

BOOK REVIEW

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# Review of “For Humanity or For the Umma? Aid and Islam in Transnational Muslim NGOs” by Marie Juul Petersen

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## Book details

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In *For Humanity or For the Umma? Aid and Islam in Transnational Muslim NGOs*, Marie Juul Petersen, researcher at the Danish Institute for Human Rights, provides a systematic empirical analysis of Muslim non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the role Islam plays in their provision of humanitarian aid.

When people hear the word “humanitarian,” most of them envision the various slogans and attention-grabbing logos used by well-financed NGOs with headquarters in Europe and North America, such as CARE and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). Also, they might think of the Red Cross or Red Crescent organizations, not to mention the white Land Cruisers and tarps marked with the insignia of United Nations (UN) agencies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Program (WFP). In some cases, the term may even call to mind a few large donors, as represented in the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Together, these well-established actors “constitute the multi-billion dollar visible face of humanitarianism. They dominate international debates, coordination bodies, advocacy campaigns, funding appeals and media attention, and thus dictate the principles of humanitarian action.” In essence, they constitute a “Northern/Western humanitarian movement, rooted in various traditions of

charity and philanthropy and in the civilizing impulses of the Enlightenment, as well as their subsequent manifestations in the expanses of what we now call the global south” (Donini 2010, p. 220).

In the shadow of this group, however, other types of actors often referred to as “non-traditional,” “new,” or “emergent” humanitarians have been involved in humanitarian action. For example, faith-based organizations have always provided aid to the needy. Yet, in recent years, the number, size, and impact of especially Muslim NGOs, many of which have a migrant background, have rapidly grown. Today, these organizations make up a prominent portion of the humanitarian community. In addition to providing aid, protection, and advocacy, some also play more political, economic, or security roles (Sezgin and Dijkzeul 2016).

Although Muslim NGOs may have access, legitimacy, and capacities in crisis zones, they are not seen as equals and are thus excluded from the humanitarian system by the more traditional humanitarian actors who see themselves as standard bearers (Labbé 2012). Similarly, academic, public, and political discussions have often portrayed Muslim NGOs as a monolithic bloc that differs from the generally Christian, secular, liberal, and democratic Northern/Western humanitarian NGOs. Without doubt, the impression that the nature of Muslim NGOs and of Northern/Western NGOs is opposite and contradictory has led to a dualistic interpretation that disregards the many nuances and exceptions of each group individually as well as the internal

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heterogeneity of both Muslim and Northern/Western NGOs.

Furthermore, the post-9/11 global security regime and the so-called War on Terror have increasingly securitized civil society and have cast a veil of suspicion and mistrust over Muslim NGOs. In particular, these organizations are often thought to be potentially susceptible to extremism, radicalism, and terrorist abuse or to be political actors who finance, participate in, or otherwise support militant Islamic activism.

Studies that focus on faith-based NGOs and their responses to humanitarian crises, although broad-ranging, have four shortcomings. First, most of these studies concentrate on humanitarian organizations run by Catholic and Protestant Churches, often ignoring the role of Islam and Muslim NGOs in humanitarian action (e.g., Ferris 2005; Thaut 2009). Second, various studies mention the relevance of Muslim NGOs in humanitarian crises, yet only a few offer a systematic empirical analysis of their ideologies, aims, activities, and strategies (e.g., Beigbeder 1991; Savage and Harvey 2007). Third, sacred and secular NGOs have often been represented as contradictory actors that exist in parallel, unconnected spheres, a belief that contributes to the “good NGO/bad NGO” narrative (Wilson and Mavelli 2014). As a result, a research gap continues to exist in terms of whether and how Islamic NGOs can bridge sacred and secular aid cultures and respond to diverse groups of actors (including their own staff, volunteers, donors, governmental agencies, and so on) whose expectations are complex and sometimes contradictory and, in this respect, whether and to what extent these organizations differ from traditional humanitarian actors. And last but not least, the literature on Muslim NGOs shares an “instrumentalist” understanding of these organizations, as Juul Petersen (2014, p. 4) points out, casting them as tools either in struggles for the Islamization of society or in the implementation of humanitarian and development activities (as in the case of the cultural-proximity thesis) (e.g., De Cordier 2009; Salehin 2016).

Because it is often not clear why and how Muslim NGOs engage in humanitarian action, several questions have become pertinent. How do these organizations understand and present themselves, their religion, and the aid they provide? What factors influence their ideologies, aims, activities, and strategies? How do they position themselves in relation to the Islamic and secular aid cultures? How do they react to the securitization of civil society and the growing sense of suspicion and mistrust toward them? Whether and how do they differ from the traditional humanitarian actors?

In her book *For Humanity or For the Umma? Aid and Islam in Transnational Muslim NGOs*, Petersen addresses these questions by choosing as case studies

four of the biggest transnational Muslim NGOs: two Gulf-based NGOs (International Islamic Charitable Organization and International Islamic Relief Organization) and two UK-based NGOs (Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid). The author has drawn on extensive field research conducted between 2007 and 2013 in Britain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan, and Bangladesh, which involved more than 100 interviews with participants in these organizations. The book is divided into eight chapters. Following the Introduction, Petersen presents three dichotomies between the traditional Islamic and secular aid cultures—that is, the different contexts in which transnational Muslim NGOs emerged. The first dichotomy is between solidarity with the *umma* (the community of Muslims) and the universal notion of humanity. The second dichotomy is between the notions of neutrality and of justice. Finally (and to some extent underlying the other two dichotomies) is the dichotomy between the secularist and the religious.

Humanitarian NGOs, like all other types of organizations, address particular stakeholders in order to gain and maintain legitimacy. An increase in organizational legitimacy means an increase in support, resources, and hence survival prospects (Meyer and Rowan 1977). The more the aims and activities of an organization resonate with the expectations of its stakeholders, the more legitimate an organization seems and the more support it will get (Benford and Snow 2000). In the case of humanitarian NGOs, access to those in need and the security of their staff in crisis zones also increase in relation to greater legitimacy (Sezgin and Dijkzeul 2013). Owing to the dichotomies noted above, secular and traditional Islamic aid cultures provide fundamentally different conditions of legitimacy in terms of the extent to which their actions are perceived as desirable, proper, or appropriate within their institutional environment (Suchman 1995).

Local humanitarian NGOs draw on the ideologies, traditions, principles, and symbols of existing aid cultures, their choices being shaped and constrained by the particular cultural context in which they and their stakeholders are situated. For transnational humanitarian NGOs active in multiple cultural contexts, the conditions for gaining and maintaining legitimacy are more complex. These groups must justify themselves to diverse groups of actors who have complex and sometimes contradictory expectations, including their own staff and volunteers, donors, governments of the countries where they are headquartered, governments in the humanitarian crisis zones, other humanitarian organizations (local and international), and the beneficiaries of their activities.

Accordingly, in Chapter 3, Petersen discusses the different ways in which these organizations have positioned themselves relative to the two aid cultures. She presents

two main arguments: The first is that before 9/11 and the War on Terror, transnational Muslim NGOs considered themselves part of an Islamic aid culture rather than part of humanitarian aid culture, thus focusing on fellow Muslim donors and recipients; the second is that the situation changed after these events, and transnational Muslim NGOs were at once both encouraged and forced to relate explicitly to the culture of humanitarian aid, thus transforming them into sites of cultural encounter.

In Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, Petersen examines the relationship between the case studies and the Islamic and secular aid cultures, specifically the ways in which these two distinct aid cultures shape these organizations' identities and ideologies, and in turn how Muslim NGOs are influencing the aid cultures from which they emerged. She provides various examples of how the analyzed Muslim NGOs navigate between the Islamic and secular aid cultures to increase their autonomy and resources, drawing on, accommodating, rejecting, or bridging different cultural repertoires. Chapter 8 summarizes the main research findings and the implications for the field of aid provision.

This book is an important contribution to the academic, public, and political discourse on Muslim NGOs. According to the findings presented therein, the dominant notion that Muslim NGOs are a monolithic bloc existing largely in parallel with and unconnected to secular/Northern/Western humanitarian NGOs is often in harsh contrast to the empirical realities on the ground. The author does an admirable job of illustrating how the four organizations chosen as case studies present two different kinds of ideologies and rest on different conceptions of aid and Islam and different interpretations of the cultures of Islamic aid and development: one is a sacralized aid ideology, the other a secularized aid ideology. Their attempts to bridge secular and Islamic aid cultures can be conceptualized in terms of two overall strategies: "secularizing Islam" and "sacralizing aid." "By secularizing Islam, the two Gulf-based NGOs seek to adjust their ideologies to the culture of aid, thereby hoping to create resonance with e.g. the UN and Western aid organizations. Likewise, by sacralizing aid, the two UK-based NGOs hope to create ideologies that simultaneously appeal to conservative Muslim donors and secular aid agencies" (Juul Petersen 2014, pp. 15–16).

This book is also a great read, because it serves to help us better understand the ways in which Muslim NGOs bridge Islamic and secular aid cultures in an attempt to fulfill their stakeholders' diverse expectations. In addition, the author shows that the degree to which an organization is secular or religious remains an empirical question and may change from (transnational) context

to context, often being based on pragmatic decisions that these organizations make to increase their resources and hence their survival prospects.

#### Abbreviations

DAC: Development Assistance Committee; MSF: Médecins Sans Frontières; NGOs: Non-governmental organizations; OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; UN: United Nations; UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; WFP: World food program

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