



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

The Emergence of Gulf-based Transnational Charities and their Expansion into Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

Southeast Asia and the Middle East have been interlinked for centuries, with the exchange of ideas primarily facilitated by trade routes. In the second half of the 20th century, however, a new vehicle for the transmission of such ideas, and other traditions, came to prominence in the form of transnational charity organizations. This paper will provide an introduction to the emergence of these organisations, which are predominantly based in the Gulf states, and the way they secured a foothold in the Southeast Asian region.

INTRODUCTION

Interconnections between Southeast Asia and the Middle East have been present for centuries in the form of trade and religious networks. People in the medieval *Dar al-Islam*¹ frequently traveled thousands of miles to visit the shrines of holy persons (*wali*). These shrines often constituted nodes of extended Sufi networks. In the medieval Muslim world, Sufi *tariqas*² connected regions such as Central Asia and Anatolia, India and Southeast Asia, and Yemen and the Malay Archipelago.

Middle Eastern traditions and ideas also have been continuously arriving in Southeast Asia through trade routes partly established by the British and the Dutch, who had colonised large parts of the Southeast Asia. Students of religion from Southeast Asia often studied at one of the Islamic educational centres of the Middle East, such as the Hijaz or Cairo.

¹ Literally, House of Islam, or territory where the sovereignty of Islam prevails.

² A *tariqa* is a Sufi path or doctrine.

In the second half of the 20th century, transnational charity organisations became among the most important vehicles for transmitting ideas and material resources from the Middle East to the Southeast Asian region. This paper will provide an introduction to the emergence of these networks, predominantly involving Gulf-based charities, and the way they gained a foothold among the Muslim communities in Southeast Asia.

THE EMERGENCE OF TRANSNATIONAL CHARITIES

The Middle Eastern charities that have been most influential in the Southeast Asian region are those based in the Gulf. The majority of these are faith-based organisations that claim to operate according to Islamic principles, and only a minority, mostly based in the UAE, can be considered secular. A number of factors have contributed to the emergence of these charities.

The so-called Arab Cold War between the conservative Saudi Arabian monarchy and the Arab nationalist Egypt lasted from the mid-1950s to the 1970s and was largely characterised by propaganda and proxy wars, such as the North Yemen civil war.³ One of the tools of the Saudi government to counter Arab Nationalist propaganda was establishing Islamic institutional bodies such as the Muslim World League (Rabitat al-‘Alam al-Islami or MWL) that had significant charitable sections. These committed themselves to building Islamic educational infrastructure across several Middle Eastern and later Asian and African countries.⁴

A new chapter in the evolution of Gulf-based Islamic charities began with the 1973 Yom Kippur war and the oil embargo imposed by the Arabs, which resulted in an oil boom that multiplied the incomes of the oil-rich Gulf monarchies. Large sums of money became suddenly available to expand the existing charity networks and establish new ones. The International Islamic Relief Organization of Saudi Arabia (IIROSA) that formally belonged to MWL thus became a major player in transnational Islamic charitable activism.

Kuwait, whose economy also significantly expanded, became another centre of Gulf-based transnational charity activity. Since Kuwait was a constitutional monarchy with a relatively free civil society, most of the charitable organisations in the country belonged to one of the Islamic social movements. The most significant among these charities was the Social Reform Society (Jama‘iyyat al-Islah al-Ijtima‘i or SRS), which belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood movement. The other important Kuwaiti transnational charities were the Salafi⁵ Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage

³ Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁴ Madawi, Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 106-120.

⁵ Here I refer to the Salafi movement, or Salafism, as a global proselytisation movement. Salafis claim to imitate the morality, ritual practices and certain habits, such as dress code, of the first three generations of Islam (*al-salaf al-*

8 November 2018

(Jama'iyat Ihya' al-Turath al-Islami or SRIH) and the International Islamic Charity Organization (Al-Hayy'a al-'Alamiyya Li-l-'Amal al-Khayriyya or IICO), which also is largely controlled by members of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁶

Two international developments opened up opportunities for Gulf charities to expand. The first was the 1979 Iranian revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic with an ideology inspired by Twelver Shi'ism. The new leadership in Tehran questioned the legitimacy of the monarchies in the Gulf, which, in their view, were serving the interests of Western powers. The Iranian clerics also showed a desire to export the Islamic revolution abroad. This presented an existential threat to the regimes in Saudi Arabia and the other monarchies of the Persian Gulf. To counter this ideological threat, the latter invested vast amounts of money. The invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union later in the year came at an opportune time for the Gulf countries. To present themselves as champions of Islam, the Gulf monarchies sent thousands of volunteers to fight the Red Army. To channel their financial support, especially to the Afghan refugees, dozens of charitable organisations were established and the budgets of the existing ones significantly expanded.

This golden age of sorts for Islamic charities lasted till the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The US government consequently scapegoated Gulf-based organisations, designating a number of charities as entities that supported terrorism.⁷ For example, one of the most significant Gulf charities, Mu'assasat al-Haramayn, was closed down in 2004 by the Saudi government owing to American pressure. The other charities faced severe restrictions and sometimes persecution by both Washington and the countries where they carried out their activities.

The recent coming to power of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, who is seen by many as the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, has had a profound impact on Islamic humanitarian activism. As a part of his policy of sidelining the dominant puritan Hanbali and Salafi (often inaccurately labelled as Wahhabi)⁸ religious establishment and responding to foreign criticism of Saudi Arabia for bankrolling the spread of ostensibly extremist interpretations of Islam, the crown prince forced

salih — righteous ancestors), and to do so they adopt a literal understanding of the scripture. Salafis believe that all aspects of life are codified in the foundational texts of Islam. The ultimate goal of Salafism is make other Muslims accept that their version of Islam is the orthodox one and reject all other interpretations as distortions of the pure form of religion.

⁶ Zoltan Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism and its Growing Influence in the Levant," *Carnegie Middle East Papers*, May 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/kuwaiti_salafists.pdf

⁷ Marie Juul Petersen, "Islamizing Aid: Transnational Muslim NGOs after 9.11," *Voluntas*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2012.

⁸ The term Wahhabi comes from the name of Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), who was the proponent of an extremely literalist school of thought within the Hanbali legal school, one of the four widely recognised legal schools of Islam. Yet, while Salafis regard him as one of their intellectual authorities, he largely remained within the confines of Hanbalism, unlike Salafis, who reject the confines of any legal school. Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhab was a key ally of Muhammad bin Sa'ud, the founder of the first Saudi state, and thereby his religious discourses provided legitimacy for the Saudi states in the following two centuries.

8 November 2018

Islamic charities to eliminate preaching from their activism.⁹ This move has led to the transformation of such institutions as the IIROSA into quasi secular charities that focus on purely humanitarian work and keep a distance from building religious infrastructure and sponsoring preachers abroad.

This new development in Saudi Arabia has opened up further opportunities for Islamic charities that are based in the smaller Gulf monarchies, especially in Kuwait and Qatar. The near future might see the further expansion of SRS, SRIH, Qatar Charity, and another important actor in the field, the Qatari-based Sheikh Eid Charity Foundation (SACF). Against this context, we can better understand the expansion of these charities into Southeast Asia.

GULF CHARITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Gulf charities appeared in Southeast Asia in the 1980s. One of their main entry points to the region was Indonesia, where some internal transformations in Suharto's "New Order" regime made it possible for Islamic NGOs to gain a foothold in the country. In his last decade of rule, Suharto granted wider space for the expression of public piety in the hope of acquiring an Islamic legitimacy for his rule.¹⁰ Religious activities at university campuses were widely tolerated while Islamic movements were allowed to raise their voices, and organise demonstrations on distant issues such as Palestine.

This religious effervescence in Indonesia allowed Gulf charities to increase their activities in the country by financially empowering local groups and institutions that shared their worldviews. The Indonesian Council for Islamic Predication (Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia or DDII), an institution established in 1967 and aimed at Islamising society from below, became the main vehicle for channelling and distributing funds received from Gulf NGOs. Among other things, DDII cooperated with the Saudi-based World Assembly of Muslim Youth or WAMY and participated in the funding of several Islamic educational and proselytising institutions, some of which subscribed to the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood and activist Salafi groups.¹¹ Another notable Islamic NGO that set foot in Indonesia about this time was the Kuwaiti Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (Jama'iyat Ihya' al-Turath al-Islami or RIHS), which became the largest bankroller of the Salafi movement.¹²

⁹ Jonathan Benthall, "The Rise and Decline of Saudi Overseas Humanitarian Charities," Occasional Paper, Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University in Qatar, 2018.

¹⁰ Martin van Bruinessen, "Ghazwul Fikri or Arabization? Indonesian Muslim Responses to Globalization" in Ken Miichi and Omar Farouk (eds), *Southeast Asian Muslims in the Era of Globalization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 63-70.

¹¹ Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2006), 39-40.

¹² *Ibid*, 55.

Another significant wave of Middle Eastern NGOs appeared in Indonesia after the 2004 Asian tsunami, which destroyed the coastal area of Aceh and North Sumatra and killed tens of thousands. Among subsequent papers to be issued in this “Charity Networks” series of *Middle East Insights*, a paper by Hilman Latif will discuss how many foreign NGOs arrived in the region in response to this crisis. A number of these were Gulf-based charities, such as Qatar Charity (QC), the Qatari Sheikh Aid Charity Foundation (SACF), and the Emirati Kinderhut International. SACF and QC, for example, expanded their activities to several other regions of Indonesia as well by financing relief and Islamic educational projects.

Another major point of entry for Middle Eastern charities was Cambodia. After the Vietnamese withdrawal and the beginning of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1992, along with the thousands of foreign NGOs, several Gulf-based charities launched projects among the country’s 4-5 percent Muslim minority. Charities such as RIHS greatly contributed to improving the economic and educational levels of Cambodian Muslims. At the same time, these Gulf NGOs markedly influenced the religious identity of Cambodian Muslims by facilitating the spread of Islamic movements, such as Salafism.

Gulf charitable organisations attempted to gain a foothold in other Muslim minority contexts as well, such as Thailand. In the latter, where Muslims constitute about 5 percent of the population, IIROSA and SRIH became the largest donors. Their activities focused on the Malay-Muslim majority provinces of Patani, Yala and Narathiwat in southern Thailand and in some of the northern areas of the country with considerable Muslim populations such as Chiang Rai. Perhaps the most significant project of Gulf charities in Thailand was the setting up of Yala Islamic University in 1995. The university offers courses both in religious studies and secular sciences and in the subsequent two decades became one of the largest educational centres for Muslims in Mainland Southeast Asia, drawing international students from Cambodia and Vietnam.

It is important to mention that while in the previous three decades charity networks stretched almost exclusively one way, from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, this trend seems to be slowly changing. As a forthcoming paper in this series by Amelia Fauzia will explain, Southeast Asian charities from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have enough material resources and professional capacities to successfully carry out relief work in troubled areas in the Middle East. A paper by Maren Koss will show that Malaysian NGOs are active in humanitarian work in Palestine and that they also acquired political influence by engaging with Hamas and expanding its international outreach by linking it to the Malaysian government.

THE FUTURE OF GULF CHARITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Both academics and professionals often charge that Gulf charities in many cases are not professional and that they use their funds to spread a certain worldview or ideology. Jonathan Benthall points out that IIROSA often voiced anti-Christian and anti-Shi'a messages.¹³ Other charities serve as vehicles for certain Islamic movements and use their funds to establish Salafism or the Muslim Brotherhood in certain localities. For example, SRIH, as indicated above, played a crucial role in establishing the Salafi *da'wa* (the call to Muslims to return to Islam) in the Southeast Asian region.

These charities most often provide material help to those who accept elements of their discourses and teaching. For instance, it is common for Salafi relief organisations to demand that their beneficiaries abandon Sufi and other traditional practices.¹⁴ Establishing religious educational networks, building mosques and bankrolling preachers are among the cornerstones of their activism.

While the *da'wa* activities of these charities are often successful, they are sometimes hampered by their lack of knowledge of the sociopolitical and cultural environment. Alberto Pereiro will show in an upcoming article in this series of *Middle East Insights* how Gulf donors failed to convert to Salafism a village in Cambodia inhabited by the syncretic Imam San community. And, as Eva Nisa will explain in another upcoming article, despite the large sums of money that Gulf charities invest in Southeast Asia, they fail to cover the solution of crucial problems, such as the plight of female migrant workers and the lack of education among women.

Despite their flaws, Gulf charities will continue to be significant actors in Southeast Asia's Islamic landscape. The main reason for this is that they play important roles in their home countries, especially in Kuwait and Qatar, in legitimising political regimes and boosting the agendas of political parties (in the case of Kuwait) and Islamic movements. For example, in Kuwait, which has the largest charity sector in the Gulf excepting Saudi Arabia, the ruling elite projects itself as champions of humanitarian activism. At the same time, parties related to the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism can increase their voter base by showing that they provide material assistance to Muslims who live in poor countries and help them strengthen their religious identities.

¹³ Benthall, 6.

¹⁴ Series of interviews and field observations by author in Cambodia and Indonesia between 2013 and 2018.

About the author

Zoltan Pall is an anthropologist specialising in transnational Islamic movements in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. His main research topics include the structure and function of transnational Muslim networks, the political dynamics of Islamic movements and religious authority. His current research in MEI focuses on Salafism and Muslim transnational charities in the Arabian Gulf and Southeast Asia. Before obtaining his PhD from Utrecht University, he was a Visiting Research Fellow at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) in Leiden and a Research Fellow at Utrecht University. He has published books, articles and policy papers on Salafism in Kuwait, Lebanon and Southeast Asia. He is also the author of *Salafism in Lebanon: Local and Transnational Movements* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).