

GLOBAL

REGIONAL

INDUSTRY



Geo-politics Humanitarian Response Middle East and North Africa

What's the role of faith-based NGOs in the Middle East?

By Mohamed Ashmawey

Jan 24 2015

Comment

f 169 t 23 in 12

For humanitarian workers in the non-profit world, the Middle East is as complicated as it gets.

A poignant example is the delivery of aid in war-torn Syria – a country where, the [United Nations estimates, 7.6 million are displaced](#) and 4.6 million are in need of assistance in besieged neighbourhoods and hard-to-reach areas. Humanitarian actors navigate political complexities on a daily basis, passing through checkpoints and territories of competing and combating factions, as they seek to provide a lifeline to the vulnerable.

Our agency, [Islamic Relief](#), works in partnership with governments and multilateral agencies, and has been operating in challenging environments for more than 30 years. We are also acutely aware that as a faith-based agency, our “spiritual capital” builds trust and often pushes us deeper into conflict zones than other agencies. It has allowed us to forge growth and spread insight in the Middle East, particularly in conflict zones.

A time of disruptive change

Times are fast changing, however. The International Civil Society Centre, a Berlin-based platform, rightly points out that the [civil-society sector is facing disruptive change](#). This doesn't just affect humanitarians, but policy-makers and financial institutions. As an NGO, what is the impact on my reputation with regulators, banks and governments? Can inaction be accepted in any scenario from a humanitarian perspective?

More pertinently, we sense a hyper-securitized environment, compared with the humanitarian crises that have gone before. Do we simply shift our focus to less risky development work in more peaceful geographies? Can aid-agency principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality still protect our mandate?

At the heart of the disruption is financing. A new report by the British think tank Demos has found that charities and NGOs are increasingly being affected by anti-terrorism legislation. This causes banks, which have less appetite for risk, to close accounts. Transferring money to where it is needed is also becoming more difficult. The Demos report concludes that this could be costing UK charities millions due to the costs of compliance and non-transferred funds tied up in domestic accounts.

A plaster over a bleeding wound

Humanitarian challenges in the Middle East stretch beyond insecurity. We are seeing fatigue in the international donation climate; there has been a severe shortage of funding for Syria, for instance, with displaced Syrians paying the price for a lack of bolder political action.

To that end, emergency response is only able to place a plaster over a bleeding wound. What the Middle East needs is significant and radical economic solutions, particularly with regard to youth unemployment and the managing of refugees in countries such as Lebanon, where one-third of the population is from Syria. Civil-society space needs to be unlocked, with young people particularly empowered to exercise creativity and shape their societies.

As we look ahead to the rest of 2015, greater complexity in the humanitarian world needs to be matched with collaborative leadership in the management of risk. This cooperation should result in constructive questions posed to international NGOs (and welcomed by us) and to the wider regulatory and financial framework. Larger organizations have a responsibility towards smaller NGOs, and can offer support and training.

More broadly, the sector will be rejuvenated by the forthcoming [post-2015 Development Agenda](#). It is hoped that this will be accompanied by growth in partnerships and innovation, and the private sector will have a role. This cannot, however, be at the expense of the local organizations that know their communities best; while they receive less than 4% of funding, they account for around 70% of humanitarian work delivered "in the last mile". The gap needs to be closed, and we should scrutinize more closely the value of intermediaries.

As a faith-based organization in the Middle East, we are given a mixed reception. Our name, Islamic Relief, can sometimes lose us friends. But our efforts to support Yazidis, Christians and Muslims in Iraq has spoken louder than words, as did our partnership with the Lutheran World Federation with refugees in Jordan, creating bonds between them and their host communities. We know now that faith can make a unique contribution, even in a secular framework.

Humanitarianism ultimately believes in reaching the world's most vulnerable, even if it means passing through some difficult checkpoints. But we hope to gain a more collaborative responsibility to do so – for the value of aid is that it brings more than just relief.

Author: Mohamed Ashmawey is Chief Executive Officer, Islamic Relief Worldwide, United Kingdom

Image: Syrian Kurdish refugees shield themselves from rain after crossing into Turkey from the Syrian border town Kobani, near the southeastern Turkish town of Suruc in Sanliurfa province October 2, 2014. REUTERS/Murad Sezer

Posted by [Mohamed Ashmawey](#) - 09:14

All opinions expressed are those of the author. The World Economic Forum Blog is an independent and neutral platform dedicated to generating debate around the key topics that shape global, regional and industry agendas.

[Annual Meeting 2015](#) | [Civil Society](#) | [Collaboration](#) | [Crisis & Cooperation](#) | [Davos 2015](#) | [Faith-Based NGO](#) | [Financing](#) | [Forum](#) | [Geo-Politics](#) | [Humanitarian Challenges](#) | [Humanitarian Response](#) |