

Unsettling Humanitarianism: Islamic Philanthropy, Power and Protection in Contexts of Displacement

Chair: Sandra Pertek

This panel brings together interdisciplinary perspectives to interrogate how Islamic philanthropy, Gulf State aid practices, and Muslim-led humanitarian actors are reshaping global aid architectures. Amid intensifying crises, shifting geopolitical alignments, and renewed scholarly interest in vernacular and faith-sensitive humanitarianisms, the panel examines how Islamic norms, values, and institutions both complement and challenge dominant humanitarian paradigms.

Together, the four papers illuminate the multiple scales at which Islamic humanitarian action operates—from state-level foreign aid strategies to grassroots interventions, from doctrinal ethics to everyday organisational practices. They investigate how Islamic giving traditions, gendered vulnerabilities, and political pressures intersect with contemporary debates on neutrality, professionalisation, environmental destabilisation, and the blurring of humanitarian and political boundaries.

Altea Pericoli's contribution examines how Gulf States negotiate the global humanitarian order through Islamic normative frameworks and foreign-policy interests, offering new empirical insights from the Syrian response. Natalia Paszkiewicz and Sandra Pertek analyse how Islamic philanthropy, approached as a relational ethics of care and justice, can reconfigure humanitarian professionalism—especially concerning gendered power dynamics. Jonathan Benthall's paper situates contemporary debates within a longer historical trajectory, interrogating claims of Islamic exceptionalism and warning against the risks of eroding the humanitarian principle of ring-fencing charity from political and military entanglements. Nabil Muhammed and Sandra Pertek explore the opportunities and gaps in British Muslim charities' responses to women in displacement, outlining a rights-based, faith-sensitive model for protection and inclusion.

Collectively, the panel highlights the plural, contested, and evolving nature of Muslim-led humanitarianism, and invites reflection on how faith-informed practices can enrich and transform the global humanitarian landscape.

1st panel presentation

Islamic aid and Gulf states in contemporary crises: Setting the framework

Altea Pericoli

This presentation draws on the central argument of the book “Islamic aid and Gulf states in contemporary crises” which is based on the existence of non-universal but coexisting values that inspire humanitarianism, and the confrontation between values and practices in humanitarian aid implementation. The Gulf States, like any other donor states, are guided by the structural norms of the aid system and the politicisation of aid itself. However, originating

from a different political and cultural background, including different Islamic understandings, they bring with them distinct practices and approaches within the system that can no longer be ignored.

Altea Pericoli brings together an analysis of Islamic norms and foreign aid interventions by the Gulf States through the study of various levels of aid implementation and policies, and examines their behaviour in a specific case study: the Syrian humanitarian response from 2015 to 2023. The analysis explores the top-down decision-making process of aid allocation by Qatar, the UAE and non-state regional actors, as well as the humanitarian negotiations and aid distribution conducted by Gulf charities and local organisations in Syria after 2015.

The presentation provides a conceptual framework for the analysis of Gulf States' foreign aid describes the Islamic values of humanitarianism and the Islamic social welfare instruments used for humanitarian financing, including *zakat*, *sadaqa* and *waqf*. It introduces new empirical evidence on the aid structures and project implementation of Qatar and the UAE in Syria. It also explores an innovative conceptual framework on Gulf States' foreign aid analysis, which is applicable beyond the case studies. Finally, it analyses the aid interventions of Qatar and the UAE in Syria and for the Syrian refugee issue in the period 2015-2023.

Altea Pericoli is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow (2025–2028) jointly affiliated with the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University and the Department of Economics at Ca' Foscari University. From 2024 to 2025, she held a postdoctoral position in geopolitics and regional cooperation at the Centre for Advanced Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University. Her research focuses on the history of foreign aid provided by the Gulf States and on the values and norms of Islamic Humanitarianism. In 2023, she was awarded the Early Career Development Scholarship by the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies to develop her PhD dissertation into a monograph.

2nd panel presentation

Multipolar humanitarianism, gendered vulnerability and professionalism: How can Islamic philanthropy transform the aid sector

Natalia Paszkiewicz, Sandra Pertek

The presentation draws on the social constructivist analysis of preliminary findings from 'Making Aid Work for Displaced Women' project, namely desk-based review and data collection in Qatar and the UK. Applying relational humanitarianism and global care ethics, we investigate in what ways Islamic philanthropy, conceptualised as a distinct set of values, beyond a financing modality, has a potential to transform aid sector; or if it risks being co-opted through replications of its structures, including those that disempower women, and are imposed in the name of professionalisation and secular status quo.

Islamic philanthropy is a set of practices that include obligatory alms giving (zakat), charitable acts (sadaqa) and endowments (waqf) rooted in a rights-based ethics of wealth redistribution and a quest to build a more just society. In the context of funding cuts and growing crises, major actors in the aid sector have turned to Islamic financing. This shift could reform the humanitarian system, traditionally reluctant to engage with faith-based values or reproduce the very exclusions it seeks to overcome.

Key themes that emerge indicate that stakeholders navigate complex power relations whereby what is deemed ‘professional’ is derived from the mainstream system with its ingrained patterns of humanitarian masculinities and women’s victimisation. Different ways of doing good may be sidelined as ‘unprofessional’, and Islamic finance’s social-justice orientation, considered by some as integral to Muslim giving, risks being dismissed as ‘too radical’. There is a danger of instrumentalising Islamic social funding instead of embracing an alternative humanitarian framework that emphasizes relationality, equity and care as both metaphysical and social duties.

Dr Natalia Paszkiewicz is a Research Fellow on the ‘Making Aid Work for Displaced Women’ project, bringing two decades of experience with migrants and refugees. Trained in applied anthropology, she focuses on transforming forced-migration governance. Her work spans UKRI projects on domestic violence, global displacement fieldwork, and research on refugee livelihoods and protection.

Dr Sandra Pertek is a UKRI Future Leaders Fellow and Associate Professor at the University of Birmingham. She researches gender, violence, religion, forced migration and humanitarianism, leading studies across the Middle East, Africa and Europe. Her UKRI project, “Making Aid Work for Displaced Women,” advances innovative humanitarian financing and faith-sensitive protection strategies.

3rd panel presentation

Women’s inclusion and protection: British Muslim charities’ response to displacement

Nabil Muhammed, Sandra Pertek

As part of the *Making Aid Work* project, we examine how Islamic philanthropy (IsP) may strengthen pathways to protection and inclusion for women in refugee, displacement and forced migration contexts. By drawing on a practical, historical, ethical and scriptural framework for women-centred IsP, we assess how faith-inspired interventions mitigate harm, restore dignity, and support resilience. We demonstrate how IsP can systematically fund mechanisms such as debt relief, psychosocial support, skills development, and education and livelihoods for women in crises. The fourfold framework codifies ethical imperatives of protection, dignity and economic security.

We complement this framework with a mapping of British Muslim charities’ interventions for displaced women. Findings show diverse protection, health, livelihoods, and education programmes, ranging across GBV one-stop centres, psychosocial support, women-friendly

spaces, maternal health services, dignity kits and livelihoods programmes for widows and female-headed households. These interventions suggest efforts of Muslim charities to operationalise culturally resonant mechanisms towards faith-sensitive care and to disrupt a continuum of violence against displaced women.

While contemporary faith-inspired organisations are crucial agents in mitigating precarity in displacement, the fourfold framework has yet to be reflected widely in practice. Significant institutional gaps remain with gender policies, safeguarding frameworks and limited gender-disaggregated outcome monitoring. Further work on gender justice policies is needed, coupled with institutionalisation of faith-based ethical principles. Integrating IsP into organisational strategy offers a scalable, gender-responsive model to bridge the theory–practice gap and strengthen long-term impact of aid for forcibly displaced women.

Nabil Muhammed is a Research Fellow on the ‘Making Aid Work for Displaced Women’ project and a PhD candidate in Near and Middle Eastern Studies at SOAS. His research examines British Muslim charities’ institutional practice. He brings a decade of experience across research, media, development, public policy, academia and language education.

4 Panel presentation and discussion:

Continuities and Departures in the Study of Muslim-Led Charity

Jonathan Benthall

This paper reflects on shifting debates in the study of Muslim-led charity, drawing on over three decades of scholarship and recent contributions to the anthropology of humanitarianism. While contemporary researchers increasingly emphasize the uniqueness of Islamic giving, I argue for a more comparative and historically grounded approach. Claims that Islamic charitable principles—particularly zakat and the Qur’anic notion of *ḥaqq ma ‘lūm*—represent a qualitatively superior moral tradition risk reinforcing binaries that obscure shared ethical impulses across religious and secular humanitarianisms. Equally, critiques that portray Islamic voluntarism as distorted by state regulation overlook the practical necessity of accountability and organizational scale, especially in complex, industrialised societies. Ethnographic studies from Egypt, Palestine, and the UK reveal enduring tensions between religious motivations and professionalized humanitarian norms, yet these dynamics are far from unique to Muslim NGOs.

A third emerging challenge concerns the blurring of boundaries between charity, politics, and armed struggle. Recent scholarship highlights forms of Muslim solidarity during conflicts in Bosnia and Syria that destabilize Euro-American distinctions between humanitarian and military action. While analytically productive, such framings risk unintended consequences—particularly in contexts already marked by suspicion toward Muslim-led aid. Situating these debates within the long arc of global geopolitics, including the legacy of the Soviet–Afghan war and the “War on Terror,” I underscore the importance of preserving a humanitarian space insulated, as far as possible, from political instrumentalization. Strengthening this ring-

fencing principle is vital for fostering equitable recognition of Muslim-led charities within the global humanitarian landscape.

Jonathan Benthall is Director Emeritus, Royal Anthropological Institute. His publications include “The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World” (with Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan, 2003, new paperback edition, 2009), “Disasters, Relief and the Media” (2003, new edition, 2010), “Returning to Religion: Why a Secular Age is Haunted by Faith” (2008); Islamic Charities and Islamic Humanism in Troubled Times (2016); and review articles for “The Times Literary Supplement”. He was previously Director of the Royal Anthropological Institute (1974–2000), Founding Editor of Anthropology Today, Chair of the International NGO Training and Research Centre, Oxford (INTRAC), and an Honorary Research Fellow, Department of Anthropology, University College London. He was engaged as an adviser to the Islamic Charities Project (formerly Montreux Initiative), sponsored by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (2005–2013), and has been engaged since 2006 by various legal teams as an expert on Islamic charities.