

HPG Working Paper

A kingdom of humanity?

Saudi Arabia's values, systems and interests in humanitarian action

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Executive summary

This study contributes to a small but growing body of work on humanitarian action by Gulf countries through an analysis of Saudi Arabia's current practice and behaviour as a humanitarian actor, both as a donor and – crucially – as a key player in the regional and global political landscape. The report explores recent structural and contextual shifts in Saudi Arabia's humanitarian sector, with an emphasis on how Saudi foreign policy has contributed to shaping its engagement in humanitarian action, particularly in the volatile sociopolitical and security environment in the Arab region following the uprisings of 2011. The study traces the connections between Saudi Arabia's foreign policy interests and its humanitarian action.

Like other governments around the world, Saudi foreign policy does influence its humanitarian action: at times aligned with the humanitarian imperative to provide assistance to countries in crisis, but also at times at odds with it, most notably perhaps in the conflict in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia is both a belligerent and a major humanitarian donor. There are clear contradictions between the establishment of the King Salman Center for Relief and Humanitarian Aid to coordinate aid and humanitarian assistance to Yemen on the one hand, and on the other mounting evidence of the Saudi-led coalition's responsibility for civilian deaths and the destruction of infrastructure. In the case of Yemen at least, humanitarian action, while also motivated by a sense of altruism and responsibility towards a neighbouring country with a shared history, is also being used as a tool to respond to mounting criticism of violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Despite its humanitarian assistance to Yemen, Human Rights Watch has blamed the coalition for the destruction of factories in Yemen, saying that it documented airstrikes on 13 key facilities between the start of the Saudi-led campaign in March 2015 and February 2016 (US News, 2016).

Like other states, Saudi Arabia's role as a humanitarian donor is driven by domestic priorities

that also shape its foreign policy and the mode of its engagement with regional and international forces. The kingdom's donorship serves as a tool to reinforce its self-image as the leader of the Arab and wider Muslim world, which in turn is essential to the regime's ability to maintain its rule at home. The political motives and implications of Saudi aid can be clearly seen in Yemen. Saudi Arabia wants to win the war there – even at huge humanitarian cost – but without compromising its concurrent desire to be seen as a charitable and responsible leader. Saudi assistance is, at once, humanitarian and deeply political. It is no coincidence that the institutionalisation recently witnessed in the Saudi humanitarian sector – most notably with the establishment of the King Salman Center – has gone hand in hand with a shift towards a more interventionist foreign policy.

While there are clearly links between Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and its approach to humanitarian action, they are not linear and they warrant close context-specific analysis. The world needs Saudi Arabia as a humanitarian actor because of the volume of its funding, as well as its reach and influence in neighbouring conflict- and disaster-affected countries that share its cultural norms and traditions – but not in its current form. As a donor, Saudi Arabia has a significant advantage compared to its Western counterparts because it is more familiar with the regional social and cultural context of affected communities within the Arab world. That kind of knowledge is scarce within other donor circles. At the same time, however, Saudi Arabia's development and humanitarian sectors have a long way to go in order to professionalise, institutionalise and, most importantly, develop an identity of their own. Torn between aspirations to join the international arena as a powerful and agile economic and political actor and the need to stay true to its Islamic heritage and traditions, Saudi Arabia has yet to find a space where these forces can coalesce.

1 Introduction

The volume of international humanitarian assistance continues to grow. In 2015, for example, an estimated \$28 billion was provided, compared to \$25.1bn in 2014. Yet despite significant funding increases, there was still a 45% shortfall in funding against needs in 2015 (GHA, 2016). This funding gap has contributed to growing interest in ‘new’ or ‘emerging’ donors. There is growing attention to understanding the volume of funding from these donors, their decision-making mechanisms and modalities of giving, as well as the kind of contributions they are able to make (Dreher et al., 2011; Fuchs and Klann, 2012; Binder et al., 2010; Kragelund, 2008). The share of reported international humanitarian assistance from government donors not part of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) trebled to 12% between 2006 and 2015 (DI, 2016). Some of these donors are now making contributions commensurate with (and, in certain crises, exceeding) the DAC donors that are often considered the anchor of the formal aid architecture.¹ The share of reported international humanitarian assistance from non-DAC government donors has trebled since 2006 to 12% in 2015 (DI, 2016). There has also been a notable increase in the number of non-DAC donors reporting their humanitarian aid to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Service (FTS) (Smith, 2011).

The largest percentage increase in international humanitarian assistance in recent years has come from governments in the Middle East and North Africa. Their contributions reached almost \$2.4bn in 2015 – a 500% increase since 2011, accounting for around 11% of overall donor government funding, compared with just 3% in 2011. Most of this came from four Gulf states: the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar (GHD, 2016). Measuring humanitarian assistance as a percentage of GNI in 2015, the UAE ranked third globally (at 0.25%), Saudi Arabia 12th (at 0.08%) and Qatar 17th (0.04%). Meanwhile,

¹ Several African countries, formerly aid recipients, were among the top ten donors to the Haiti Emergency Response Fund (ERF) following the earthquake in 2010.

Box 1: A definition of terms

Official Development Assistance (ODA) refers to grants, loans or technical assistance provided to developing countries and multilateral organisations in order to contribute to economic development. In cases where the assistance is a loan, a portion of the loan should involve at least a 25% grant (Momani and Ennis, 2012: 606). With regard to humanitarian aid, this paper refers to assistance and activities that include ‘the protection of civilians and those no longer taking part in hostilities, and the provision of food, water and sanitation, shelter, health services and other items of assistance, undertaken for the benefit of affected people and to facilitate the return to normal lives and livelihoods’ and which aim to ‘save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of man-made crises and natural disasters, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for such situations’ (GHD, 2003).

There are several definitions of what constitutes an ‘emerging donor’. The term often refers to Brazil, India and China, as well as the Gulf Arab states (Momani and Ennis, 2012: 605). For its part, the OECD divides non-DAC providers of development cooperation between Arab donors, providers of South–South cooperation and emerging donors. It does not include Arab donors within the ‘emerging donors’ category, which it defines as ‘countries that have relatively new, or recently revived, aid programs. Most are new member states of the European Union (EU) ... Others like Estonia and Slovenia have applied for OECD membership and are seeking to deepen their engagement with the DAC. Some non-EU members, notably Israel, Russia and Turkey, share characteristics of this group’ (OECD, 2010). To some extent, terms such as ‘new’ and ‘emerging’ are misnomers: donor states such as China, Brazil, Russia, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have engaged in international aid for many decades and have long histories of charitable giving. What is perhaps new is the growing scale of their contributions, the emergence of new institutions and structures and the attention they are attracting from within the ‘traditional’ humanitarian system.

institutional developments, such as the UAE's Office for the Coordination of Foreign Aid (OCFA), established in 2008, and the King Salman Center for Relief and Humanitarian Aid in Saudi Arabia, set up in 2015, are intended to enhance transparency and the coordination of funds. Gulf donors are also diversifying their assistance: in 2012, the UAE disbursed \$1.43bn through 43 donor entities, including the private sector and private individuals and humanitarian and charitable projects in 137 countries. The following year, the UAE's foreign assistance stood at \$5.89bn (Evren Tok, 2015).

Despite the growth of Gulf donorship – and despite the fact that many Gulf countries have been important aid actors for decades – the sources, modalities and motivations of humanitarian assistance from the Gulf continue to confuse Western observers, as do the links between their role as donors and other roles, such as mediation and diplomacy. The little knowledge available tends to reiterate misperceptions based on limited understanding of the social, cultural, political and historical determinants underlying Gulf assistance. The Gulf countries are significant donors whose contributions have gained impressive traction in the contemporary international development and humanitarian landscape. With the expansion of needs around the world, particularly in Arab countries such as Libya, Yemen, Iraq and Syria, the role of Gulf donors has become increasingly important, making the need for international cooperation greater than ever before.

This study explores Saudi Arabia's current practice and behaviour as a humanitarian actor, and the implications for international cooperation in the humanitarian field. To what extent are Saudi Arabia's values, systems and interests aligned with or divergent from those of other international donors? Using Saudi Arabia as a case in point, the study examines the degree to which a state's foreign policy shapes its engagement in humanitarian action, particularly in a volatile sociopolitical and security context. The author has been actively involved in researching and studying trends in Arab aid and philanthropic practices over the past ten years, and some of the findings in this report are directly informed by her experience in the sector in North Africa and the Middle East. In addition to in-depth stakeholder interviews and a review of the literature, this study builds on two noteworthy contributions to analysis of the Arab aid landscape: a Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) report by Khalid Al-Yahya and Nathalie Fustier from 2011 on Saudi Arabia as a humanitarian donor (Al-Yahya and Fustier,

2011), and a Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) study by Espen Villanger on disbursement patterns in Arab foreign aid (Villanger, 2007). While the authors of the first report recognise the substantial contributions made by Saudi Arabia to natural disasters and crises around the world, some of which have exceeded those of traditional donors, they also see a number of shortcomings preventing the kingdom from realising its full potential as a humanitarian donor, including the lack of 'a coherent and organized humanitarian aid framework and ... central agency to coordinate and supervise relief operations'. In his work, Villanger points to limited transparency, aid volatility linked to Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil and gas revenue and the lack of active participation in the aid policy debates that have been central to the development of Western aid structures. This study examines these issues within the context of shifts in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards a more interventionist stance, notably in its involvement in the conflict in Yemen, and the transition of its humanitarian engagement from informal, ad hoc hand-outs to more institutionalised forms of giving.

This case study is part of a wider research project on the links between foreign policy and humanitarian action, with companion case studies on China and the United Kingdom. In the specific case of Saudi Arabia, the research analysed:

- Foreign policy drivers. What are the key drivers and priorities of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, especially in light of recent shifts in the sociopolitical and security context in the Gulf? How are foreign policy objectives influencing the ways in which Saudi Arabia provides and engages in humanitarian assistance?
- Trends. What trends are evident in how Saudi Arabia responds to a humanitarian crisis – through bilateral support, direct deployment, multilateral channels, core funding, NGOs/government-organised NGOs (GONGOs), government to government, in-kind, cash and humanitarian diplomacy/engagement? How do these trends vary by type of donor and crisis?
- Implications. What are the implications of Saudi Arabia's humanitarian engagement for the global humanitarian sector?

The first section of the report provides an overview of Saudi Arabia as a humanitarian actor, and the structures and governance arrangements of its

humanitarian sector. The second section analyses the factors behind Saudi humanitarian assistance and examines the tensions between the religious and political drivers of Saudi engagement in crises. The last section of the report explores some of the implications of Saudi Arabia's engagement in humanitarian response for the international humanitarian sector.

1.1 A note on the research

Conducting research on Saudi aid is a challenge. There is a dearth of literature and analysis on the country's humanitarian policies and architecture, and its institutions – and the officials within them – are difficult to access for research and data collection. The fact that the researcher was a woman also

made the task of securing interviews difficult in a conservative country. That said, she was eventually granted a number of key interviews, and these inform the analysis presented here. In addition to extensive desk research of reports and academic and grey literature on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and humanitarian activities, around 20 interviews with key government officials, humanitarians and academics were conducted in Riyadh and London, as well as follow-up skype interviews. Interviews took place in various locations, including ministries and humanitarian organisations. With regard to the review of the literature, a conscious effort was made by the researcher to use sources in both Arabic and English, in order to present a more nuanced perspective on Saudi Arabia's engagement in various contexts in the Gulf and beyond.

2 Saudi Arabia as a humanitarian actor

Saudi Arabia's humanitarian sector is deeply informed by Islamic cultural traditions of giving and philanthropy, typically in the form of assistance passed directly to organisations and recipients on the ground. Like other Gulf donors and philanthropists, Saudis prize the privacy of their giving, in keeping with Islamic teachings that specify the need for secrecy in giving as a means to maintain the dignity of the beneficiaries: the Prophet said: 'Allah loves the God-fearing rich man [who gives much in charity but still] remains obscure and uncelebrated'. As a result, Saudis tend to shun the idea of releasing information about their giving or making their channels and beneficiaries known.² Donations are usually given directly to recipients as a hand-out. This is part of a larger trend in the region, whereby only a limited number of donations are made through the banking system: private bank Coutts tracked just 20 donations of \$1 million or more from the region in 2015. This compares with 355 such donations in the UK (Alkhalisi, 2017).

At the same time, the growing institutionalisation of Saudi giving to humanitarian and development causes, notably with the establishment of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center, which provides international relief to crisis-afflicted communities, marks a move towards more Western modes of giving via the established international humanitarian architecture. This evolution is taking place within a context of domestic and regional instability. Domestically, long-standing grievances among Saudi Arabia's minority Shia population sparked unrest in the largely Shia province of Awamiya in August 2017, with clashes between the security forces and armed protesters that left several people dead and forced residents from their homes. Regionally, Saudi Arabia is heavily involved in the conflict in Yemen, both as a belligerent and as an important contributor

of assistance. The country has also severed ties with Qatar and imposed a blockade on the country in protest at what the Saudis say is Doha's support for terrorism (Fisher, 2016). These developments are significant because the more unstable the domestic and regional context, the more Saudi Arabia will seek to use its assistance to bolster its image as a stable, charitable country.

2.1 Governance and decision-making

There is no independent civil society or humanitarian sector in Saudi Arabia, and all organisations have to report to the government: 'In an autocratic state such as Saudi Arabia, which has virtually no formal, structural representation of the public (only the debating chamber of the Majlis al-Shura), people have no means to influence decision-making' (Montagu, 2015: 3). Any form of association with a common objective is illegal and carries heavy penalties (*ibid.*). While the Saudi Basic Law of Government (*an-nizam al-asasi li-l-hukm*) explicitly encourages giving and charity, the core human rights that are the basis of any organised benevolent, voluntary or civil society, such as freedom of expression and assembly, are strictly circumscribed (Derbal, 2011). All associations and organisations in Saudi Arabia are registered with the state and listed by the National Authority for Associations and Civil Organizations (NAA – *al-Hai'a al-wataniyya li-l-jam'iyyat wa-l-mu'assasat al-abliyya*). The NAA, which is responsible for developing the civil society sector, has power of veto over programme development, permission to receive visitors and approval of board members (*ibid.*).

As in the region more broadly, Saudi philanthropy has largely been ad hoc, informed by religious and charitable impulses rather than any long-term vision. The philanthropic sector relies largely on individual giving and religious channels, such as *zakat* and

2 Prince Alwaleed bin Talal is the first and only Arab to back the Giving Pledge, an initiative led by Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. The Pledge is a public commitment by the world's wealthiest individuals and families to dedicate the majority of their wealth to communities and people in need.

ushur (Muslim and Coptic Christian tithing from personal income) (El Taraboulsi, 2011). Structurally, the humanitarian sector is made up of a web of ministries, primarily the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and foundations; there are no defined checks and balances, decision-making and reporting mechanisms are unclear and mandates overlap. Conversations with Saudi officials during the course of this study did not clarify the governance system for aid institutions, or details related to how officials envision Saudi Arabia's humanitarian role in the region and beyond. Governance structures are opaque and professional expertise and knowledge of humanitarian assistance is reportedly weak. Over-reliance on international staff within humanitarian and development organisations is also hampering the development of sustainable domestic humanitarian structures and expertise.

2.2 Volumes and channels

According to UNDP (2016), in 2014 Saudi overseas development assistance (ODA) amounted to \$14.5bn, equivalent to 1.9% of the country's Gross National Income (GNI). As a percentage of GNI, this puts Saudi Arabia at the top of the list of global aid donors, and far in excess of the 0.7% of GNI target set by the United Nations. In terms of gross ODA, the country ranked fourth in 2014 (and seventh in terms of assistance classed as humanitarian aid), and between 2005 and 2014 it was in tenth place (Al Ahmari, Adhwan and Dakamseh, 2016). Most assistance is provided in the form of grants (78% of Saudi ODA), rather than loans (UNDP, 2016). Assistance is provided bilaterally, through institutions such as the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD) and the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center; multilaterally through regional bodies such as the Islamic Development Bank, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, the African Development Bank and the Arab Bank for Economic Development for Africa (BADEA); and through global organisations including the International Monetary Fund, the OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID), the UN and the World Bank. Other institutions administering humanitarian assistance include royal foundations and public campaigns. The King and other members of the royal family have mobilised large national campaigns for humanitarian purposes, including one in 2010 that raised \$120m for the flood response in Pakistan (UNDP, 2016).

Several features of Saudi giving are highlighted here. First, interviews for this study pointed to an emerging 'hybrid' model for Saudi humanitarian assistance, with two broad funding approaches: one (reported) injected through international humanitarian actors, and the second (invisible) channelled directly to local civil society organisations and actors on the ground in recipient countries. Second, respondents saw humanitarian and development work as interconnected, and did not subscribe to Western definitions that distinguish one from the other. This lack of a formal distinction between humanitarian and development assistance is evident in the work of the Saudi Relief Committee for the Palestinian People, which has funded a number of humanitarian and development projects 'trying to meet the needs of the Palestinian families and children for food, clothes, medicine and shelter' as well as 'the provision of social, education and health care as well as meeting developmental and housing requirements of the Palestinian people' (Ministry of Interior, 2011). No funds are earmarked for development work separately from humanitarian assistance. The committee has also pledged funds to support the Palestinian Authority (PA) in rebuilding roads and schools, in line with respondents' emphasis on infrastructure development as core to their humanitarian and development strategies. This is an overall Gulf trend, whereby over half of reported Gulf Arab lending is directed towards infrastructure. According to the World Bank, aid is mostly channelled to the social and agricultural sectors (Momani and Ennis, 2012: 618).

Third, there is a clear preference in Saudi giving for the Arab region: in 2016, just under 94% of Saudi Arabia's total humanitarian aid spending of \$360m was disbursed regionally (see Annex 1). Yemen received 76% of total humanitarian assistance in 2016 and 70% in 2015, with Iraq accounting for 63% in 2014 and Syria 55% in 2012. In 2013, \$24m of Saudi Arabia's overall humanitarian assistance of \$109m went to Jordan, and \$20m to Lebanon (GHA, 2014). Muslim-majority countries are also prominent recipients of Saudi aid, with Mali, Tajikistan and Djibouti among those receiving regular, large allocations (GHA, 2017). This regional inclination is part of a wider commitment to South-South solidarity and an emphasis, common to other Gulf donors, on a shared history with the underdeveloped economies of the global South. As Prince Talal bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, president of the Arab Gulf Program for Development (Ag-Fund), has put it:

Then – and now – the impetus driving the Arab donors was a sincere desire to assist, to whatever extent possible, the development efforts of their poverty-stricken neighbors. Indeed, it was the Arabs who were not only instrumental in coining the expression ‘South–South solidarity’ but who contribute to practise it to this day. Moreover, it is an effort that has continued unbroken even through the lean oil years of the 1980s (cited in Momani and Ennis, 2012: 613).

This solidarity is also evident in the allocation of 62% of all Gulf aid to Arab countries between 1970 and 2008, with Asian and African countries receiving 21% and 15% respectively. Gulf aid has also supported post-war reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Finally, while Saudi giving tends to favour bilateral channels, the country is also a generous donor to the United Nations and the multilateral system. Indeed, compared to other Arab countries Saudi Arabia was in the lead in terms of giving through the UN system in 2016, and in 2015 funds injected through the UN exceeded those channelled bilaterally. How such decisions are made is unclear, however, and there are no clear laws governing how funds are apportioned through which channel (UN, bilateral, multilateral). It is also worth noting that the increase in multilateral

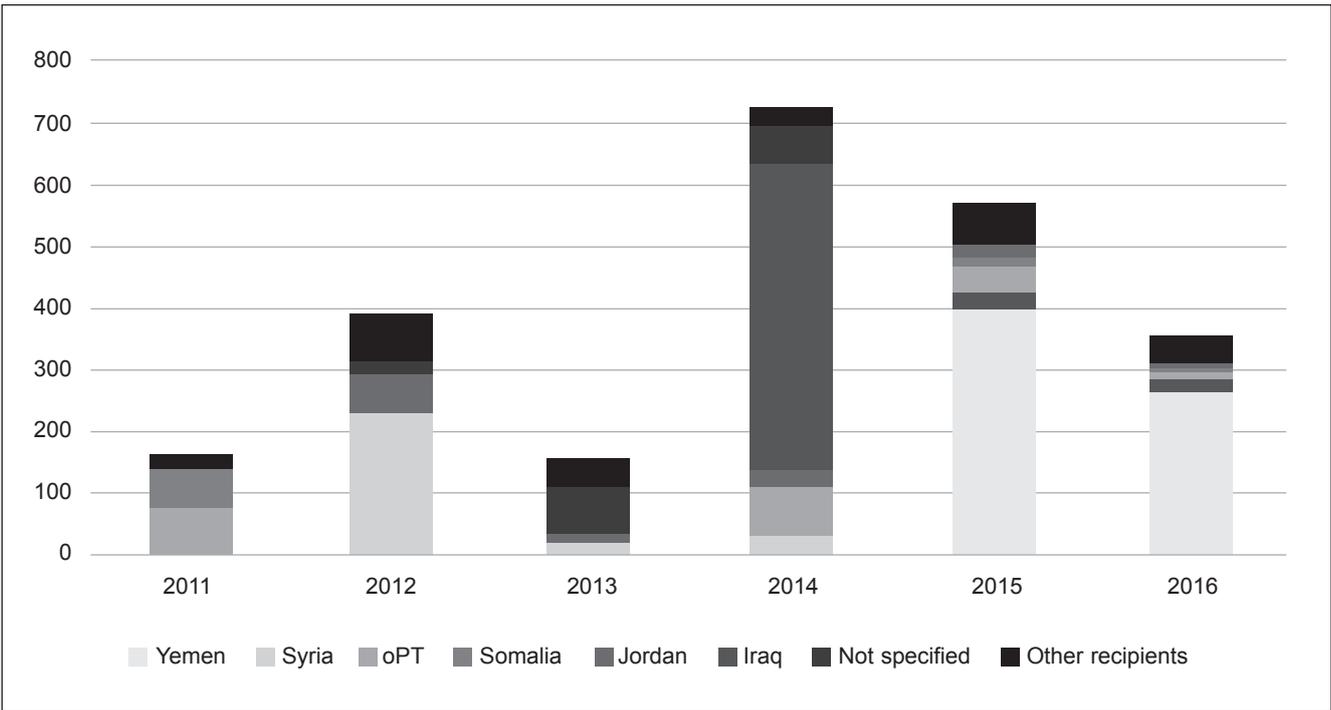
Box 2: The Lives and Livelihoods Fund

The Lives and Livelihood Fund is a \$2.5bn partnership between the Gates Foundation and the Jeddah-based Islamic Development Bank (IDB). It combines IDB lending capital with donor grant money in a multi-donor trust fund. The partnership aims at lifting 400m people out of poverty and destitution. Over five years, the IDB will disburse \$2bn to health, agriculture and infrastructure projects in 30 Muslim countries. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will raise \$500m and contribute \$100m, and Qatar has contributed \$50m (Stall, 2016).

funding followed the start of the war in Yemen, and it is difficult not to interpret this as an attempt by Saudi Arabia to sanitise the country’s image after reports of violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in the conflict there.

One very important caveat needs to be inserted into this discussion of Saudi humanitarian assistance: while official figures are available on Saudi donorship through FTS, the \$364m in humanitarian assistance reported to FTS in 2016 does not provide the full picture of Saudi giving; for instance, funds allocated through the royal family or channelled directly to civil society organisations in affected countries are not

Figure 1: Largest recipients of reported humanitarian assistance from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (US\$m)



necessarily within the public domain, and while the institutionalisation of aid does appear to be increasing, funds are still administered with no disclosure to the public (Villanger, 2007: 1). As noted, this is partly a function of Islamic teachings and the strong emphasis on discretion in charitable giving, a point stressed by respondents in interviews for this study. At the same time, however, without transparency and disclosure it is difficult to fully understand the scope and volume of Saudi Arabia's contributions, or whether its aid decisions are in line with the humanitarian imperative to help affected communities irrespective of their political affiliation and the principle of impartiality. Certainly, sources from Yemen emphasised the politicisation of the humanitarian response and the use of assistance as a bargaining chip in the conflict there. In an interview, one humanitarian aid worker in Yemen described how the Saudi coalition delays the flow of assistance from Hodeida port, while the Houthis block aid flows within Yemen.

2.3 Structures

2.3.1 The King Salman Center for Relief and Humanitarian Aid

The King Salman Center for Relief and Humanitarian Aid was established in May 2015, under the sponsorship of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz. It was primarily set up to coordinate Saudi Arabia's humanitarian response to the crisis in Yemen, though its broader remit is to 'coordinat[e] and reorganize[e] Saudi humanitarian assistance under one roof' (Arab News, May 2016). The Center has funds of SR2 billion (\$500m) and a mandate directly from the King (Al Harthi, 2016). According to its director, Dr. Abdullah Al-Rabeeah:

The Center is expected to be a semi-government organisation, but we are not totally dependent on the Saudi government. The Center is an independent and not-for-profit aid organization. We report directly to King Salman. As far as financial support to the Center is concerned, it comes from government donations as well as from donations of private and public companies and entities. The King Salman Center has a mandate to work in a transparent manner and in close coordination with major international aid agencies. It complies with regulatory provisions of international standards. We believe that the

Center will improve the way the Kingdom responds to humanitarian crises in the region and around the globe (Arab News, May 2016).

Although only recently established, the Center reports having carried out 66 aid and relief programmes benefiting more than 36m people, mainly in Yemen. Programmatically, the focus has been on food security and training young Saudis to develop their skills to work in charities in compliance with global standards: 'We are working to build capacity that will eventually make this center a model resource and research center for the region and also for the world' (Arab News, May 2016). The Center has also developed wide-ranging collaborations with 62 global agencies, including the UN, NGOs and regional partners. In December 2016, it struck its first cooperation agreement with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and contributed \$1m to the provision of food assistance to Palestinian refugees in Syria (UNRWA, 2016). Although Saudi Arabia has been a member of UNRWA's Advisory Commission since 2005, the cooperation agreement marks a commitment, not between a government and an aid organisation, but instead between two humanitarian organisations. Saudi Arabia is currently the second-largest donor to UNRWA.

The Center has also drawn on international expertise from a number of regional, bilateral and multilateral humanitarian organisations to feed into its strategies and help develop a governance structure. Representatives from UN agencies and agencies from the Gulf, the UK and the US all have offices at the Center's premises in Riyadh. However, what progress has been made, either in terms of a strategic vision or in developing governance mechanisms, remains unclear, and the Center has been criticised for a lack of technical expertise in and knowledge of humanitarian assistance among its staff.³ Likewise, while the Center has apparently been tasked with overseeing all funds allocated from government and private sources for humanitarian action, with the exception of funding for the Syria crisis (which is overseen and monitored by the Ministry of Interior), it is unclear how the Center is going to execute its coordination function, not least because institutions with a similar mandate already exist, and given the Center's limited in-house expertise in monitoring and managing aid funds.

3 Author interview (Skype), August 2016.

2.3.2 The Saudi Relief Committees and Campaigns department

The Saudi Relief Committees and Campaigns department within the Ministry of Interior is chaired by Dr. Saed Al-Orabi Al-Harhi, who is also Advisor to the Second Deputy Premier and Minister of Interior, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. Private funds from the Saudi public are leveraged publicly for humanitarian causes. The King authorises a public campaign and funds from private sources are raised under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior. According to Al-Yahya and Fustier (2011), this is how it works:

A public campaign usually starts with a TV telethon to which the King and several senior princes make a personal donation. Once the fundraising phase is completed, the committee that manages the campaign also engages in aid implementation. Resources generated by public campaigns are spent to buy relief goods (food, medical equipment, temporary shelters, tents etc.) or financial assistance for affected families. They can, however, also take the form of longer-term assistance (e.g. reconstruction of hospitals, mosques or water plants) or scholarships for students.

These funds can be substantial: in 2010, the total funds generated by the Saudi public exceeded \$388m (*ibid.*).

2.3.3 The Saudi Fund for Development (SFD)

The Saudi Fund for Development (SFD) is Saudi Arabia's primary development assistance institution. Founded in 1974 by Royal Decree as an independent legal entity, it commenced operations in 1975. As defined by its charter, the SFD's main objective is to assist developing countries by providing soft loans for development projects. Through the Saudi Export Program (SEP), it also provides credit and insurance facilities to promote Saudi non-crude oil exports (Villanger, 2007: 20). The Fund uses untied bilateral loans to finance projects in developing countries in sectors such as transport and telecommunications (32%), electricity and power (21%) and agriculture (19%) (Momani and Ennis, 2012: 619; ANRDI, 2003). According to UNDP (2016), the SFD's current capitalisation is around SAR31bn (\$8.27bn). It channelled an estimated 30% of Saudi Arabia's overall aid in the form of multilateral cooperation, grants and concessional loans over the period 2005–2014. Since its inception, SFD has issued loans to 83 countries. It also manages loans and grants financed by the

Ministry of Finance. SFD loans are provided on a highly concessional basis: an average interest rate of 1–2%, a repayment period of up to 50 years and a grace period of up to ten years. SFD loans also have one of the highest grant elements globally, estimated at between 35% and 59%.

2.3.4 The Saudi Red Crescent Authority

Founded in 1963, the Saudi Red Crescent Authority provides emergency medical services in five administrative regions in Saudi Arabia. It also operates on the borders between Saudi Arabia and its neighbours, in close cooperation with the Saudi military. The Red Crescent has a particular role to play during the Hajj, providing first aid and using its vehicles to take emergency cases to nearby medical facilities.

2.3.5 Royal foundations

Royal foundations have a long history in Saudi Arabia. They either commemorate or reflect the vision of particular members of the royal family. Most, including the King Khalid Foundation and the Majid Society, operate inside Saudi Arabia, with a focus on youth empowerment and capacity-building and infrastructure development. Interviews with three royal foundations in Jeddah and Riyadh revealed a deep understanding of the needs of local communities and sophisticated governance of operations.

Alwaleed Philanthropies is an umbrella organisation bringing together the Alwaleed Bin Talal Foundation's three philanthropic institutions located in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. Alwaleed Philanthropies has four focus areas: the promotion of better understanding and greater harmony between cultures and religious faiths; the development of communities; the empowerment of women and young people; and the provision of relief to victims of natural disasters. Alwaleed Philanthropies provided support to agencies including Mercy Corps and Habitat for Humanity in the wake of the Nepal earthquake in 2015, and in May 2016 it committed £20m to the Humanitarian Leadership Academy (HLA), helping to launch ten rapid response centres around the world in partnership with Save the Children. The centres are intended to provide frontline humanitarian staff with the latest insights and technologies in humanitarian response. The founder, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, is a signatory to the Giving Pledge, a global campaign led by Bill Gates and Warren Buffet which asks the very rich to donate half of their wealth to philanthropic causes.

3 Drivers of Saudi humanitarian assistance: Islamic charity or realpolitik?

Saudi Arabia's humanitarian assistance is driven by three interrelated impulses: the precepts of Islamic charity and the Arab culture of giving, made more persuasive by the country's status as the gatekeeper of Islam; a strong concern for domestic and regional stability; and an interest in forging links with international actors. It is often the case that a combination of both values and interests drives aid decision-making. The influence of Islamic traditions and injunctions on the country's humanitarian assistance is visible in the language of humanitarian appeals, as well as in the articulation of mission and vision statements for humanitarian and developmental institutions. At the same time, however, Saudi Arabia's patterns of giving and its predominant focus on regional countries in crisis – in recent years Iraq, Syria and now Yemen, where the country is both belligerent and aid provider – betray the central role of realpolitik in decisions regarding the allocation of aid funds.

3.1 Islamic traditions of giving

As the 'cradle of Islam' (Al Saud, 2013), the Islamic culture of giving is a powerful factor in Saudi humanitarianism and a powerful means for the Kingdom to stay true to its role as the custodian of the two holy mosques.⁴ According to a recent report by the Ministry of the Interior, Saudi Arabia's humanitarian work emanates from both its culture and its values:

the Muslim individual does not lurk on the sidelines as an irrelevant factor. On the contrary, he is found at the heart of events actively participating in all humanitarian issues, not shying away from the responsibility ordained by Allah who designated him as a vicegerent on earth commensurate with his status and role in life. Whoever is charged

with a portion of authority should discharge it according to the varying scope of responsibility: ruler or ruled, father or son or whatever. Prophet Mohammad said: 'every one of you is a guardian and is responsible of his charges' (Ministry of Interior, 2011).

According to Rieger (2017), observers of former Saudi monarch King Abdullah described his piety and the impact of his religious convictions on his policy decisions. In one example of this link, well-informed sources confirm that King Abdullah initiated mediation between Fatah and Hamas in 2007 to aid his Muslim brothers in Palestine (*ibid.*: 62). Humanitarian engagement has also been used – albeit with limited success – to bolster Saudi Arabia's image as a benevolent nation within the international arena: a 'Kingdom of humanity', as the Ministry of Interior report cited above puts it (Ministry of Interior, 2011).

3.2 Domestic and regional stability

Realpolitik concerns for domestic and regional stability constitute the second main driver of Saudi donorship. Domestically, the country must manage the demands of a very large population of young people (most Saudis are under 30 in a country with a 29% youth unemployment rate (Glum, 2015)) and a disadvantaged Shiite minority that constitutes 15% of the population (Foreign Policy, 2016). There is also deep domestic insecurity regarding the future of an oil-based state. While the royal family has a monopoly over political power within the kingdom, the regime is not completely free in its decision-making. There are traditional mechanisms whereby public needs and opinions are communicated to Saudi royalty, such as the *majalis* ('seating area' or meeting-place),

where Saudis discuss public affairs. According to Rieger (2017: 41), 'The Saudi ruling elite is aware that in order to prevent people from challenging their legitimacy, it needs to respect, balance, orchestrate and realize the heterogeneous ideational and materialistic interests of its population'. This also means that social reform and societal liberalisation projects must balance the interests of the liberal and conservative parts of society, and are not simply decided by the royal family (Rieger, 2017).

Recent domestic reforms include Vision 2030, announced in April 2016. This is an ambitious economic plan intended to confirm the kingdom's leadership status in the region and to address the country's institutional and governance weaknesses. Launched by Mohammad Bin Salman, the Crown Prince and First Deputy Prime Minister, it sets out to position Saudi Arabia at 'the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds, the investment powerhouse and the hub connecting three continents'.⁴ Part of the plan envisages strengthening and formalising, with government support, 'social and compassionate work so that our efforts have the maximum results and impact'. The aim is to grow the non-profit sector from less than 1% of GDP to 5%, and to rally a million volunteers a year. According to the Vision:

Today, we have fewer than 1,000 non-profit foundations and associations. In order to increase the resilience and impact of this sector, we will continue to develop regulations necessary to empower non-profit organizations. We will review our regulations to encourage endowments to sustainably fund the sector and to encourage corporations and high net worth families to establish non-profit organizations.

At the time of writing these regulations were yet to be released, and their potential impact on Saudi Arabia's role as a humanitarian actor has yet to be determined. More broadly, the plan faces a number of major challenges, including the persistent slump in oil prices, which has drastically reduced the government revenues needed to implement the proposed changes; the costly conflict in Yemen; and the kingdom's basic resistance to change, epitomised by the deep conservatism of the clerical leadership (Henderson, 2017). Given these constraints, it is

⁴ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030, <http://vision2030.gov.sa/en>.

unclear whether Vision 2030 will result in genuinely transformative change.

Regionally, Saudi Arabia sees the primary cause of unrest as the expansion of Shia influence from Iran, both within Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Arab region (a second, though possibly lesser, cause of instability is the domino effect of the Arab uprisings of 2011). Tensions between the two countries are long-standing: in the early 1940s the government in Tehran prohibited its citizens from making the annual *Hajj* pilgrimage for several years after an Iranian pilgrim was executed on grounds of desecrating the Ka'aba, resulting in a break in relations, and a massacre of Iranian pilgrims during the 1987 *Hajj* led to another rupture in 1988 which lasted for three years (Ekhtiari Amiri et al., 2011).

This rivalry has recently increased because of changes in the balance of power in the Middle East following the US 'war on terror' and the uprisings in the Arab world in 2011. The former removed Iraq as a power in the region, and the latter had a major destabilising effect on Egypt and Syria. With the elimination of these major regional powers, the intensity of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has increased. Fears regarding Iran's increasing regional presence have been exacerbated by the nuclear deal signed between Iran and a group of six Western countries in July 2015, which has bolstered Tehran's ties with international and Western powers (CFR, 2016). In January 2016, Saudi Arabia executed a prominent Shiite leader, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, along with 46 others, angering Iran and resulting in the termination of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Riyadh has also responded robustly to the recent unrest in the largely Shia province of Awamiya in the east of the country (CFR, 2016). In an effort to maintain regional stability and curtail Iranian influence, Saudi Arabia has employed a number of strategies, including supporting regional actors whose objectives are aligned with its own and with those of its Western allies (Kamrava, 2012). Saudi military involvement in conflicts overseas has increased, most notably regarding the military campaign in Yemen to counter Houthi rebels – which Saudi Arabia alleges are backed by Iran.

3.3 Forging ties with regional and international actors

Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran has provided a strong incentive for the kingdom to forge and consolidate

alliances with international and regional actors in order to support its leadership within the Arab and Muslim world, and as such the institutionalisation of Saudi Arabia's humanitarian activities is designed to project the image of a modern, charitable country. According to the Ministry of Interior, priority is given to extending Saudi assistance to 'its Arab and Muslim brothers during calamities and disasters', in addition to helping others in need of urgent assistance around the world. The Ministry describes collaboration with international organisations in the following terms:

The Kingdom cooperates with international organizations operating in the relief and humanitarian sphere because it is conscious of its responsibility to deepen understanding and solidarity among various ideologies, languages and colors. It is also keen to achieve rapprochement among peoples of the world, unifying their feelings and objectives within a consistent humanitarian system in line with the teachings of magnanimous Islam.

The point that needs to be made here is that, despite Saudi Arabia's repressive policies regularly making headlines, its adherence to Islamic teachings is not necessarily in contradiction with international standards and expectations: the country can follow Islamic strictures while at the same time forging strong international ties and making a contribution to communities worldwide.

3.4 Islamic charity and realpolitik: the war in Yemen

In March 2015, the cautious calculus of regional stability in the Gulf was profoundly shaken with the launch of a Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen designed to restore President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi to power following a coup by the Zaydi Houthis, which Saudi Arabia alleges have received Iranian support.⁵ Since the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in

1990, no military intervention had been conducted by one Arab country in the Gulf against another, with the exception of the Saudi-led Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) effort that intervened on a much smaller scale to support the Khalifa regime in Bahrain in 2011 (Young, 2013). The Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, Operation Decisive Storm, which has included airstrikes and an economic blockade, has triggered a large-scale humanitarian crisis. More than 14m people are suffering from food insecurity and 2.8m are internally displaced.⁶ To make matters worse, the country faced a serious cholera outbreak in 2017 concentrated largely in the northern and western governorates that have been the focus of Saudi-led airstrikes and the blockade. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) declared Yemen a Level 3 emergency in July 2015, and the following year agencies appealed for \$1.8bn in humanitarian funding.⁷

According to one analyst (Al Rasheed, 2013), Saudi Arabia's military engagement in Yemen constitutes a 'pre-emptive strike to inaugurate an aggressive Saudi regional foreign policy'. The intervention has been described both as a proxy war and as a manifestation of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, albeit evidence of substantial Iranian involvement is 'severely lacking' (Poole, 2016). There are statements by Iranian officials to the effect that they would want to 'support' the Yemeni population in the same way as Iran has supported Syrians (Middle East Eye, 2016). However, there is no solid evidence that the Houthis have received substantive support from Iran. A 2015 report by the United Nations Iran Sanctions Committee states that Iran did provide small amounts of weapons to the Houthis in 2009, and whatever support they are receiving in the current crisis is likely to be small-scale, with little effect on the power balance on the ground (Juneau, 2016). This more interventionist foreign policy stance is also closely connected to domestic changes within the royal court following the accession to power of King Salman (Carey and Almashabi, 2016). Under Salman, Saudi Arabia has cut off military aid to Lebanon because of what it perceives as the expansion of the Iran-backed Hezbollah movement there, and continues to call for the removal of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (*ibid.*).

5 Saudi Arabia has a history of interfering in Yemeni politics dating back to the 1930s. It provided tribal chiefs and activists with subsidies and cooperated militarily with the Salih regime, including participating in attacks on Huthis in Saada in 2009. In 2011, protesters calling for the overthrow of Salih also denounced Saudi interference, chanting '*al-Yaman mush il-Bahrain*' ('Yemen is not Bahrain'), a reference to Saudi involvement in the PSF (Al Rasheed, 2013).

6 For more information on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, see El Taraboulsi, 2015; and Larsson, 2015.

7 See OCHA, 'Crisis Overview', <http://www.unocha.org/yemen/crisis-overview>.

The contradictions and tensions between Saudi Arabia's role as a humanitarian donor and its domestic and foreign policy concerns are perhaps most stark in relation to the country's involvement in Yemen. Alongside other members of the coalition fighting the Houthis, Saudi Arabia has also been a key provider of humanitarian assistance, both directly and via multilateral organisations (it was the fourth-largest contributor to the UN humanitarian appeal in 2016, after the US, the UK and the World Food Programme (WFP)). As a belligerent, however, the country has been accused by human rights groups of violations of International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law (IHL). The alleged violations amount to war crimes, including the use of cluster munitions banned by international treaties, coalition airstrikes causing indiscriminate civilian casualties, especially in the southern cities of Taizz, Lahj, al-Dale'a and Aden, and attacks on humanitarian workers (HRW, 2016). In 2015, three International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) staff and two Yemen Red Crescent Society (YRCS) staff were killed (*ibid.*). Allegations of war crimes raise obvious questions around Saudi Arabia's commitment to humanitarian principles, and the degree to which its humanitarian action is driven by foreign policy and calculations of power, as opposed to the humanitarian imperative. Given that the King Salman Center pledged \$274m for emergency assistance to Yemen to the United Nations in April 2015, Saudi Arabia's conduct during the conflict also raises uncomfortable questions for the international humanitarian system (Relief Web, 2015). Saudi Arabia's participation as a belligerent in the

conflict in Yemen also casts doubt on its impartiality, and some respondents from within the humanitarian system questioned whether Saudi assistance was being withheld from Houthi areas. The King Salman Center maintains that humanitarian assistance is distributed in different regions of Yemen, irrespective of whether they are Houthi-controlled or under the control of the government. According to the Center, it operates in Houthi-controlled Saada, Hajjia, Taiz, Hodeida, Aden and Sanaa, as well as other parts of Yemen.

More broadly, while there have been efforts to support collaboration between Gulf donors and international humanitarian organisations providing assistance to Yemen, coordination is still problematic, and negative perceptions of each party towards the other tend to dominate these exchanges. In interviews with multilateral organisations and Saudi donors, respondents pointed to a failure on the part of Saudi donors in communicating objectives, as well as in the ability of international organisations to identify the best means to send and distribute assistance. Mutual distrust has also played a part in this, alongside the lack of a joint vision for the reconstruction of Yemen. On the Saudi side, respondents emphasised that they would like to be treated by the UN system as partners and not as a cash cow, and accused the UN of inefficiency in distributing assistance in Yemen. On the other side, one UN official described how Saudi Arabia had been demanding what were seen as excessive amounts of information on how Saudi funds were being spent in the humanitarian response in Yemen, making it difficult to consider Saudi Arabia as a humanitarian partner.

4 Conclusion

That Saudi Arabia's humanitarian aid has been influenced and shaped by foreign policy interests and shifts in the geopolitics of its region is not a phenomenon unique to the kingdom. On the contrary, this is the case for many other countries around the world. A state's concern for promoting its national interests is a common driver for engagement in humanitarian action, and how a state views itself in the evolving global or regional order informs its aid allocations and decisions (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2016). Nor is this a new trend: during the 1990s, the US government tried to use aid as a lever to effect political change in countries such as Sudan and North Korea (Stoddard, 2002). The key point here, however, is how the shaping of humanitarian aid takes place, whether transactions are transparent, and the degree to which assistance can be monitored and predicted by the international community. In the case of Saudi Arabia, humanitarian donorship remains highly opaque to the international community. This is a problem many other Arab donors have, though it is more critical in the case of Saudi Arabia because of the volume of its giving and its leadership role in the region.

Saudi Arabia's role as a humanitarian (and development) donor is driven by domestic priorities that also shape its foreign policy and the mode of its engagement with regional and international forces. Donorship serves as a tool to consolidate the country's self-image as a regional leader, and bolster the regime's authority in a context of regional and domestic instability. It is significant that recent moves to institutionalise Saudi assistance have gone hand in hand with a shift towards a more interventionist foreign policy in Yemen, and in its dealings with other regional states, marked most recently by the Qatar blockade engineered by Saudi Arabia and its allies. Saudi Arabia's donorship performs a political role as much as a humanitarian one, acting as a tool for maintaining a delicate balance between domestic, regional and global priorities.

There is also a risk that the process of institutionalisation currently under way will not provide a strong foundation for the humanitarian sector in Saudi Arabia. More emphasis needs to be

placed on institution-building, identifying talent and engaging with other Arab and international donors on the current state and future development of Arab humanitarianism, its comparative advantages and the challenges it faces. A difficult but much-needed discussion on accountability under IHL is also in order. Documented violations of IHL in the Yemen war render Saudi humanitarianism questionable in the eyes of the international community.

The report makes the following recommendations to the humanitarian community, the international community and the government of Saudi Arabia. These recommendations should be picked up collectively, in partnership with all relevant stakeholders. It is the author's view that sustained and concerted efforts by all three groups of actors are required to move Saudi humanitarian giving forward and ensure that its impact is maximised in meeting the needs of affected communities and developing an infrastructure for an Arab humanitarian sector.

The international community needs to play a more assertive role in ensuring accountability for violations of International Humanitarian Law

All states, whether or not a party to conflict, have a responsibility under the Geneva Conventions of 1949 to exert their influence, to the degree possible, to stop violations of IHL. This can be done through unilateral or multilateral measures, including the imposition of sanctions against a state.

Saudi Arabia's humanitarian action in Yemen should not deter the international community from holding it and the Houthis accountable for their actions under IHL. An analysis of Saudi Arabia's humanitarian sector and the tensions between the country's national priorities and its international aspirations reveals the political nature of its humanitarian response and of the recent institutionalisation of humanitarian assistance. Humanitarians and policy-makers should be aware of this politicisation, but should not condone it if it compromises the safety of affected communities. Saudi Arabia's military operations in Yemen should be subject to scrutiny and an independent investigation into violations of human rights should be conducted.

Saudi Arabia cannot be allowed to use humanitarian action as proof of its respect for humanitarian law. The United Nations and the international community more broadly should also take a more active role in ensuring that such an investigation takes place.

The international community and humanitarian actors should begin planning for post-conflict reconstruction now

Given Saudi Arabia's role as a belligerent in the Yemeni conflict and its history of political influence in the country, post-conflict reconstruction cannot be entrusted to Saudi Arabia and its Gulf neighbours alone. The United Nations and the international community must ensure that this process is managed in such a way that it meets the needs of affected people, rather than the political needs of Saudi Arabia.

Arab donors should be more transparent

To meet the needs of affected people, globally but particularly in the Arab world, Arab donors need to continue to expand their giving and make it more transparent to the international community. Contributions in the Middle East increased in 2016, whereas giving from governments in the US, Asia and Europe stayed the same. According to the 2016 BNP Paribas Individual Philanthropy Index, there was a rise in 'the sums given by Arab donors, how much they talk about giving and how effectively they spend their charitable dollars'.⁸ This expansion in giving is yet to be matched by an increase in transparency, including publishing annual reports, financial statements and information about operations. Grant-making processes are still the purview of a small handful of foundations and philanthropic organisations under the umbrella of corporate philanthropy in the Arab world (Abou Schneif, 2017). Better coordination, tighter governance structures and more transparency will help ensure that funding meets the needs of crisis-affected communities irrespective of their political leaning or affiliation.

While links between Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and its humanitarian action are complex, as is the case with other state donors around the world, it is critical that Saudi Arabia's humanitarian institutions emphasise professionalism, transparency and adherence to humanitarian principles. With the launch of Vision 2030, the country has a golden opportunity to lead the way towards greater transparency both

within and beyond the Gulf. Sustained partnerships between humanitarian donors in the North and South are possible if there is a sufficient flow of information on the capacities and comparative advantages of the parties involved. Transparency is key to sustaining those partnerships.

Saudi Arabia should articulate a vision for its humanitarian giving and seek constructive criticism of current practices

At the level of institution-building, Saudi Arabia needs to clearly articulate a philosophy for international humanitarian giving, and ensure that this is reflected within its decision-making and governance structures. Saudi Arabia has an opportunity to develop a model of humanitarian giving for the Muslim and Arab world, but the current ad hoc merging of traditional modes of giving with more institutionalised Western methods remains incomplete and incoherent. What is Saudi Arabia's comparative advantage as a donor beyond giving funds? How does its humanitarian assistance fit with its development aid? What will the Saudi humanitarian sector look like in five years' time? Setting strategies and having a conversation, led by a local vision, with international and regional actors would be a constructive way forward.

Develop ways to integrate Islamic finance within humanitarian donorship

Important sources of funding, including Islamic instruments and faith-based donations, can be better programmed in concert with others. However, while there is interest in Muslim donors, there is limited understanding of Islamic finance in the West. Provided that transparency and data reporting mechanisms are secure, Islamic finance can be a means to help bridge the gap between Western and Muslim funding of humanitarian responses. This has the potential to create a common understanding as well as better coordination between Saudi/Gulf donorship and Western donorship. Innovative examples of this merger of Western and Islamic models of donorship include the Dubai Awqaf and Endowments District, described as the Arab region's first social real estate project. Rental income from the district will be used to fund charitable causes. The Mohammed bin Rashid Global Center for Endowment Consultancy (MBRGCEC), launched in March 2016, offers free advice to donors on ways to increase the impact of awqaf (Islamic endowments) and giving in the Arab world. According to Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, vice-president and prime minister of the UAE: 'We've

8 See <https://group.bnpparibas/en/press-release/2016-bnp-paribas-individual-philanthropy-index>.

opened the doors to become the most supportive nation for endowment for the service of humanity'. This marks a shift from hand-outs and less structured giving towards more strategic, institutionalised and strategic modes of giving: 'Many businessmen provide charity in secret. We want them to announce their endowments and lead by example' (Stall, 2016). Finally, the SDG Philanthropy Platform in partnership with the World Congress of Muslim Philanthropists held a session at the World Humanitarian Summit that addressed the role of Islamic philanthropy in humanitarian action.

Arab civil society actors in collaboration with international actors should invest in a platform for an in-depth and sustained debate on Arab aid policy

Existing platforms such as the Arab Foundations Forum (AFF) and the Global Donors Forum should be expanded and used more strategically to convene key players within the Arab world and from the international humanitarian sector. They can serve

as a platform for a community of practice to debate policy, capacity and comparative advantages within the humanitarian sector. More support from Arab civil society leaders and other international development and humanitarian actors is needed to anchor those platforms as a space for discussion of aid policy in the Arab world.

Address the problem of data poverty in Arab philanthropy and aid

Lack of data is an obstacle to collaboration on humanitarian assistance. Little is known about how, when and who makes decisions in humanitarian organisations within the Arab region. Sharing data on how priorities are set, as well as lessons learned based on opportunities and challenges within the Arab humanitarian donor sector, can help create institutional memory around humanitarian aid in the region. Currently, documenting funding flows is very difficult due to the lack of available data and obstacles to accessing the ministries and institutions that oversee aid.

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Annex

UNOCHA-FTS registered humanitarian contributions to the Arab region in 2016 (US\$)*

Regional donors	Total	Total to region	% of total
Algeria	660,000	660,000	100
Saudi Arabia (includes the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center)	358,892,790	335,554,157	93.5
Kuwait	200,827,713	138,578,149	69
Qatar	43,514,549	36,657,570	84.2
United Arab Emirates	620,763,837	618,306,134	99.6
Notable non-regional donors			
Canada	600,643,877	244,371,805	40.7
China	20,817,478	9,500,000	45.6
Denmark	293,842,627	77,187,178	26.3
European Commission	3,440,471,292	996,882,998	29
Germany	2,869,275,261	1,548,048,420	54
Japan	1,030,603,736	335,831,305	32.6
Norway	912,992,129	213,213,815	23.4
Russian Federation	15,850,000	8,500,000	53.6
Sweden	594,909,438	197,164,983	33.1
Turkey	3,850,000	1,600,000	41.6
United Kingdom	1,737,726,335	877,299,886	50.5
United States	6,414,309,529	2,699,426,909	42.1

* Comprising the 22 members of the Arab League including Syria. Contributions include those to recipient governments, national Red Crescent societies, INGOs, UN agencies and 'Various Recipients: details not provided' in the region.

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