. The first is to provide a sort of baseline knowledge of philanthropy in the Muslim context, in order to inform and educate interested USAID professionals. This knowledge can help shape efforts to strengthen non-governmental Muslim-oriented philanthropic

organizations, to suggest approaches to increase oversight and transparency in that sector, and to help such organizations win some necessary freedom from state control.

It is also the intention of this work to help generate new ideas for USG activity, through leveraging the activities of extant groups, pointing out best practices, and suggesting new areas of operation.

This exercise was not designed to discern better ways to divide between “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims,” between “moderates” and “radicals,” or between what is “Islamic” and what is “un-Islamic.” Indeed, several participants in the CSIS seminars held in concert with the project suggested that such binary distinctions, which are intended to enhance understanding by those outside the Muslim community, serve to obfuscate, essentialize and mischaracterize the very phenomena they seek to understand. Consistent through many presentations was the extent to which philanthropy in the Muslim context covers a rich spectrum of practice and belief that varies over time and space and is inherently dynamic.

There are several obstacles to success in this field that should be acknowledged initially. The first is that the idea of governmental aid to Muslim philanthropic organizations sits poorly with many Americans. On the one hand, many Americans value a strict separation between church and states; on the other, many feel that Muslim organizations propound messages that are inimical to American values and hostile to American interests. The investigation and shuttering of several Muslim charities in the United States in the last two years due to direct and indirect ties to terrorist organizations reinforces this reluctance.

There is a converse reluctance as well among Muslim organizations to have anything to do with the United States government, which many Muslims view as hostile to Muslims and to Islam. This is partly a consequence of their critique of American foreign policy, and partly a consequence of criticisms of U.S. domestic security responses to the attacks of September 11.

Despite the obstacles, the topic is worthy of investigation. In the first instance, President Bush and members of his administration have clearly identified the absence of political openness in Muslim-majority countries, and especially in the Arab world, as a condition that contributes to terrorism and civil strife - thereby harming American national security. In addition, stronger non-governmental organizations in Muslim-majority countries can help promote traditional USAID goals, including economic development, democratization, education and others. They can do so both through direct NGO activities in these areas, and through the establishment of more vibrant non-governmental sectors

in host societies more generally. Finally, a better understanding for the social contexts in which USAID operates can help inform ongoing USAID activities, whether they seek to involve religious organizations or not.

## II. Contexts

Philanthropy and charity are central tenets of Islam, and many Muslims regard charity as a form of worship. According to traditional conceptions of Islam, charity is one of the five pillars of the faith (along with prayer, belief in God and the Prophet Muhammad, fasting in Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca).

What is perhaps less well understood outside Muslim communities is the way in which philanthropy binds Muslims to each other. In Muslim conceptions of faith and community, humans are linked to each other through their obligations to God. A charitable act is therefore not merely an act of faith, nor merely an act of community. It is the building of community through faith, and the building of faith through the deepening of community. This idea has further elaboration in the Islamic concept of *takafful*, or the responsibility of each Muslim for every other Muslim. In this structure, charity is not so much an act of piety as it is one of obligation.

It is perhaps the centrality of charity that contributes to Islam's emphasis on the idea of social justice, both as a societal ideal and as a responsibility of government. There is no expectation of equality of opportunity, but Islam expects leaders to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and house the orphan and widow, and it expects all Muslims – be they rich or poor – to contribute to such efforts.

One might reasonably ask, however, whether such impulses are Muslim, religious impulses more generally, or perhaps at their basic level, human nature. After all, every religion appears to have some charitable component to it, be it Christian, Hindu, or other, and many secular individuals are highly charitable. Is this not an example of a more general phenomenon masquerading as a particularistic one?

One need not address such a question to point out that because those in Muslim-majority societies view such impulses predominantly as religious ones, and because they are manifested in predominantly religious ways, they can be treated as religious phenomena even if they are more universalistic in their essence. Indeed, there is an advantage to doing so, because it gives such activities an authenticity and local flavor that prompts their acceptance and spread.

One should also point out that “Islamic” is neither a self-evident nor homogenous category. It has no essential meaning, except that it is perceived (or perhaps more narrowly, intended) to have its roots in Muslim religious thinking or practice. Because there is wide variation in the understanding and practice of Islam, defining something as Islamic at all is an act that can be (and often is) contested.

Finally, what is under examination here is not one practice but many, from handing out a loaf of bread to a beggar to putting money in a collection box to building a network of schools. Each individual carries out and understands his or her own acts of philanthropy in a way that varies from individual to individual, and may vary from time to time with the same individual. Rather than propose a formula for action, this study aims to sensitize readers to opportunities and possibilities of which they may have been unaware. Putting them into practice will depend on resources, institutional commitment, local partners, and most importantly, an idea and a desire to see that idea to fruition.

### **III. Structures of Philanthropy:**

#### *A. Variations in practice:*

With so deep a history in Muslim societies, and with such a central role in Muslim faith, it is not surprising that there is an elaborate set of rules and institutions governing philanthropic work in Muslim communities. Despite a heavy presumption within Muslim communities that Muslim practices have been consistent from time immemorial, those rules (like many aspects of Islam) have differed greatly over time and space. Hakan Yavuz of the University of Utah suggests that there are seven distinct “zones of Islam”: Arab, Iranian, Turkish, African, South Asian, Southeast Asian and Diaspora (i.e., non-Muslim majority countries).

Another aspect of variation has to do with schools of jurisprudence. There is some variance between the rules governing religious charitable donations and obligations, depending on which of the four primary schools of Sunni jurisprudence are followed (Hanbali, Hanafi, Maliki and Shafii), or which branch of Shi’a Islam. Each school is based on the work of a scholar who lived in the first three Islamic centuries (ca. 650-850 CE), and was codified in Baghdad between the fourth and sixth Islamic centuries (ca. 950-1250 CE).

### Types of Islamic Charity

*zakat*: A charitable obligation, generally calculated at 2.5 percent of wealth of certain categories (excluding, for example, fixed equipment, jewelry that is worn, etc) and paid at the end of the Ramadan fast. There are elaborate rules for calculating zakat obligations.

*sadaqa*: voluntary or discretionary charity, not necessarily monetary in nature.

*kaffara*: a penitential charitable contribution for the breaking of an oath.

*khoms*: A charitable obligation of Shi'a Muslims, calculated at 20 percent of annual profits, or 20 percent of income above and beyond living requirements.

One's obligation to a school of jurisprudence is generally by custom rather than fiat, and in many countries several different schools of jurisprudence are practiced side-by-side.

The literalist Hanbali school of jurisprudence tends to dominate in Saudi Arabia, for example, while more flexible Hanafi school tends to predominate in Central and South Asia; Maliki Islam, which is closely tied to what were thought to be the practices of Madina, is prominent in North Africa, West Africa, and the Sudan; the Shafii school, with its emphasis on confirmed traditions of the Prophet and diminution of the role of the jurist's personal judgment, dominates in Egypt, Iraq

and Southeast Asia.

There are also differences between Sunni and Shi'a jurisprudence, and within Shi'a jurisprudence itself (in which the Ja'afari school is the most common).

Differences between schools tend to be in details rather than in principle, and each are in agreement in perhaps 80 percent of their content. Schools differ, for example, on the penance for intentionally breaking the Ramadan fast, and under what conditions vomiting would be considered a breaking of the fast.

The most significant differences between Sunni and Shi'a law have to do with spiritual and temporal leadership of the Muslim community, which was at the core of the Sunni/Shi'a split in the first Islamic century. Differences between schools are of sufficient importance, however, that a Muslim visiting Saudi Arabia is asked to which school of jurisprudence he or she adheres.

The import of the differences between these schools is to observe that what is considered "properly Islamic" in one context may not be considered so in another. A ruling from a North African jurist of high qualifications may be considered non-binding, or perhaps erroneous, by a Central Asian cleric. Broad claims that "Islam demands" one practice or outcome versus another are

unlikely to hold across all geographical areas, and the closer one gets to the complexity of actual practice, the more local difference is likely to manifest itself.

That being said, one of the emerging trends in modern Islam is a trend toward homogenization and orthodoxy. Such a trend is driven by a combination of communications technology, travel, and proselytization efforts from the Arabian Peninsula. Religious leaders are emerging who have regional or global audiences, and their proclamations on what is Islamic and what is not extend far beyond their own cities or countries.

The effects on philanthropy are far reaching. First, philanthropic causes with truly regional scope are increasingly possible to establish. They can go far beyond telethons for Palestinians or Iraqis, which were a staple of Arab satellite television in the 1990s, and they can command hundreds of millions of dollars in annual contributions. Second, practices of philanthropy are likely to become increasingly uniform, as regional religious authorities (such as the popular television cleric Yusuf Qaradawi, the religious talk show host Amr Khalid, and others) put forward a view of “proper” Islam that de-legitimizes variance in local customs. Still, the inviolability of the extent schools of jurisprudence remain

#### *B. Waqf:*

In addition to individual giving, Islam has an elaborate pattern of institutional religious foundations, called *waqf* (pl: *awqaf*). Foundations can be endowed by individuals, families or institutions, and they often have income-producing activities attached to them. A mosque, for example, may be surrounded by commercial stalls, the rent from which helps maintain the mosque. There are two principal kinds of *waqf*. A *waqf khayri* is one principally established to further the public good. Hospitals and clinics, schools, baths, and other such institutions fall into this category.

Another kind of *waqf* is one that operates much more along the lines of a Western family trust. Such an institution, called a *waqf ahli*, serves as something like a tax shelter and mechanism for the transmission of wealth from one generation to the next. Sometimes women have established endowments as well, as a way of shielding their wealth from their husbands and their husbands' families, and those in government have established *awqaf* in times of political instability as a way of

### Waqf, Religion and State

There is no single relationship between religious endowments and state institutions that prevails throughout Muslim majority countries, although modern states have generally sought to exert control over the religious sector, and that impulse has increased over time.

In **Egypt**, the government nationalized religious education at al-Azhar in 1958, following a millennium of relative independence. Since 1961, the Egyptian president has appointed the head of al-Azhar and the *mufti*, or head jurist in the country, replacing a pattern of clerical elections. Beginning in 1981, the Ministry of Awqaf began implementing a plan to bring every mosque and informal prayer circle under ministry control (giving the government both assets and the ability to appoint employees, but also the responsibility to pay salaries). The government controls perhaps 60,000 out of 80,000 mosques in the country, with aggressive plans to control the balance.

In **Indonesia**, the Ministry of Religion oversees religious education, the publication of religious materials, and public celebration of holidays. In the last 20 years, it has stepped up government efforts to train clerics. The government manages ownership of waqf properties, funds mosques in the country, and has heightened efforts to oversee religious donations, sermons, and mosque activities, where possible.

In **Malaysia**, each state has a separate Islamic Council responsible for administering zakat that reports to its respective state government but relies on the federal Islamic Religious Department for support. The Prime Minister's Department also has an Islamic Affairs Division that acts as an administrative coordinator. The resultant model is a mix between local autonomy and centralized control.

In **Uzbekistan**, Czarist control followed by state-enforced secularism did away with most Islamic institutions. In post-Soviet rule, institutions of local rule, called *mahallas*, are resurgent, and they have been vested with neo-traditional religious meaning. In the meantime, the Uzbek government has appropriated Islamic terms to give weight to institutions that bear little resemblance to their orthodox Islamic counterparts.

protecting it from confiscation if they were to fall from power.

In such an environment, it was perhaps inevitable that charitable institutions should come into conflict with the increasingly powerful modern states of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Not only did charitable foundations shelter their income and assets from state control, but they provided services that increasingly put them at odds with modernizing bureaucrats. Whereas poverty may have been a public policy problem for Ottoman rulers, for example, the state had few instruments to co-opt or compel charities to share their approach to the problem.

In the early twentieth century, many states responded by nationalizing *awqaf*, often establishing a ministry or office to administer such affairs in accordance with the local civil code and with state interests. In so doing, they extended state control into what was thought in Western Europe to be the heart of civil society, eliminating a source of independence and potential political opposition. Similarly, states brought under their control a massive amount of assets (in many cases representing some 15 percent of the wealth of the state), which could then be directed toward supporting state interests.

### *C. Formal versus informal institutions*

The existence of so much formal structure governing philanthropic giving in Muslim-majority societies can perhaps give a mistaken impression that Muslims systematically favor formal institutions over informal ones. Such is not, in fact, the case. Individual philanthropic acts are far more likely to be directly exchanged between the giver and recipient rather than funneled through a formal institution, which goes some way toward explaining the prevalence of beggars in many Muslim societies.

At the same time, there is widespread distrust of formal Western-style foundations, which many in Muslim-majority societies reportedly see as businesses rather than philanthropic institutions. Consequently, community trust of such institutions remains rather low.

One of the advantages religious figures have in running philanthropic enterprises is that they are presumed to be trustworthy, thereby simultaneously fulfilling the religious obligations to give, as well as giving the donor confidence that one's money will be channeled to an acceptable cause. Some Muslims argue that their responsibility for where the money goes should end with their fulfillment of the obligation to give, and intermediaries should be pursued for all activities beyond that.

## IV. Objects of Philanthropy

While the mechanisms of Islamic philanthropy may vary from region to region and time to time, the objects of that philanthropy have been relatively consistent.

### A. Mosques

It is not surprising at all that a principal form of traditional philanthropy would be the establishment of a mosque. In this, Muslim traditions bear a close relationship to medieval Christian ones, whereby rulers and other wealthy patrons would contribute heavily to the construction of a house of worship. While individually endowed churches have become less common in

#### Philanthropic Case Study: Fethullah Gülen

While outsiders regard most Islamic networks with suspicion, one such network is seeking to establish itself as a voice of charity, knowledge and moderation. The Fethullah Gülen movement of Turkey has its roots in Sufi, or mystical, Islam, and counts among its adherents an impressive array of Turkey's intellectual elite.

Recruiting through personal contacts and operating largely through a series of study circles, Gülen's followers seek to perfect themselves and their society through study, works, and personal probity. The movement seeks to establish a "golden generation" which possesses both religious and secular knowledge.

Through its efforts, the movement has established an impressive network of newspapers, television and radio stations, student dormitories, cultural centers and publications, and they have been especially active among Turkish communities in Europe and Turkic-speaking communities in Central Asia. Gülen's followers have founded more than 200 schools from Tanzania to China, with most located in the former Soviet Union.

While the movement is outwardly pro-bourgeoisie and pro-Turkish military, some regard it as engaged in a long-term effort to infiltrate Turkish institutions and subvert the secular state. Supporters retort that its networks are self-correcting ones that promulgate liberalism and tolerance, and movement followers have never been implicated in acts of violence.

Christendom, both heads of state (such as the late King Hassan II of Morocco) and religious adherents (such as those faithful to the late Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran) have supporting the building of massive mosques that serve as living memorials. The physical requirements of a mosque are modest, but the frequency of Muslim prayer suggests the utility of having mosques widely dispersed. Friday prayers tend to draw large crowds to a city's or town's main mosque, giving it a potential political purpose as well.

### B. Schools

As in Western societies, schools in Muslim communities are frequent recipients of philanthropic funds. In some cases, the schools are intimately tied to

mosques (such as Cairo's millennium-old al-Azhar mosque, which is connected both to a university teaching religious and non-religious subjects, as well as to programs for younger students). In others, the schools are freestanding institutions.

It is not necessarily the case that a school receiving Muslim charity is a religious school, and there are a wide variety of types of religious schools as well. The term "madrassa" has become connected in the public mind with extremist education, but in fact is merely the word in Arabic for "school."

### *C. Hospitals and Clinics*

Starting in the medieval period with the rise of medicine, the provision of medical care has been a long-standing priority in Muslim communities. In earlier periods, a political or military leader would often endow a hospital in his name or in the name of his family. Organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and Hezbollah have gained popular support in part due to the fact that they operate modern and efficient clinics at low cost in areas of need.

### *D. Support for the poor, women and orphans*

Islam has had a tradition of caring for women and orphans, perhaps accentuated by the frequency of raiding and conquest in the early Muslim period. Whereas Islam traditionally frowns upon adoption by non-relatives, it has an unusually well developed tradition of caring for the disadvantaged. Many Muslim communities take it as a point of pride that no one is hungry in those communities, even if prosperity remains out of reach for most.

### *E. Aid to Communities in Distress*

The Muslim concept of *takafful* holds that every Muslim is responsible for every other Muslim. Thus, common targets for charity are Palestinians, Chechnyans, Bosnians, Kashmiris and others in Muslim communities under stress. To outsiders, this can appear to be support for the "bloody borders of Islam," in which Muslim minorities or near minorities on the fringes of Muslim-majority areas are often found to be in conflict with non-Muslim populations. Within the Muslim world, however, the problems of these communities reinforce a perception of Muslims under siege, and support for such communities and their cause remains a potent rallying cry.

### *F. Informal Activities*

It would be a mistake to limit Muslim philanthropic activity to the sorts of formal practices outlined above. In reality, some of the most developed and impressive activities by Muslim philanthropic groups are more informal and have a far greater effect on peoples' daily lives. Informal activities can be distinguished from their formal counterparts by their *ad hoc* nature, their lack of permanent space, considerable improvisation in the provision of services and their highly localized nature. In many cases, formal Muslim philanthropic groups may carry out informal activities.

One such activity is responding to natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods. Muslim charities have made a name for themselves in such circumstances, oftentimes performing better than government agencies going about the same task.

Another activity is assisting with matchmaking and marriage arrangements. As the cost of marriage rises and youth unemployment rise, the need for assistance in finding a spouse and paying for a wedding becomes more acute. Many Muslim charities have leapt into the breach, not only connecting potential suitors but also assisting with marriage costs and presiding over less costly weddings.

## V. Constraints on Philanthropic Activity

Philanthropic enterprises in Muslim communities face several constraints, only some of which are of their own making. The most important of these is state encroachment on philanthropic activities. The popular conception in many countries is that the states have simultaneously failed to create just societies and have blocked any prospect of political change. In so doing, the states increase the potential political importance of activities in the non-state sector. In some countries, such as Egypt, non-governmental actors suggest that they have wide freedom of speech, but highly constrained freedom of action. Efficient or effective delivery of services, alongside only partly successful government efforts to do the same, poses a political challenge to extant governments that those governments are keen to perceive. The consequent government encroachment on those activities can take many forms.

One form is the nationalization of philanthropic institutions like *waqf* in order to bring them under state control (and in some cases to bring their subsidiary assets under the control of the state). Muslim philanthropic institutions under state management obey the interests of the state, or perhaps, the state's understanding of what Muslim institutions' interests should be.

A related form of state control is the state appropriation of legitimate religious authority. In such a scenario, state institutions either take over religious institutions, or religious institutions are brought under the control of state institutions. Either way, the state gains influence (or in many cases, control) over what is deemed legitimate or illegitimate from a religious perspective. Starting in the early twentieth century many Middle Eastern states began appointing a *mufti* to act as the highest religious authority in the land (the title is derivative of the word *fatwa*, or religious edict). In addition, in Egypt, the state also appoints the head of al-Azhar, the pre-eminent religious training institution in the country. A potential consequence of such action can be to de-legitimize religious institutions, especially when the state is viewed as illegitimate as well. In such a scenario, mainstream religious views are devalued, and populations may see radical views as the only ones untainted by connection to the state.

A third form of state control is determining what forces can organize, to what purpose and in what numbers. Such control is often exercised through local or state security forces, or through the domestic intelligence apparatus of the state. The relative balance of power between the state intelligence apparatus and religious groups varies greatly from country to country, and can be hard to discern from the outside. Similarly unclear is the extent to which orthodox religious groups enjoy support within the state apparatus. On the whole, states tend to give wider leeway to activities that appear not to have attached political content. They also grant significantly wider berth to activities that do not involve known political opposition figures. In addition, there is often a broad scale governmental preference to formalize informal activities, in order to gain greater knowledge of their activities and control over them.

To date, states are less inclined to restrict the inflow of money to religious institutions than to obstruct secular institutions' relationships with Western philanthropic or governmental groups. The consequence has been to give religious institutions a leg up on secular ones, and to give such groups far freer ambit in their activities. There appear to be some signs that states are beginning to revisit this issue, but religious charities are often highly resistant to what they view as a part of a larger pattern of state encroachment on their prerogatives.

A fourth form of state control is the introduction of government-organized non-governmental organizations, or GONGOs. Such organizations fill the space in society for public groups that are engaged in positive social change, embracing such issues as poverty alleviation, education, care for women and children, etc. Often operating under a form of royal patronage or the equivalent, they are especially prevalent in a country like Jordan. Such groups represent a cooptation of issues and individuals under the penumbra of the state, and make the emergence of non-state institutions harder to envisage and accomplish. Because

they are often elite institutions, they can appear to foreign funding organizations as the public face of non-governmental activity in such countries, even if they are not *bona fide* non-governmental organizations.

## VI. Policy Implications

The foregoing suggests an important area of opportunities for U.S. government action. Many philanthropic activities in Muslim communities dovetail with, and in some cases replicate, current U.S. government efforts. At the same time, ongoing philanthropic activities in Muslim communities are at the nexus of political power, social action, and the encroachment of state power. While it is possible to conceive of effective U.S. government action that does not encompass interaction with Muslim religious institutions, thinking creatively about such interaction provides promising opportunities to advance much of USAID's agenda.

The first task, however, has to be to define a potential U.S. government role in such activities. If philanthropy is essentially about a community of believers united through their obligations to God, for example, what is the potential U.S. government role in such a community? Americans, both individually and collectively, have their own ideas about the proper role of religion in the public sphere, and those ideas are often different from those held in Muslim-majority societies. Even if Americans are uncomfortable with the role that religious practice plays in Muslim-majority societies, it is important to acknowledge the weight this religious presence has in shaping the environment in which U.S. government efforts take place.

The second task is finding a way to overcome suspicions of U.S. government intent. Many people in Muslim-majority societies view the U.S. as a malign power, not only indifferent to their suffering but actively abetting it through support of oppressive governments as well as surrounding countries with hostile intent. Overcoming such suspicions will be a slow and uncertain process, and one that will be only partly successful for the foreseeable future.

A third task is thinking about the trade-offs between accountability and policy objectives demanded of potential partners. Understandably, U.S. government regulations require a relatively high threshold of transparency for organizations receiving U.S. government funding. Such accountability is desirable in order to prevent public money from being squandered or misappropriated. But if the effect of such regulations is to prevent the U.S. government from working with all but the small elite organizations in capital cities, it is overly restrictive. There is a trade-off between accountability and

policy objectives, and that tradeoff needs to be acknowledged and consciously made, rather than maintaining maximum accountability regardless of its programmatic effects.

There are several broad areas of activity that deserve further attention.

#### *A. Activities at the state level*

The easiest area of interface for the U.S. government is its interactions with other governments. Customs of international relations provide for extensive ties with well-understood protocols.

An agenda for diplomatic engagement in this area should have several aspects:

- 1) *Working to reduce constraints on informal partnerships.* Many governments have overly onerous restrictions on foreign government interaction with local non-governmental organizations. In effect, such restrictions hinder international cooperation through religious channels in favor of activities that are easier to monitor and influence. In practice, local groups with a religious orientation often maintain covert ties to groups overseas, but Western donors are prohibited from interacting with them. To the extent these groups are effective delivering services to broad publics, they represent an alternative to interaction with Western countries rather than a example of partnership with them. The U.S. government should seek broader freedom for interaction for a wide variety of groups on a wide variety of issues.
- 2) *Working to build autonomy into charities while boosting transparency.* The secrecy that some philanthropic activities seek drives them underground and increases the possibility of nefarious activity under the guise of philanthropic activity. The U.S. government should work to give philanthropic activities more freedom of ambit, in return for greater openness about funding sources and activity.

#### *B. Activities on the NGO level*

Some of the most promising activities in the philanthropic sector are occurring within non-governmental organizations, although such institutions remain weak and diffuse. The U.S. government could help strengthen such organizations in several ways:

- 1) *Sponsor regional discussions on NGO success stories.* NGO leaders could learn from best practices and successes in other countries, and if such programs had primarily a regional, rather than a U.S. face, on them, they could come across as truly authentic, grass-roots success stories.
- 2) *Provide matching funds.* When NGOs get so much of their money from overseas, they fail to develop roots on the ground in their own societies. Providing matching funds and challenge grants will drive NGOs toward fundraising in their own societies, giving them a sense of legitimacy and authenticity that has thus far been lacking.
- 3) *Establish "NGO Service Centers."* Giving even greater autonomy to U.S. government entities on the ground to fund worthwhile activities will help ensure that programs are funded because they make sense in the countries in which they occur, instead of to broad Washington-based concepts about how the world works. Attention will have to be paid to prospecting for worthwhile candidates, instead of rewarding usual suspects or providing additional revenues to individuals who have been useful to the embassy in other contexts.
- 4) *Support informal initiatives.* Some of the most promising, creative and entrepreneurial work going on in the religious communities is informal. U.S. policy should seek to discover and reward such work.

### *C. Activities with clerics*

Religious leaders are opinion leaders in their countries, whether the U.S. government wants them to be or not. Clerics' views will therefore influence the success of U.S. efforts to engage politically, diplomatically and programmatically. A program to engage with clerics could potentially involve:

- 1) *Increasing efforts to engage with clerics in-country.* Most political officers are trained to work with political figures rather than religious ones. Greater outreach to clerics could help inform embassies of key aspects of public attitudes and help shape policies and programs to better conform to local realities.
- 2) *Promoting tours among like-minded clerics, and supporting regional intra-religious dialogues.* The loudest voices in public religious discourse are often the most extreme, and they enjoy many channels for the exchange of ideas. Opportunities for mainstream religious voices to discuss public policy issues would help leaven the public discourse and provide moderate ideas with a forum.

- 3) *Arranging tours by U.S. PVO's to explain faith based charitable work in the U.S.*  
A successful effort in this regard would help expose interested parties to new modes of state-civil society interaction and highlight ways in which state and non-state activities can coexist rather than compete. At the same time, such efforts would help ameliorate negative views of the United States, which is perceived by many religiously oriented people in the Middle East to be atheistic and hostile toward religion.

## **VII. Conclusion**

What is most important in this exercise is to recognize that communities in Muslim-majority states are going through historical processes of contestation. States are struggling to maintain control in the face of broad processes of urbanization, modernization, and the spread of communications technologies. The latter is especially important in the Middle East, where a common Arabic language can help establish transnational ties among 22 countries in the region.

Effective U.S. engagement in the region will require new partnerships in this dynamic environment, and constructive relations with aspects of the religious sphere would be helpful in this regard. Many of the significant non-state actors have a religious coloration, and many of their activities are primarily philanthropic in nature.

In order to be effective in this regard, the U.S. government will have to build trust among local communities. Because of the role that such institutions have in demarcating what is permissible and desirable in the local contexts, their cooperation and partnership are vital to efforts to establish this trust.

Effective partnerships in that realm would also lend support to broader USAID objectives in democratization in the region, because it could both bolster responsibility and transparency among religious philanthropic organizations, and help such organizations gain greater autonomy from state apparatuses that they often judge to be overbearing if not repressive.