Charities or Terrorist Funding on the African Continent?

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It is incumbent on every Muslim to give a portion of one's earnings for some charitable purpose (*zakat*). It is also a religious duty to support charitable works through voluntary deeds or contributions (*sadaqah*). Whilst *zakat* is collected by the government, local mosques and religious centres in the Middle East, *sadaqah* is paid directly to the Islamic charity.[1] This is, however, where the problem begins. According to Robert Looney, because *zakat* and *sadaqah* are viewed as religious duties there has been little oversight of these activities. Moreover, the fact that donations have been made anonymously coupled with the opaque financial and operating structures of Islamic charities has created a perfect environment which terrorists can exploit.[2] One indication of this comes from Somalia where one survey points out that 70% of Arab donors allowed the recipient complete autonomy to manage and disperse funds with little or no accountability.[3]

Recently leaked State Department cables to the whistle-blowing website WikiLeaks illustrate American diplomats' frustrations with getting Arab countries to monitor these charitable donations. Indeed Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who leads his Kingdom's anti-terrorism activities was quoted as saying, "*if the money wants to go to terrorist causes, it will go.*"[4] A similarly fatalistic attitude was adopted by the Qatari and Kuwaiti leadership. This compelled the US officials to bemoan Islamic militants' "...*ability to generate money almost at will from wealthy individuals and sympathetic groups throughout the Middle East while often staying ahead of counter-terrorism officials.*"[5]

The size of these charitable donations has been immense. Josh Martin estimates that since the early 1970s Middle East charities distributed US$ 110 billion, of which US$ 40 billion found its way to Sub-Saharan Africa, making Arab states the largest donor bloc to this region.[6] There is, however, a strong belief that this figure of US$ 110 billion is too conservative. After all, the Saudi-based and funded Muslim World League alone has disbursed US$ 75 billion between 1962, when it was founded, and 2002.[7]

More important than the amounts disbursed, however, are the actual activities of these charities. Whilst many of these charities are involved in useful social welfare activities, providing schools and clinics to the poor, they can also contribute to political tensions by proselytising a radical Islamism which can undermine security in a given African state by exacerbating tensions between Muslims, Christians and Animists and between Wahhabi and Sufi-inclined Muslims. Salih, for instance, powerfully argues that "... *some Muslim NGOs have been used as a vehicle for spreading political Islam at an accelerated rate combining faith and material rewards among the disenfranchised Muslim poor ... becoming cronies to militant Muslim groups, including an emergent tide of indigenous African Islamic fundamentalist movements.*"[8]

In Somalia, for instance, the Saudi-funded *al-Islah* organization supports and runs numerous schools, health facilities and community centres. Whilst the organization is not violent in itself, its long-term political goal is to establish a theocratic Islamic state not only within Somalia's borders but also in Somali-inhabited regions of neighbouring countries.[9] At an ideological level, such a position hardly differs from the Al Qaeda-linked *Al Shabaab* terrorist grouping in Somalia today. It should be noted that the diverse Sufi orders did resist *al-Islah* and its radical ideology "viewing it as a form of religious and cultural imperialism."[10] However these Sufi orders lacked access to the external funds of *al-Islah* which allowed it to propagate its Wahhabist creed and win over converts. *Al-Islah* received its funding from two Saudi entities – the Muslim World League and *al-Haramain*. The latter was designated by the United States as a terrorist entity on account of its financial ties to Al Qaeda.[11]

More than just providing such organizations with money, Saudi and Kuwaiti backers are also alleged to provide them with protection through corruption. Peter Kagwanja asserts that funds from the Africa Muslim Agency (a Kuwaiti charity), the CIFA Development Group (a joint Tanzanian-Saudi investment venture) and the Saudi-based petroleum company Oilcom were used to bribe corrupt members of Tanzania's ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi party to turn a blind eye to the spread of Wahhabist Islam.[12]

Indeed, throughout East Africa security officials have witnessed the close relationships between some Gulf-funded Muslim charities and local extremist groupings which have been undermining the respective countries' security. Following the August 1998 Nairobi bombing, the Kenyan government banned five Islamic NGOs on account of their alleged sympathies and funding of local Islamic fundamentalists. Those banned included Mercy Relief International, the *Al-*

Haramain Islamic Foundation, Help African People, the International Islamic Relief Organisation (IIRO), and the Ibrahim Bin Abdul Aziz Al Ibrahim Foundation.[13] In similar vein, the European Intelligence Agency contends that Uganda's Islamist extremists are receiving support from the IIRO, the Islamic African Relief Agency, the World Islamic Call Society, the International Islamic Charitable Foundation, the African Charitable Society for Mother and Child Care and the Sudanese National Islamic Front.[14]

The underlying point being made is that without Arab radical Islamist indoctrination and financial support emanating from the Arab states, Islamic militancy in Sub-Saharan African would not have been as severe a problem both in scale and magnitude as it is currently.

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Notes

[1] Robert Looney, "The Mirage of Terrorist Financing: The Case of Islamic Charities," *Strategic Insights*, Vol. 5, Issue 3, March 2006, p. 1.

[2] *Ibid*. p. 1.

[3] Arab Donor Policies and Practices in Education in Somaliland. 24 September 2004. Internet: http://www.mbali.info/doc427.htm. Date Accessed: 5 September 2011, p. 1.

[4] Erich Lichtblau and Eric Schmitt, "Cash Flow to Terrorists Evades U.S Efforts," *The New York Times*, 5 December 2010: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/06/world/middleeast/06wikileaks-financing.html. Date Accessed: 11 August 2011.

[5] *Ibid*. p. 3.

[6] Josh Martin, "Arab countries eye new giving guidelines: Arab and Islamic charities, which suffered in the wake of 9/11 revelations of links to extremists, have been working hard to clean up their image. But are they doing and giving enough?," *The Middle East*, July 2005, p. 1.

[7] Looney, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

[8] Quoted in Jeffrey Haynes, "Islamic Militancy in East Africa," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26 No. 8, 2005, p. 1322.

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[9] *Countering Terrorism in a Failed State*, *Africa Report No. 45*. International Crisis Group. Nairobi/Brussels, 2003, p. 13.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Kagwanja, *op.cit.*, p. 77.

[13] Haynes, *op. cit.*, p. 1324.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 1325.