

History of Muslim Charities

Charity is an essential part of Islam and Muslim charitable groups are as old as the religion itself. But in the late 1970s, Islamic generosity went global. While many charities provided care and comfort to Muslims in need, others, particularly those based in the oil-rich Persian Gulf, provided support for Islamic fighters around the world.

Mathew Levitt, director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, says Iran's effort to spread its brand of Shia sparked a religious revival across the region.

"You had this massive buildup of NGOs, non-profits, charities, service organizations... All with an eye towards proselytizing their version of Islam. Then you had the Afghan war. And here was an opportunity not only for some people to go out and fight in the jihad but also for others to support it.

And a principle that began to get traction then and still has traction among extremists today is this idea of *jihad bin-mal* – economic jihad. According to the extremist narrative, you had an obligation to go fight in jihad and if you couldn't do it yourself, you could fund someone who could and you'd get credit for having done your part."

While Gulf charities supported the Mujahideen fighters, different kinds of Islamic organizations also started with an aim to provide aid to the thousands of people starving in East Africa during the 1980s.

Hani al Banna, founder of Islamic Relief, a global Islamic NGO, reacted strongly to the hundreds of thousands of people walking from Eritrea to the East of Sudan and other countries.

"You cannot imagine it. People are dying walking, people are dying waiting, people are dying sitting, people are dying crying. We felt as Muslims that our Christian brothers and sisters and other communities are responding swiftly, why don't we do something? That was actually the faith element of it. And this is how Islamic Relief started."

As Islamic Relief gathered steam, the jihad in Afghanistan was winding down. The Soviets had been improbably beaten by the Mujahideen. Islamists believed this was an effective model to defend the Muslim *umma*, the Muslim nation.

According to Levitt, wealthy individuals in the Gulf states in particular saw this as an opportunity to come in defense of Muslims.

"You had an opportunity for people who were inclined to abuse these charities for more violent purposes to broaden their ability to do so. And unfortunately it's given Islamic charity somewhat of a bad name. Which is unfortunate because the vast majority of charities functioning in that or other religious contexts are perfectly legitimate."

In the chaos of Bosnia, some charities helped support Muslim fighters. But Islamic Relief stayed true to its humanitarian ideals.

For Hani al Banna, Bosnia was an opportunity of a very different kind. His organization worked to ease the suffering of a brutal war.

"Bosnia war was the ugliest scar on the face of Europe at that time. It was shocking, more shocking than the Africa famine, because of the number of cases of rape which has happened to young girls, old women. We were crystal clear, in Bosnia and before the Bosnia war, that we are humanitarian organization. Do not cross the political line, and do not cross the military line, and do not cross any non-humanitarian line."

After the attacks of 9/11, the work of Islamic charities was further scrutinized. While many were perfectly legitimate, some were found to have links to terrorist groups. Hani al Banna says his organization was mindful of the tangled history of Islamic charities.

"I myself and all my colleagues of Islamic Relief learned the heavy lesson of Afghanistan. And the political interest of governments of supporting a lot of charity to supporting a lot of mujahideen groups. This was a trap that led a lot of Muslim organizations in the '70s to fall into it. We did not do this, and we learned from it."