



Muslim Humanitarian and Development Organizations in and around Conflict Zones: Barriers to and Opportunities for engagement

A Closed-Door Dialogue and Focus Group

The British Council
United Nations Alliance of Civilizations
Georgia State University

Muslim aid and development organizations sit at the nexus of a number of key elements related to conflict resolution and post-conflict stabilization in the short, medium and long terms. As first-responders with broad and deep grass-roots networks, Muslim humanitarian groups are often gatekeepers for a range of transnational actors operating in and around conflict zones. As such, they are uniquely positioned to provide relief to the most vulnerable victims of war and forced migration. Moreover, they possess the potential to contribute to building the civil and economic foundations necessary for long-lasting resilience. However, a number of significant obstacles continue to prevent further integration of the Muslim NGO community into the wider ecosystem of global humanitarian assistance. The lack of knowledge of and practical experience with the global Muslim aid sector is concerning considering the current refugee and forced migration crisis.

To address this shared global challenge, researchers from The British Council and Georgia State University in cooperation with the United Nations' Alliance of Civilizations will host a non-attribution meeting of practitioners, policy makers, and analysts designed to better understand the complex role of Muslim humanitarian and development networks and organizations in and around conflict zones. Through a series of carefully moderated panels and roundtable discussions, researchers will gather information and insight from key stakeholders to better inform policy makers and practitioners in this space about the current best practices and major challenges that affect their work. This will be done through the publication of a final report to be delivered to the EU Commission's Office of Foreign Policy Instruments by mid-summer 2017.

This fourth and final dialogue on humanitarian aid and development, builds upon three -years of successful multi-institutional research and collaboration under the auspices of the [Civic Approaches to Conflict Resolution Initiative](#) at Georgia State University developed in coordination with the British Council's Bridging Voices Initiative and funded by the E.U. Commission.

Discussion Themes

Previous dialogues in Brussels, Istanbul, and Washington D.C. have established the following themes as areas in need of further discussion:

- **Finance & Security:** While financing humanitarian relief is a perennial challenge for civil society actors and governments alike, those operating in and around conflict zones face particularly difficult challenges. How can one deliver aid to populations under the control of militant organizations and maintain their neutrality? How do they avoid accusations of indirect collaboration or outright support?

In an effort to protect themselves from legal or political ramifications, many international banking and financial services institutions have implemented rigorous de-risking measures and more stringent controls on international aid flows. While increased regulation in the interest of global security should be applauded, it is also the case that such developments hinder the ability of key humanitarian actors to do their job efficiently and effectively making this a global issue for all transnational actors not just Muslim NGOs. Participants will be asked to discuss these and other finance related obstacles facing their own organizations or those with whom they work closely.

- Capacity Building: Despite good faith efforts, there continues to be a trust gap amongst actors engaging with the Muslim humanitarian sector. From ideological differences, to concerns over potential ties to Islamist parties, a variety of anxieties impede a range of collaborative opportunities. Unfortunately, this has often resulted in the use of Muslim NGOs to mere implementing partners for the delivery of food and shelter for many well-established humanitarian organizations and international organizations. However, because they often have to operate in environments marked by a lack of transparency and intermittent security, the opportunity for these groups to collaborate and scale their activities is severely limited. High impact and long-term projects designed with an aim to engage in collaborative capacity building exercises are needed for the Muslim aid and development community to be more effective to the international community. This is all the more necessary when considering that humanitarian aid organizations are increasing taking on the responsibilities of humanitarian advocacy and conflict transformation. Over the course of two days, participants from various sectors will work together to explore the areas of conflict transformation and research capacity.
- Economic Development: Muslim humanitarian and development groups' efforts in building social infrastructure and advancing economic development have long been recognized and supported by a range of international organizations and government bodies. Actors across this space have expressed a conscious decision to engage local communities as leaders in medium and long-term civil society building initiatives ranging from economic development to human rights campaigning. These civil society relationships provide resilience in times of crisis and help mitigate the exacerbation of ethno-sectarian tensions. Theoretically, highly integrated and long-term local partnerships also provide opportunities to overcome secular/religious divides and bring-together unlikely actors on shared platforms. However, despite the long-standing confidence in economic development as a natural prevention of violence and tool for post-conflict stabilization, real-world scenarios have produced mixed results. Participants with expertise in developing economic solutions to social and political conflict are asked to discuss the challenges and opportunities of their work.



Format

This two-day dialogue, conducted per Chatham House Rule (no-attribution), is designed to ensure honest and robust conversation on sensitive topics. Sessions are structured as interviews, roundtables, and moderated discussions to facilitate substantive input by all participants and provide researchers with data for further investigation.

Preliminary Agenda

Sunday, May 21

- Participant Arrival and Check-In
- Evening Program: Reception and public discussion on religion and humanitarian aid. In coordination with The British Council, New York.

Monday May 22

- 9:00-9:50: Workshop Introduction and Opening Roundtable Discussion
- 10:00-11:00: Security, Financial Regulation, and International Civil Society
- 11:15-12:30: Exploring the Boundaries and Impact of Material Support Statutes
- 12:30-1:45: Plenary Lunch and Roundtable
- 2:00-3:00: Can Humanitarian Actors be Conflict Transformation Partners?
- 3:00-4:00: “The Muslim Humanitarian Sector” —Assessing the State of Research
- 4:00-4:15: Break
- 4:15-4:45: Closing Roundtable

Tuesday May 23

- 9:00-9:30: Morning Roundtable and Open Discussion
- 9:30-10:45: Economic Solutions to Social and Political Conflict: Rwanda and Yemen
- 10:45-12:00: Economic Solutions to the Forced Displacement and Migration Crisis
- 12:00-1:00: Closing Plenary Lunch

Logistics

- Airfare and hotel stay are provided and facilitated by The British Council and Georgia State University.
- The meeting will be held at the [UN Headquarters](#).
- Participants will be provided an updated agenda and information packet two weeks prior to the dialogue along with a draft of the final report for review and feedback.