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ISLAMIC HUMANITARIANISM AND FOREIGN AID:
GULF STATES' AID IN CONFLICT ZONES

Altea Pericoli

Durham Middle East Paper No. 111

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INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EASTERN AND ISLAMIC STUDIES

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Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies
Durham University
Al-Qasimi Building
Elvet Hill Road
Durham
DH1 3TU
Tel: +44 (0)191 3345680

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Islamic Humanitarianism and Foreign Aid: Gulf States' Aid in Conflict Zones

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BIO

Altea Pericoli is currently a post-doctoral researcher at the Centre for Advanced Middle Eastern Studies, Department of Political Science, Lund University, Sweden. In September 2025, she will start the Global Marie Curie Fellowship between Princeton University and Ca’ Foscari University with the research project “ISLAMICAID”. She obtained her PhD in Institutions and Policies (2019-2023) at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, and she conducted visiting periods at Vienna University, Durham University, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, and Chr. Michelsen Institute in Norway. In 2023, she was a visiting research fellow at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, and the European University Institute. Her first monograph “*Islamic Aid and Gulf Donors in Contemporary Crises*” will be published by Edinburgh University Press in 2025.

INTRODUCTION

The narrative of the “international humanitarian order” rooted in Western history has dominated the literature on aid interventions in crises and conflict zones for a long time. However, the increasing presence of non-Western actors and institutions in addressing humanitarian needs in armed conflicts, refugee governance, development aid, and natural disasters requires a more comprehensive understanding of these actors. These players “are contributing to a broader range of perceptions of what constitutes legitimate humanitarianism”,¹ demonstrating that while the concern for people who

“HOW ARE SAUDI ARABIA, QATAR AND THE UAE OPERATING IN CONFLICT ZONES AND PROTRACTED CRISES, ...”

are suffering may be universal, the responses can differ across the cultural and political backgrounds of donors and recipients.

Among them, the Gulf States and regional organisations, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and Islamic Development Bank, have an active role in financing and implementing aid interventions in contemporary crises, especially in the MENA region and Muslim-majority countries.² Even so, most of the literature has described them as “other” donors or “emerging” agents despite their efforts as donors starting in the 1970s.³ The understanding of the Gulf States as donors is particularly relevant considering that most of the countries in the MENA region are affected by conflicts, protracted crises, or have to deal with refugee governance.⁴ Therefore, the research posits the following questions: *How are Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE operating in conflict zones and protracted crises? How are the internal and external dynamics of donors and recipients affecting*

the decision-making process and aid interventions on the ground? To answer these questions, the study goes through the analysis of four conflict zones - Syria, Sudan, Gaza, and Yemen – and the observation of Qatar, UAE, and Saudi Arabia’s aid flows from 2015 to 2022. Moreover, this study challenges the literature on foreign aid by the Gulf States analysed through existing international relations theories,⁵ where their foreign aid has been examined exclusively as a tool of foreign policy, and the pursuit of political interests, ignoring the relevance of internal dynamics, cultural background and the religious components.

This paper explores the characteristics of the Gulf States as donors, starting from the main concepts that have inspired this research: *humanitarianism, politics, and Islam*. It describes the conceptual framework in which the observation of the institutional top-down and the bottom-up analysis of the aid implementation is articulated. The analysis of aid, indeed, requires a broader understanding at two main levels. The first one is the elaboration of aid policies when the states are the subjects of donation and the decision-makers in terms of resource allocation. This level regards the top-down analysis of foreign aid which refers to the elaboration of policies and the institutional dimension of aid at the country level. The second dimension concerns the bottom-up observation which is related to the interaction between the implementing agencies and recipients on the ground. To observe these two levels the study identifies three main variables that affect the aid allocation from the donors to the recipients: 1. Islamic values and identities of donors; 2. Elite decision-making process; 3. Geopolitical dynamics and projections of power. These elements identified in the conceptual analysis are applied to the examination of aid interventions in conflict zones. They represent key variables in the foreign policy evaluation and aid implementation that affect three main aid parameters on which the comparison and analysis of the donors are based: a. geographical allocation of resources at the macro (selection of countries) and micro (selection of areas in the targeted country) level; b. the sectoral allocation of resources; c. the channel allocation of resources. Moreover, another element considered in the analysis is the capacity of these donors to interact with local actors and organisations in the recipient context. The empirical evidence from Syria, Sudan, Gaza, and Yemen sheds light on the interconnection between external

“THIS LEVEL REGARDS THE TOP, DOWN ANALYSIS OF FOREIGN AID...”

and internal dynamics of both donors and recipients that shape foreign aid and humanitarian response in current protracted crises.

Despite the fact that this study will focus exclusively on the top-down evaluation of aid by the Gulf States, it is important to consider that dynamics at the implementation level can be affected by the cultural and religious proximity⁶ between implementing agencies and recipients and that, at this level (bottom-up), the role of Islamic values and practices can emerge as a form of legitimisation of aid interventions.⁷

This research project is based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews conducted during fieldwork in Qatar (December 2021- February 2022), and remotely with key actors in the Gulf States' institutions, and humanitarian workers in the conflict zones from 2021 to 2023. Moreover, it uses secondary sources from governmental institutions, such as Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Fund for Development, Abu Dhabi Fund for Development, King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre, Saudi Aid Platform and Annual Reports of state-sponsored charities. For data triangulation, the study refers to the UN platform including OCHA Financial Tracking Services, UNRWA and other UN agencies, and OECD country profile data.

The paper proceeds as follows: in the first section, it describes the concept of

humanitarianism and its connection with politics and Islam. The second part consists of a description of the conceptual contribution on which the analysis of the Gulf States' aid is articulated. The third section is related to the empirical evidence and the case studies considered: Syria, Sudan, and Gaza for the comparative analysis of Qatar and the UAE, and Yemen for the observation of Saudi Arabia. In the conclusions, the study traces some considerations on these donors' behaviours and the way forward for further research in this field.

Humanitarianism, Politics, and Islam

To understand the foreign aid strategies of the Gulf States and in particular their efforts in humanitarian operations, the paper explores the relationship between humanitarianism, politics and Islam and the consequent link with the Gulf States' foreign aid. The study assumes that despite Islam offering an ethical and ontological framework (behavioural norms) in which concepts of humanitarianism can be identified, the application of these behavioural norms in the foreign aid strategies (structure) of the Gulf States results in the predominance of political needs (external and internal dynamics). However, the religious identity should be considered in the analysis of foreign aid of these donors as an element that distinguishes them in the international humanitarian order and that can bring advantages

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in the implementation of aid in Muslim-majority communities or countries (bottom-up analysis).

Humanitarianism is a contested concept.⁸ Despite the existence of charity and philanthropy in human history, for many modern humanitarianism began with the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1864. After that, the term “humanitarian” emerged in international law and international relations to refer to a legitimate form of “organized assistance and protection for people who are suffering from armed conflict or disaster”.⁹ It embeds universal principles of impartiality, neutrality, humanity and independence that should be applied in each context by the humanitarian actors involved. These principles define a form of humanitarianism that is often said to be apolitical and is not intended to be non-threatening to authorities and non-state actors in the context of armed conflicts. However, if we look at how humanitarian response works in emergencies, it emerges how humanitarianism has always been affected by politics and has political effects, which have been debated as the unintended consequences of aid during conflicts.¹⁰ The political intentions of donors, especially when states are involved in the humanitarian response and the influence of resources allocated for humanitarian purposes in certain

contexts or to certain actors affect the a-political nature of humanitarianism, transforming the response to crises and conflict in a political tool. This does not necessarily undermine the scope of aid itself but can create asymmetrical relationships between donors and recipients¹¹ and among donors with different political and cultural backgrounds.

Islam and humanitarianism: the behavioural norms

The connection between religion and humanitarianism is not new in the literature and the humanitarian practices of charity.¹² In the case of Islam, the ontological framework contains principles that inspire the approach to humanitarianism in terms of financing instruments and transnational efforts of state and non-state actors to assist Muslim communities (Umma) worldwide. However, these principles that constitute the behavioural norms can be affected by the donors' intentions or be altered when they interact with social and political dynamics on the ground (structure). This dichotomy between behavioural norms and everyday practices has been identified by Asutay in the analysis of Islamic Moral Economy and Islamic banking and finance practices.¹³ Some of the principles that inspire humanitarianism are, indeed, part of the same ontological framework which constitutes the references for the Islamic Moral Economy. There are three main concepts to consider in this analysis: *amanah* (trusteeship), *'adalah ijtimaiyyah* (social justice), and *ihsan* or beneficence for socio-economic equilibrium.¹⁴ The concept of *amanah* is strongly linked with charitable obligations and wealth redistribution. *Amanah* is a form of trusteeship where all things that belong to God are handed over to human beings for their collective well-being. Humans are not the owners of wealth and property; rather they are entrusted with resources and what they have is not right but a privilege.

This privilege to possess resources should go with the moral and spiritual responsibility to use those resources for expanding *ihsan* or beneficence.¹⁵ In this ontological system and approach to development, individuals should be aware that all resources are ultimately owned by God, and for this reason they are not available for individual benefit only, but they should be shared equitably, and justly among mankind. This establishes the vertical relationship between God and human beings and the horizontal relationship among all human beings. The concept of *amanah* leads to the redistribution of wealth to create social justice through instruments such as *zakat*, *sadaqah*, or *waqf*. These are defined as Islamic social welfare instruments and represent a form of mandatory (*zakat*) and non-mandatory (*sadaqah*, and *waqf*) instruments for wealth redistribution within the society.

Regarding the concept of social justice and social solidarity (*'adala* and *takaful*), individuals are expected to establish justice (*'adl*) and promote beneficence (*ihsan*), resulting in attaining high levels of the good life (*hayat al-tayyibah*), both individual and collective. In other words, *al-'adl* is the framework within which *falah* (salvation), as an ultimate objective, can be achieved through *ihsan*. *Ihsan* and *'adala* are complementary parts of an ontological system that wants to ensure "balance and reciprocity in human relation" in terms of expansion of beneficence. In the perspective of this social justice, it is not enough that the poor and the weak take equal share with the others in a social environment (equality), but it is necessary that "the poor and the weak take more than their share in social cooperation to achieve an overall social equality of the human condition".¹⁶

This ontological framework brings two main implications in the humanitarian field. 1. At the financial level it produces Islamic welfare instruments able to integrate the humanitarian conventional financing that is used today by state and non-state organisations, Muslim and non-Muslim actors (as in the case of UNHCR Refugee Zakat Fund),¹⁷ to respond to humanitarian needs. 2. The second implication regards the political level and the concept of helping the *Umma* beyond the national borders. This was at the core of the beginning of the Gulf States'

foreign aid strategy in line with pan-Islamic sentiment, which inspired interventions in Afghanistan, and Bosnia from 1979 to the 1990s'.

Therefore, this relationship between Islam, foreign policy, and humanitarianism in the analysis of regional actors and Gulf donors' strategies implies a sort of religious identity together with political interests in the allocation and implementation of aid on the ground. Assuming that aid has always had a political dimension and that the institutional cultural and religious background of donors plays a role in shaping aid dynamics, the study is built on a conceptual framework that can bring together all these elements in the analysis of the Gulf States' foreign aid.

Conceptual contribution: Variables for Understanding Foreign Aid Parameters¹⁸

What remains problematic, indeed, is how foreign aid by the Gulf States has been analysed through the existing theoretical frameworks of international relations. As argued in the previous paragraph, Islam, in principle, offers its view of aid and charity. However, aid implementation and strategies of donors are the result of multiple factors. The existing literature has observed foreign aid policies by the Gulf States through rationalism, constructivism,¹⁹ and neoclassical realism.²⁰ However, some elements are missed in current studies that could provide a solid

reading on the evolution of Gulf States' foreign aid, especially after the Arab Spring. Existing IR theories seem to be not completely adequate to explain foreign policy and consequently foreign aid of the Gulf States in the MENA region. The starting point of this analysis is rooted in the theory elaborated by Hinnebusch and Ehteshami of *complex realism*. According to these two scholars, the foreign aid policy of Middle Eastern countries cannot be analysed following the framework of realism or constructivism alone. Several realist assumptions, indeed, have problematic results when applied to the MENA region for the following reasons. First, states are not necessarily cohesive actors. Second, the environment in which foreign policymakers operate is more multi-layered than that depicted by realists. Third, foreign policy is also affected by trans-state identities and the global hierarchy in which regional states are embedded.

In this framework, they use constructivism to understand the trans-state level where identity matters. "In the Middle East, sub- and supra-state identities compete with state identity, inspire trans-state movements, and constrain purely state-centric behaviours".²¹ With this in mind, to explain foreign policy outcomes, Hinnebusch and Ehteshami built the *complex realism* framework of analysis to combine domestic and international levels in the understanding of states' behaviours. In line with this view of *complex realism*, to read and understand the foreign aid approach of the Gulf states it is necessary to combine the domestic and international levels with the cultural and religious values which inspire aid and assistance in third countries. The relevance of their different Islamic backgrounds - intended as supra-state and trans-state dimensions - blended with internal and external dynamics, creates their "brand" as donors in the region.

The three variables for understanding foreign aid

Therefore, the conceptual framework is based on three variables that affect three aid parameters on which the comparison and the analysis of foreign aid policies of the three Gulf States are conducted.

- The first variable regards the role that Islam plays in the identity of the Gulf States and the normative framework that constitutes the behavioural norms for transnational assistance in Islamic understanding.
- The second one regards the internal dynamics, with the elite decision-making process and the relationship between the elite in the donor and recipient countries. This variable regards the institutional process of policy elaboration of the aid strategies and the approach of the elite to political Islam (at the national and international levels).
- The third variable is related to the influence of external geopolitical dynamics on foreign aid and the different strategies for projecting power.

All these three variables represent key elements in the foreign policy evaluation and aid implementation that affect three main aid parameters: a. geographical allocation of resources at the macro (selection of countries) and micro (selection of areas in the targeted country) level; b. the sectoral allocation of resources; c. the channel allocation of resources (multilateral, bilateral, through international NGOs or Gulf state-based charities).

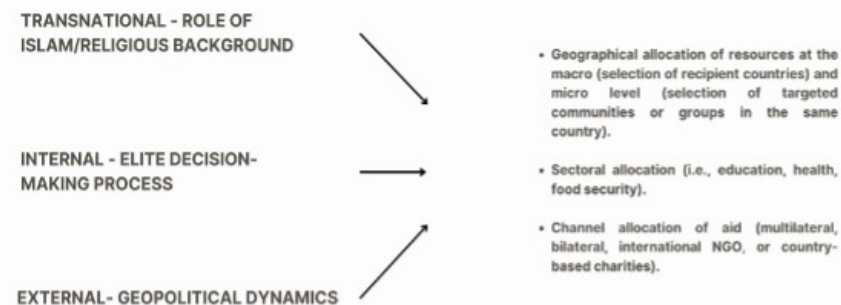


Figure 1- The figure shows the three variables of the conceptual framework (left) which affect the three aid parameters (right) of the resource allocation.

The elite decision-making process and the institutional dimension of aid

The second variable, the elite decision-making process, is related to the institutional dimension of aid in the three countries considered. Looking at the case of Qatar, the institutional dimension related to the aid system appears centralised in its policy elaboration and implementation level. The Department of International Cooperation and the Minister of State for International Cooperation are part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which is in charge of elaborating the policy directions of foreign aid strategies described in the Qatari National Vision 2030 and the Third National Development Strategy (2024-2030). In 2002, the Qatar Fund for Development was created to take over the executive competence of the International Development Department and develop a strategic component for Qatari aid. The QFFD became the public development institution committed to allocating the governmental budget for projects in line with the main strategy in four main sectors: education, health, economic empowerment, and humanitarian response. To better coordinate the policy level and the implementation level, in 2014 the State of Qatar created the Regulatory Authority for Charitable Activities. The Authority is charged with developing, supporting, encouraging, regulating,

and supervising charitable activities carried out by charities in Qatar. Under the Law Regulating Charitable Activities, all charities are monitored and must respond to the RACA. Under the law, the following are subject to the supervision and control of RACA: 1) Charitable associations and institutions that existed at the time this law came into force, or those registered according to its provisions. 2) Other entities authorized to initiate charitable or humanitarian activities, following the provisions of this law. 3) Individuals authorised to raise donations or proceed with financial transfers for charitable or humanitarian purposes. At the implementation level, the two main charities that are operating in third countries are Qatar Charity and Qatar Red Crescent Society. They operate through governmental and private funds but their flow of funds in third countries requires previous approval by RACA.

In the UAE, the first governmental agency created for administrating foreign aid was the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD) in 1971, which is in charge today of financing exclusively development interventions through bilateral channels with soft loans and grants. In 2008, the Cabinet of the UAE created the Office for the Coordination of Foreign Aid (OCFA), signifying the government's commitment to supporting the transformation of the UAE aid sector. OCFA was assigned the responsibility of documenting and coordinating UAE foreign aid, assessing its impact, and supporting capacity building in UAE organisations. In 2013, OCFA's mandate evolved, necessitating the creation of the Ministry of International Cooperation and Development (MICAD), which continues the responsibilities of OCFA, in addition to developing the UAE Foreign Assistance Policy. In 2016, MICAD merged with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to become the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MOFAIC). In 2017, the UAE Foreign Assistance Policy was launched to ensure the effectiveness of this assistance. At the coordination level, each emirate has its own Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department, which has the aim to harmonize the foreign aid interventions between the federal government and the emirates. At the implementation level, in 1983 the Emirati Red Crescent was created, as the country's principal humanitarian agency marking an important milestone for UAE foreign assistance. In the same period (1980-1990), the nation's leadership further supported the creation of sponsoring aid organisations and charities per each emirate.

Compared to Qatar, the decision-making process appears fragmented and managed by different figures within the elite. Foreign aid strategies are the result of a federation (centralised) process elaborated by multiple actors, especially among the elite of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. This system has created many actors in the humanitarian and development landscape with financial

and implementation roles (i.e. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abu Dhabi Fund for Development, Emirates Red Crescent, Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation, Al Maktoum Foundation among others). Most of them are linked to key personalities of different emirates, reflecting the fragmentation of policies and priorities in terms of foreign aid.

The last case analysed, Saudi Arabia, presents some peculiarities compared to the previous ones in terms of aid institutional architecture. The Saudi monarchy decided that the right to formulate all its policies was in the hands of the royal family. The policymaking bodies surrounding the royal family include the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance and the Cabinet. The Ministry of Finance also specializes in the Department of International Development Cooperation. The Cabinet may also issue new decrees to manage development assistance in accordance with Article 7 of the Royal License No. M/48.²²

In 1984, the Kingdom created the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD) exclusively for development interventions in third countries and economic support through soft loans and grants (the same structure as the ADFD). However, starting in 2015, with the creation of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSRelief), Saudi Arabia established a clear division between humanitarian and development interventions in

terms of aid strategies and funding. At the financial level, members of the royal family have created their foundations which operate through different channels for supporting interventions in third countries. For instance, the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Program for Charity Works is a trust fund founded in 2007 by the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. The program is implemented by the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) in coordination with the King Abdullah Humanitarian Foundation (KAHF). Regarding the implementation level, the Saudi Red Crescent Society was the main implementing agency of the Kingdom for humanitarian response, together with the International Organization for Relief, Welfare and Development, formally called the International Islamic Relief Organization.²³ In this landscape, the creation of the KSRelief had the aim of reorienting Saudi aid, with a distinction between humanitarianism and Islam to add international recognition and visibility to a new image of the state, "a post-Wahhabi Saudi State".²⁴ The KSRelief has restructured the humanitarian aid system of Saudi Arabia, channelling it through a single entity which claims "impartiality" over "Islamic solidarity".

The institutionalisation and professionalisation of the aid sectors in these three countries show the effort to enhance transparency and accountability to act as international donors in the humanitarian order.

However, despite this trend, data on aid allocation show a clear preference for Muslim-majority countries²⁵ that can be explained as a political priority in terms of regional influence and the response to the real needs of protracted crises occurring in MMCs.

Foreign Aid in Conflict Zones: Case Studies

The case studies are selected according to the relevance that these recipient countries in the Gulf States' strategies of aid in terms of resources allocated in the period considered, but also the role played by these Gulf actors in their political dynamics.

Qatar and the UAE in Syria

The Syrian response to humanitarian needs and recovery is a case in which Qatar and the UAE have intervened following different aid policies and approaches. From a political perspective, Qatar responded to the regional opportunity and became an external funder of the regime's opposition. On



Figure 2 – Deir el-Zor, Syria, 2021. Photo by Giulia De Cesaris.

the other hand, the UAE, along with Saudi Arabia, intervened because the Syrian conflict could increase threats to their internal stability and regional security.²⁶ The UAE adopted positions closer to Saudi Arabia, although with some divergences. Despite its initial opposition to the Syrian regime, the UAE never entirely cut diplomatic relations with Damascus and the Syrian embassy continued to operate in Abu Dhabi.²⁷ The implicit willingness of some Gulf monarchies to normalise relations with Damascus became explicit in the summer of 2018. Leading the way were the UAE and Bahrain, which both re-opened their embassies in Syria in December 2018. In other words, Qatar and the UAE supported parts of the conflict with different intents and have fragmented opposition in line with their political interests. This observation brings the analysis to the scope of this study: understanding their aid policies in the country. Considering their different positions in the conflict, the question is if the sectarian approach to the conflict and the fragmentation of the opposition, put in place by these external supporters, reflect how policies of aid by these two Gulf states were implemented.

In this scenario, the analysis should consider that aid in conflict zones could be useful for helping political actors (both rebels and regime/formal and informal authorities) to win peoples' hearts and minds.²⁸ Sometimes, it is an undesirable effect arising from humanitarian negotiations on the ground, which require the approval of formal or informal authorities to aid delivery to the vulnerable population. Looking at the Syrian case, in the regime-controlled areas, the study conducted by Awad shows that resources provided by donors for humanitarian and development aid can be instrumentalised by the regime for controlling beneficiaries' access to aid and services. The Syrian regime, indeed, is trying to claim control of local NGOs and UN-led humanitarian interventions, to ensure the aid distribution is in line with its political agenda.²⁹ If the regime controls who can have access to aid and who cannot, in areas partially or completely controlled by government forces, it defines 'eligible criteria' of access to aid based on loyalty, excluding all parts of the population considered as 'opposition'. On the other hand, in part of the country controlled by the opposition, in particular, by the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib and the Syrian Interim Government in northern Aleppo where Qatar operates today, access to aid delivery and vulnerable populations is negotiated with these two *de facto* authorities which – in the same ways as the regime does – control the access of the recipients to aid resources.³⁰

Observing the aid flow of these two countries and comparing them on the geographical (micro level), sectoral, and channel allocation of resources, diverging patterns emerge in the analysis of Qatari and Emirati foreign aid. The data analysis regards funds allocated in the Syrian territory (opposition

and regime-controlled areas) and funds for Syrian refugees in third countries (especially Lebanon and Jordan). In the case of Qatar, the main effort from 2015 to 2022 went in two main directions: relief interventions through UN channels (i.e. OCHA and IOM) and its charities (QRCS and QC); refugee issues in third countries through education, health, and shelter programmes. Until

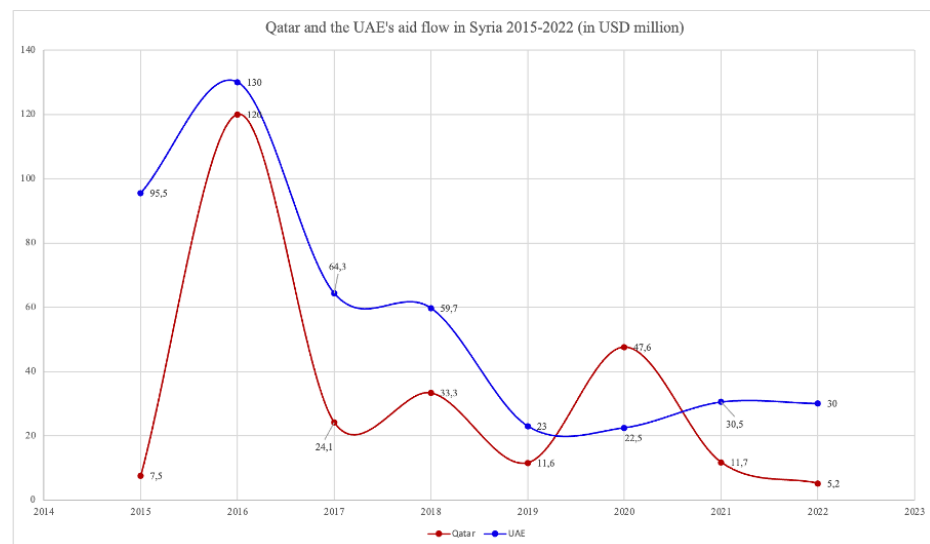


Figure 3 – Qatar and the UAE aid flows in Syria from 2015 to 2022 (in USD dollars). Source: Qatar Fund for Development and UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Annual Reports 2015-2022. Elaborated by Author.

2018, QFFD supported interventions in the south, including the areas of Daraa and Quneitra, and in the north in the Aleppo district. In June 2018, the southern provinces of Daraa and Quneitra, considered rebel-held areas³¹ until that time, were recaptured by the Syrian regime with the support of Russia. After 2018, Qatar funds have been allocated in northern Syria, including the areas of Idlib and northern Aleppo (in Afrin, Al Dana, and al-Rai). In 2018, QFFD signed many agreements to develop a response in the southern region of Daraa and in particular in Eastern Ghouta. Moreover, there was a great effort in the education sector in Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Daraa, Quneitra, Rural Damascus and Damascus. From 2019, QFFD concentrated its efforts on internally displaced people in northern Aleppo and Idlib. The geographical allocation of resources demonstrates that the effort of Qatar in Syria is related to territorial control of the regime and rebels in this fragmented context. Qatari policy of aid, indeed, has not followed the potential reconstruction plan

“...USD 50 MILLION WAS DESTINED FOR STABILISATION SUPPORT AND EARLY RECOVERY PROGRAMS...”

of the regime, but it has operated in areas controlled by *de facto* authorities, such as the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib and the Syrian Interim Government in northern Aleppo after 2018.

A different strategy was adopted by the UAE. On one hand, the UAE operated through multilateral channels for the humanitarian response in the country. In 2013, together with Germany and the US, the UAE created the Syria Recovery Trust Fund, a multi-donor initiative primarily aimed at reconstruction and recovery efforts. In the first period 2015-2018, the major effort was in humanitarian response, and a small portion of resources went to development initiatives. The UAE response also included support for the refugee issue especially in Jordan, to the Emirati-Jordanian camp (Mrajeb Al Fahood) and the Zaatari Camp.

In 2018, USD 50 million was destined for stabilisation support and early recovery programs in Raqqa after the recapture of territory by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Efforts in Raqqa can be analysed following the willingness to control the Turkish influence in Syria and sympathising with Syrian Kurds. For this reason, the UAE government supported the SDF for the US stabilisation programme in the SDF-controlled part of the Raqqa governorate.³² Moreover, starting in 2018, the UAE

maintained its support to Jordan for the Syrian refugee response and allocated funds bilaterally, directly to the Syrian government. From 2019 onwards, the allocation of resources was in north-eastern Syria (Kurdish part) and through bilateral contributions (regime-controlled areas).

Therefore, the response of these two donors to the Syrian crisis follows their positions towards the regime or the opposition, as the observation of geographical and channel allocation of aid shows. The politicisation of aid in the Syrian crisis results in interventions implemented on two parallel lines and represents a decentralised and uncoordinated response to post-conflict recovery, within a system that aims to re-establish a centralised power.³³

Qatar and the UAE in Sudan

Three main differences can be identified when comparing the Qatari and Emirati aid approaches in Sudan. 1) Humanitarian vs. Development interventions; 2)

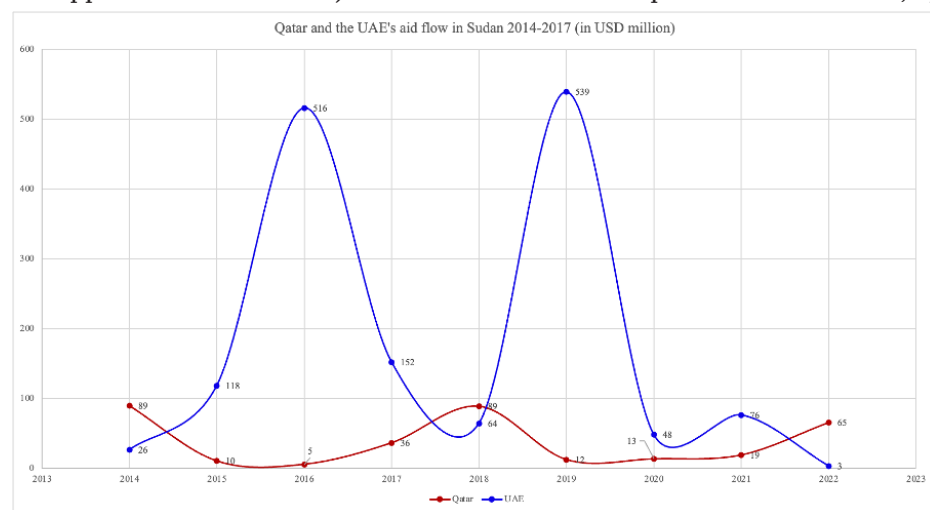


Figure 4 - Qatar and the UAE's aid flows in Sudan from 2014 to 2022. In 2020, data for UAE resources does not include the amount of 936 million as support to the general budget (bilateral contribution) by ADFD. Source: QFFD, UAE MOFA Annual Reports and OCHA Financial Tracking Service. Elaborated by Author.

Institutional vs. Charities; 3) Autonomy vs. Security. These elements have determined, over time, the geographical allocation to the peripheries (Darfur) in the case of Qatar, or to the central government as in the case of the UAE. The domestic and regional dynamics can partially explain these three variables. In the first period analysed, 2014-2017, both Qatar and the UAE increased their influence in Sudan, using the ambivalent position of al-Bashir towards the Islamist movements and the need for security in the Red Sea by the UAE and KSA. However, the amount of resources invested by the UAE in this period is greater compared to Qatar, with bilateral and development interventions by the former, and humanitarian efforts through its charities in Darfur for the latter (see figure 4).

During the GCC crisis (from 2017), the commitment of the UAE to the central government decreased due to the declaration of neutrality of al-Bashir. At the same time, Qatar significantly increased the efforts in Darfur and allocated USD 85 million in development intervention through bilateral channels, directly to the central government of Sudan. This could be explained as the willingness of the Qatari elite to maintain a strong tie with al-Bashir during the GCC crisis through direct support to Khartoum and not only in Darfur.

With the end of the al-Bashir era (2019), the UAE maintained its commitment to bilateral aid, to support the new government and expand its influence in the country. Qatar, instead, increased its efforts in the multilateral channel, through the contribution to the Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan (OCHA), strengthening its image of humanitarian donor in the international community.

The geopolitical dynamics in the three periods explain the different levels of analysis respectively for Qatar and the UAE 1. Humanitarian vs. Development interventions; 2. Institutional vs. Charities; 3. Autonomy vs. Security, but other factors should be considered. The capacity of Qatar to penetrate the difficult context of Darfur through its organisations, namely Qatar Charity, and Qatar Red Crescent Society, made this tiny Gulf State one of the most active humanitarian donors in the region and one of the most important mediators between Darfur and the central government. On the contrary, the UAE put more effort into development and bilateral aid through budget support to ensure the economic stability of the central government and the transition government after 2019, and to protect its economic and security interests in the country.

However, these dynamics depend also on the internal characteristics of the aid system in these two Gulf countries. The centralisation of the decision-making

process in Qatar, and the financial control of its charities' interventions through the Regulatory Authority of Charitable Activities, allows the country to act through its organisations at the local level, following a single strategic line. In the case of the UAE, instead, the decision-making process in terms of foreign aid is decentralised and fragmented in terms of several actors and organisations able to operate abroad and affiliated to different élites in the federal states. Looking at the aid data from annual reports, indeed, it is possible to find several organisations operating in the field i.e., Emirati Red Crescent, al Maktoum Foundation, Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation, and Dar al Ber Society. However, due to the prevalence of Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the decision-making process of foreign aid and foreign policies, the main contributions come from the UAE government and the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development through bilateral channels and direct support to the Sudanese governmental budget.

In Sudan, and Darfur in particular, the donor community was pushed to work not only to address the basic humanitarian needs of the civilian population but also to address social justice, governance, and economic empowerment, following the Darfur Development Strategy. Observing aid data, Qatari effort in resource allocation in the period considered is allocated in Darfur to address the first pillar of reconstruction but also agriculture, health, economic empowerment, and education. Although Qatar has seen its influence over Khartoum reduced after 2019, it continues to maintain significance as a partner in the eyes of the Sudanese Transitional Government. This relevance is primarily attributed to Qatar's relationships in the country's peripheries. Qatar's humanitarian and development initiatives, such as building service complexes, fostered networking and trust-building with local communities. As a result, Doha has remained a privileged intermediary for several non-state armed groups in Darfur and other Sudanese regional states (Blue Nile, South Kordofan), facilitating talks with authorities in Khartoum. With the assistance of Qatar, the transitional government led by Prime Minister Hamdok successfully signed the Juba Agreement in 2020. The agreement involved some of the armed groups that had been opposing the Sudanese government. Therefore, Qatar remained in the peripheries but at the same time at the core of mediation efforts, with a reduction of funds in terms of bilateral (Sudanese government) and multilateral aid (UN agencies), and the continuity of interventions implemented by Qatar Charity and QRCS in Darfur and eastern Sudan in terms of humanitarian interventions.

In the case of the UAE, the huge investments in development and bilateral interventions -directly allocated to the budget support of the Sudanese government- underlines the intention of this country to preserve the

**“THE GREATEST
AMOUNT
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CHARITY
IN 2022...”**

relationship with the central government, along with the economic stability of Sudan to protect its security and economic interests. From 2018, it is possible to observe a slight shift from development to humanitarian interventions, with a significant increase after 2019 with the end of al-Bashir and the beginning of the Transitional government. Moreover, starting in 2018, foreign aid has been allocated exclusively in the form of grants, in contrast to the previous trend of combining concessional loans with grants.

In both cases, the allocation of aid through multilateral channels and UN agencies is quite small, with earmarked contributions to the World Food Programme or OCHA Humanitarian Response Plan. The greatest amount allocated in UN channels was made by Qatar Charity in 2022, with \$ 44.5 million for emergency shelter, food security, education, and health through the Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan. The limited effort in multilateral channels demonstrates the willingness of these two donors to maintain their strategies in terms of aid allocation in Sudan, taking advantage of their relationships between local authorities in the peripheries (for Qatar), or the political and military élites in the central government (for the UAE).

Qatar and the UAE in Gaza

Gaza and the West Bank present some similar patterns in terms of the diverging approaches of Qatar and the UAE in the two territories for the aid allocation. However, before starting with the description of these two donors' strategies, it can be useful to trace the "exceptionality" of Gaza in terms of aid management and delivery. Its exceptionality can be identified in the correlation of several factors which are not present in other conflict zones or areas controlled by non-state actors.

The Gaza Strip is a coastal territory inhabited by over two million Palestinians,³⁴ that was under formal military occupation from 1967 until 2005 when Israel withdrew its forces and settlers. After Hamas started its control on the Strip in 2007, Israel imposed an air, land, and sea blockade that severely restricted the movement of people and resources to and from the Strip. Gaza has been subjected to five wars during the 2008–2022 period, in addition to over 30 separate Israeli military operations and assaults.³⁵ The prolonged blockade has been among the main causes of the high level of poverty (81.5% of the population lives below the poverty line), an unemployment rate of 47%, and a food insecurity percentage of 64.4%. Around 80% of the population is dependent upon foreign aid.³⁶ Following the takeover by Hamas of the Gaza Strip, the blockade by Israel was accompanied by a political and financial boycott by the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and Russia. But, in the isolated and highly aid-dependent Strip, the international community's involvement had to continue. This effort has been focused, to a large extent, on addressing humanitarian needs, giving less relevance to development issues,³⁷ and has generated a long-term dependence on external –and highly politicized- funding, which also undermined the capacity of local civil society organisations.³⁸ What makes Gaza an exception in terms of aid access and aid dynamics can be resumed in four main components.

The first one is the geographical "isolation" of the Strip related to Israel's occupation and blockade, with every border controlled by Israel and one by Egypt for goods and people transit. There are three main crossing points, two in the south namely Rafah (Egyptian border) and Karem Shalom (Israeli border), and one in the north, Erez (Israeli border), exclusively for people entering/exiting). The other three crossing points, Sufa, Nahal Oz and Karni, were closed between 2008 and 2011. In the south, there is the internal border checkpoint in Salah Ad Din.³⁹

The second aspect regards the political circumstances about Hamas as a *de facto* authority that controls the Strip boycotted by the US and the EU.⁴⁰ Despite the boycott, however, both of them continued to support aid interventions in

Gaza with a "no-contact policy" with Hamas, and channelling resources exclusively through the United Nations agencies. Yet, under the no-contact and boycott policies, UN agencies and international NGOs have little choice but to comply. Therefore, regarding political dynamics and aid coordination, all Western agencies rely on UN organisations to identify and respond to the situation in Gaza. The scope of the policy was to avoid the legitimization of Hamas as a political actor and enhance its administrative capacity.

This aspect brings the third feature which regards the lack of local ownership in aid coordination and management. The international boycott of the Hamas government in Gaza imposed new conditions on donor organisations, and the UN agencies were obliged to resume their operations in Gaza under the policies of boycotting, avoiding any formal contacts with Hamas government ministries and preventing the financing of any Hamas-run institutions, including local CSOs, to avoid the spread of Hamas political agenda and ideology. As argued by Sara Roy, this mechanism ignores the professionalization and the fundamental transformation of Islamic civil society actors, in the education or healthcare system, and the fact that they do not represent necessarily a channel of Hamas' political agenda.⁴¹

The Western strategies of aid in Gaza

and the coordination mechanism bring to the fourth aspect: the prolonged humanitarian assistance and the absence of development goals. Humanitarian assistance which by definition is a short/medium-term response to a man-made or natural disaster that should be gradually integrated with development objectives to gradually make the targeted community independent from external resources. In the last decades, the concept of protracted crises, such as in the case of Syria, Yemen, Sudan or Afghanistan, has transformed this idea of a short-term approach to humanitarian interventions, which in the case of Gaza remains related to political dynamics which have determined the donors' strategies and perceptions of the Palestinian occupation. The case of Gaza was treated as a prolonged humanitarian crisis without any efforts toward development and political objectives.

Against this background, Qatar and the UAE implemented interventions following different directions and strategies. The empirical evidence shows the different approaches of these two donors towards Gaza and OPT in general. The first aspect regards the fluctuation in resource allocation. Both the aid flows of Qatar and the UAE show inconsistency in the period considered, 2017-2022, with an inversion of the trend in 2020. The normalization process with Israel started by the UAE affected the aid dynamics of these two donors in both

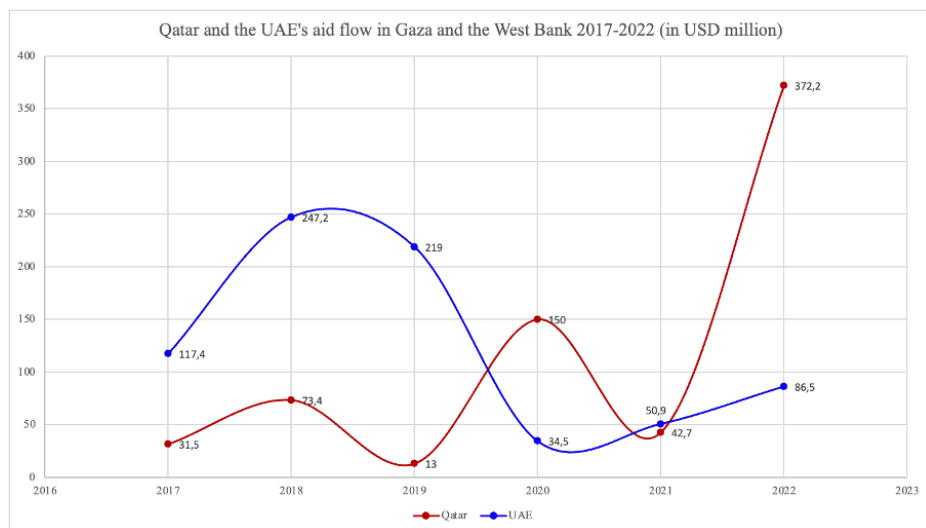


Figure 5 – Foreign aid by Qatar and the UAE in Gaza and the West Bank (including UNRWA paid contribution). Source: QFFD, Qatar Charity, and UAE MOFA Annual reports.

Gaza and the West Bank in terms of aid funds. This year, Qatar increased its efforts through the allocation of USD 150 million and the UAE granted USD 34.5 million compared to USD 219 million in the previous year.

Overall, Qatari aid has declined from 2017 to 2019, with a new significant increase by Qatar in 2020 and 2022. The empirical evidence shows a declining role of Qatar in the reconstruction, with a new significant effort in the post-2021 period. In March 2018, an anonymous source from the Reconstruction Committee stated that money for large-scale rebuilding projects was running out with no indication of renewal. This occurred in the context of the “Qatari Grant Agreement” signed

by Hamas, Qatar, Egypt, Israel, and the UN, which included civil servant salary payments, cash assistance to poor families, and fuel payments.⁴² In 2021, Qatar pledged USD 50 million to the UN for cash assistance and the Gaza Power Plant. In the post-2021 period, Doha pledged USD 500 million for rebuilding, but the amount committed was USD 360 million as reported in the QFFD Annual Report. Regarding the UAE, from 2017 to 2019, the country donated USD 583,6 million, mainly allocated to the PA budget support, with a significant decrease from 2020. The reduction of foreign aid to the West Bank and Gaza occurred concurrently with the beginning of the Abraham Accord and the normalization process with Israel. This shift is also related to a

change in the foreign aid approach to Palestine. The UAE government, indeed, reduced interventions in development with a greater amount of resources allocated to humanitarian interventions, health, and commodity aid. This process affected Qatari aid in the opposite direction, with USD 150 million and USD 360 million allocated respectively in 2020 and 2022 (see Figure 4).

Moreover, the two donors present diverging behaviours in terms of channel and sectoral allocation of resources, along with the interaction with local organisations on the ground. The main characteristic of Qatar’s approach is the strong collaboration with Ministries and local organisations within Gaza. The effort in reconstruction was made through the partnership with local institutions, such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Development, and Ministry of Agriculture by QFFD and Qatar Charity. This bypasses the “no-contact policy” of Western donors, embedding direct and formal involvement of the Hamas administration and local CSOs in the process of aid distribution and implementation. The study conducted by Alkahlout reported that “The majority of interviewees confirmed that, Qatar is the main active donor in Gaza on a sustained basis, especially during the siege of Gaza”.⁴³ Islamic Relief World Organisation, Qatar Red Crescent Society, Qatar Charity, and the Qatari Committee for Reconstruction have been heavily involved in supporting CSO projects and working on their capacity building. Moreover, the perception of the Qatari aid was positive among the interviewees of the study, in terms of the effectiveness of interventions and the presence of this donor on the ground. Therefore, Qatar prioritized localisation and avoided the no-contact policy applied by other donors, with some benefits in the effectiveness and perception of beneficiaries.

The UAE, in the period considered, channelled foreign aid mainly in two directions: bilateral support to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and multilateral support through UNRWA for interventions in Gaza, in the form of earmarked contributions in the education sector. The major donors were the UAE government, the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (until 2019), the International Charity Organisation and the Khalifa Bin Zayed Foundation. From 2020, the ICO has become the prominent donor, after the government, due to the shift from development to humanitarian efforts. Therefore, from the data available, it is evident the lack of interaction between UAE organisations with local actors and organisations in Gaza, where this Gulf State relies exclusively on the UN organisation for channelling resources in the area.

This aspect is related to the third point, the allocation of resources toward UNRWA of these two donors. Figure 5 and Figure 6 show the difference between funds paid and pledged by Qatar and the UAE. In the case of Qatar, the funds

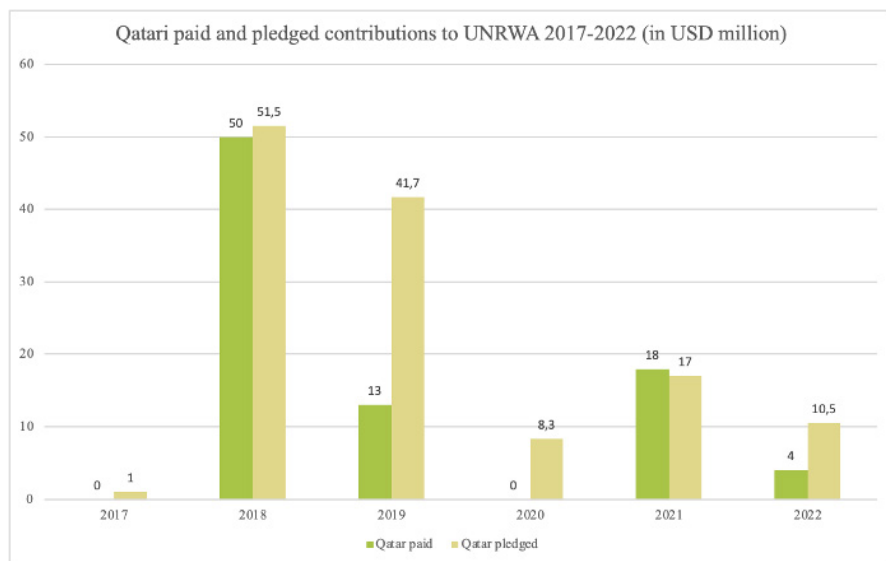


Figure 6 – Qatari paid and pledged contributions to UNRWA in the period 2017-2022 in USD million. Source: UNRWA donor chart and QFFD Annual Reports.

paid are less than the amount pledged with a more earmarked contribution for Palestinian refugees in other countries, such as Syria. In the case of Gaza and the West Bank, Doha relies on its presence in the territories for delivering and implementing aid. We can see a peak of paid funds in 2018, with quite stable and small amounts in the following years. The UAE, instead, concentrated their grants to UNRWA from 2017 to 2019 with no data available of paid donations from 2020 to 2022 – despite the pledge of USD 106,6 million registered in the UNRWA donor chart. This shows how the process of normalization affected both the bilateral and multilateral efforts of Abu Dhabi towards Gaza and the West Bank.

Saudi Arabia in Yemen

The Saudi aid support to Yemen found its roots starting from 1994, after the country's unification. From 1994 to 2011, Saudi aid was delivered through four main channels: 1) aid afforded by the Special Committee headed by Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz; 2) aid decided by the Saudi–Yemeni Coordination Council; (3) governmental aid approved by the cabinet and delivered by the SFD; and (4) aid provided by charities owned by individuals of Yemeni descent, especially from Hadramawt, belonging to the business community.⁴⁴

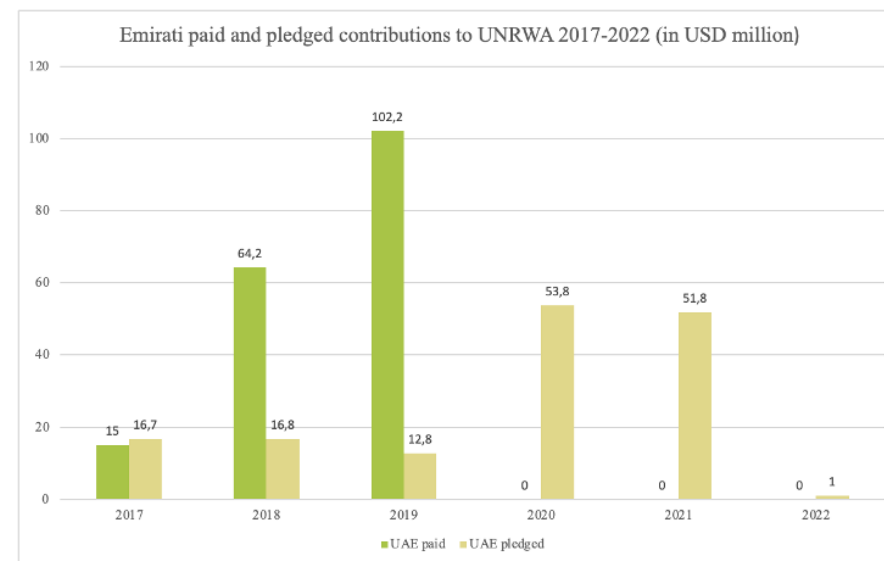


Figure 7 – Emirati paid and pledged contributions to UNRWA in the period 2017-2022 in USD million. Source: UNRWA donor chart and UAE MICAD Annual Reports.

Concerning the first channel, the Special Committee used to meet twice annually to discuss issues with the Council of Yemeni Tribes and controlled by al-Ahmar, the most influential family of the Hashid tribe. The death of Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar in 2007 affected the Special Committee greatly. He had built a solid alliance with KSA and, thanks to Saudi economic and political support, he formed a centre of power inside the north of Yemen. Most of the aid provided by the committee was undocumented and went to tribal leaders. The Hashid tribe was the largest beneficiary of Saudi aid provided by the committee.⁴⁵ Regarding the role of the SFD, it supported infrastructure projects and development in public sectors through loans, especially for roads, health, vocational education and technical training.

After 2011, with the beginning of the Arab Spring and the armed conflict in the country, the decentralised approach to aid interventions gradually changed. The creation of the KSRelief and the new position taken by Mohammed bin Salman as Minister of Defence with responsibility for the Yemeni file pushed for a centralization of aid funding and management, together with a geographical distribution of resources in areas controlled by Hadi's government. In the case of Yemen, as for Syria and Sudan, the geographical allocation of resources

at the micro level can explain the donors' strategies. As the Houthis took hold in the north, the southern and central governorates acquired renewed importance.⁴⁶ The creation of the KSRelief re-designed the aid flow through a single agency, as “the sole authority responsible for receiving relief, charitable or humanitarian donations [...] and delivering them to beneficiaries abroad”.⁴⁷

In the period 2018-2022, the aid patterns saw a shift in the Saudi strategy. First of all, the resources allocated nearly doubled in 2018 and maintained high numbers compared to the period pre-2018 (see Figure 7). Second, there was a shift in the aid composition: the humanitarian response was considerably reduced for more development interventions. Following this trend, in 2018 Saudi Arabia established the Saudi Reconstruction and Development Program in Yemen (SRPY) as a long-term plan to focus on the development



Figure 8 – Saudi Arabia's contributions to Yemen from 2015 to 2022 in USD million. Elaborated by the Author based on Saudi Aid Platform data.⁴⁸

“THE IDEA THAT THE GULF STATES OPERATE AS HUMANITARIAN ACTORS FOLLOWING EXCLUSIVELY RELIGIOUS SOLIDARITY AND ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES IS NAIVE...”

of infrastructure, capacity-building of Yemeni institutions, and the creation of job opportunities. The Program was the result of a bilateral agreement between Saudi Arabia and Yemen and is supervised by Saudi Ambassador to Yemen Mohammad Al Jaber. While Riyadh conveys this as a benevolent gesture that reflects a desire to help Yemen's humanitarian crisis, critics note that it mainly enables Saudi Arabia to expand its influence in the country.⁴⁹

Overall, if we consider the cost of projects per funding entity (see Figure 8), the Ministry of Finance is the first donor entity, followed by the King Salman Humanitarian and Relief Centre, the Ministry of Energy, the Saudi Reconstruction and Development Program (SRPY) and the Saudi Fund for Development. The top-funded sectors are, indeed, industry and mineral resources, banking and financial services, and the third one regards food and agricultural security as a humanitarian contribution.

Conclusion

The idea that the Gulf States operate as humanitarian actors following exclusively religious solidarity and Islamic principles is naïve and can alter the understanding of these donors in the international humanitarian order. As stated in the first section of this study, foreign aid and humanitarian

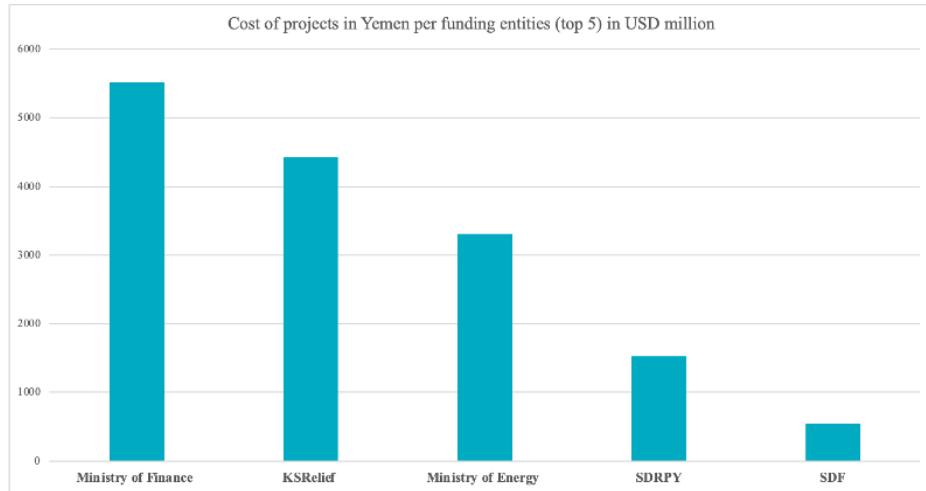


Figure 9 – Cost of projects financed by Saudi Arabia in Yemen per funding entities (top 5) in USD million. Data are related to the period 1975-2023. Elaborated by the Author based on Saudi Aid Platform data.

assistance have always had a political dimension, and the professionalization and institutionalization of these donors over time have led them to act as “political donors” in the international humanitarian arena. Their tendency is, indeed, to transform the aid sector in line with Western humanitarian standards, without contesting the “universality” of the system in which the “Islamic solidarity” is replaced by a neutral response to human suffering.

However, religion continues to play an important role in many organisations involved in the aid response, including engagement through Islamic financing tools for charitable and humanitarian purposes. Moreover, despite this not representing the scope of the article, aid implementation on the ground and the perception of beneficiaries can be affected by religious values and the cultural proximity with donors as a form of legitimization. For this reason, the analysis includes the ontological framework as the basis for Islamic humanitarianism. This set of behavioural norms can coexist with the “universality” of humanitarian order and can constitute an added value in the implementation strategies, offering the multiplicity of values that have historically characterized the field of humanitarianism.⁵⁰

As “political donors” the internal and external dynamics identified in the conceptual framework are shaping the behaviours of the three Gulf States considered. Observing the cases of Syria, Sudan, and Gaza some common

traits emerge in the Qatari and Emirati aid strategies. In all three contexts, Qatar has prioritized its autonomy in foreign policy and foreign aid strategies compared to its neighbours. The second and third variables (elite decision-making process and the geopolitical dynamics) have affected the allocation of resources in opposition-held areas in Syria, Darfur, and Gaza through direct coordination with Hamas, challenging the mainstream approach in the Strip. This is also the result of the pragmatic relationship of Qatar with movements related to the Muslim Brotherhood in the region. Moreover, the centralized structure of the aid system in this country allows it to operate mostly through the two main state-based charities for the humanitarian response, maintaining a strategic presence in fragile zones. In the case of the UAE, the prioritization of security in its foreign policy strategy defines the preference of aid allocation mostly bilaterally and the fluctuation of resources allocated following geopolitical dynamics. This is particularly evident in the reduction of funds towards Gaza and the West Bank after 2020 and the Abraham Accords, the increase in resources allocated in Syria after 2018, and in Sudan after 2019 and the end of the al-Bashir government.

The last case considered, Saudi Arabia’s aid towards Yemen, shows the changing trends of Saudi aid before and after the civil war, which also reflects the changes within the humanitarian aid structure in the Kingdom. Despite the fact that this research does not consider the impact of aid in the areas and communities targeted, the preference for bilateral and development interventions demonstrates the willingness to adopt aid as a tool of its foreign policy and objectives. The bilateral contribution towards development interventions and the centralised response to humanitarian assistance after 2012, had the aim to increase the Saudi influence and control on the aid flow in the country, favouring areas controlled by the Saudi-back government.

Against this background, the last considerations regard technical aspects of the humanitarian response in conflict zones. The first one is a lack of coordination between Gulf States and Western donors and among Gulf States aid institutions. The second element is related to a sense of mistrust among humanitarian organizations on the ground that can be partially resolved through more logistic coordination and a better knowledge of these donors and their interventions. Therefore, research and data in this field are essential to build a constructive framework and improve the response in humanitarian emergencies.

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