

# CHARITY AS POLITICS “WRIT SMALL” IN GULF PETRO-MONARCHIES

Miriam R. Lowi  
The College of New Jersey

*This paper offers an overview and comparative analysis of charitable giving in four Gulf monarchies—Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. It focuses on both domestic and international giving as well as on giving by different donor types. It explores several questions: who gives, how do they give, to whom do they give, and why do they give as they do? The data were collected in the course of four research trips to the region, including site visits, extensive interviewing, and the review of documents provided by the various organizations. On the basis of my findings—some of which confirm those of other scholars working on the region or in other contexts—the paper elucidates various ways in which charitable giving, while intrinsic to the practice of Islam, is often instrumentalized by donors to advance political and/or social interests. Among such interests are extension of influence, gathering information, asserting relationships of power and authority, shoring up allegiances, and consolidating communal boundaries. The paper argues that charity—in discourse and practice—is a tool for social management and social control. Thus, the study of charitable giving in Gulf monarchies offers a window on the practice of politics and state-society relations.*

*Keywords: aid, appeasement, autocracy, charity, 'dawa, exclusion, governance, Islam, oil, philanthropy, political interests, relief, ruling families, zakat*

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Charitable giving in the petro-monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula provides a rich field for the study of politics and state-society relations in the contemporary period. This is so for several reasons: First, as these are Muslim societies, people are expected to give to charity (*zakat* and *sadaqa*) regularly, to show their devotion to God by attending to the community's welfare and assisting those in need. Indeed, giving is said to be substantial in these states, although reliable data are lacking.<sup>2</sup> Second, as ruling elites assert, to varying degrees, their adherence to Islamic norms in governance, charitable giving is not only prominent, but it is encouraged by regimes, extended in a variety of ways, and engages ruling families, governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and private citizens. Active donors in the international sphere, these regimes encourage charitable giving among their subjects; they tend to employ a two-pronged rhetoric that identifies it, first, with Islamic doctrine and, second, with nation-building through social solidarity (*tadamun ijtima'i*) (LeRenard, 2008, p. 148). Some go further by showcasing their own—that is, the royal family's—benevolence.<sup>3</sup> Third, given that wealth is abundant, the possibilities for broad redistribution and the enhancement of social welfare, through charitable

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<sup>2</sup> It is noted repeatedly in the literature that governments do not publish all that they give bilaterally and until recently, published figures on the size and sources of revenue, the extent of giving and the size (and destination) of donations by numerous charitable organizations were said to be incomplete, imprecise and/or unreliable. Insofar as individual giving is concerned, the challenges of conducting surveys effectively result in the absence of hard data. However, see Tok et al. (2014) who write the following: “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been among the most active donors in the world, with official development assistance (ODA) averaging 1.5 percent of their combined gross national income (GNI) during the period 1973–2008, more than twice the United Nations target of 0.7 percent and five times the average of the OECD-DAC” (p. 591).

<sup>3</sup> For example, in 2013, the Emir of Kuwait made a very public personal contribution of \$300 million to Syrian refugees (Stafford, 2017, p. 15).

giving and otherwise, are vast. However, that poverty persists, to varying degrees, in these countries suggests that, for whatever reason, charitable giving as a poverty alleviation strategy is insufficiently effective and that its principal purposes may lie elsewhere. How, then, is charity practiced in Gulf states today, for what purposes, and to what effect?

In this article, I offer an overview and comparative analysis of charitable giving in four Gulf monarchies: Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup> I consider giving both at home and abroad and by different donor types: private individuals and public figures, multinational agencies, governmental and nongovernmental organizations, those that are explicitly charities and those that have a charity wing, those that are “identity-based” in that they are religiously and/or ideologically motivated, and those that have no obvious agenda apart from philanthropy. I explore the following questions: what kinds of entities extend charity, how do they give, to whom do they give—or, not give, and why do they give as they do? In conducting this research, I made four trips, ranging from three weeks to five months in duration, to the four countries over the course of four years. These trips included multiple site visits (to the organizations mentioned herein) and extensive interviews with members of government and of royal families, religious scholars, representatives of charitable organizations and of business groups, and private citizens.<sup>5</sup> The research also involved close study of documentation provided by the organizations and of the secondary literature on charity in the Gulf monarchies and the broader Middle East.

I highlight several key findings, some of which confirm what is considered to be universal in the world of charity and philanthropy or have been identified elsewhere in the Middle East or by other Gulf scholars.<sup>6</sup> First, benevolence may be motivated not only by charitable feelings or commitment to the faith, but also by political ambitions. For most donor types, providing charity at home or abroad is an important source of political capital: a means to extend influence, establish networks, gain recognition, and secure allegiance, et cetera. Furthermore, in three of the four countries, among the most prominent charitable foundations are ones created by members of the ruling family or by major political associations or interest groups.<sup>7</sup> Both

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<sup>4</sup> This study builds on and extends a preliminary treatment of the topic in Lowi (2017).

<sup>5</sup> All those interviewed for this study remain anonymous.

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Atia (2013), Cammett (2014), Isik (2014), Jung et al. (2014), as well as Benthall (1999, 2003, 2018), Derbal (2011, 2014), Le Renard (2008), and Petersen (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Given issues of transparency noted above (note 2), it is difficult to know which

instrumentalize charity and social welfare for political ends: to enhance legitimacy, deepen their penetration of society, shore up political power, gain adherents, and/or advance a particular ideology. Second, when the state intervenes in the domain of charity by, for example, declaring how and/or to whom entities may or may not give, even at times by revising religious edict, it is transforming charitable giving into a tool for social management and social control. It may aim thereby to appease a particular social category or demarcate the boundaries of community. Third, not unlike international giving that has prioritized Arab and Muslim countries and communities, private giving at home appears to favor—although we cannot know for sure given the paucity of hard data—one’s family, tribe, ethnic, and confessional community.<sup>8</sup> With few exceptions, migrant laborers, for example, are excluded from access to charity. Hence, as can be found elsewhere, an “ethics of care” does not extend seamlessly to those who are perceived as distant—socially or otherwise.<sup>9</sup>

The article is structured as follows: it begins with an examination of international giving—its purposes, methods, and sites (target communities)—distinguishing among multinational, governmental and “semi”- or nongovernmental organizations as donors. For each I note connections among extending aid and promoting interests. It then proceeds to address the matter of access to charity and offers an explanation for the exclusion of certain social categories. Next, it turns to private citizens and their giving—its purposes, methods, and sites—and then moving on to outline their views on how and why Gulf nationals, on the one hand, and Gulf institutions, on the other, extend charity as they do. Finally, the article offers conclusions about what we learn through the lens of philanthropy about the dynamics of politics and piety in Gulf monarchies today.

## International Giving: Multinational and Governmental Organizations

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of the foundations are the best endowed financially and the most active in charitable initiatives.

<sup>8</sup> This finding is largely impressionistic, based exclusively on interviews with private citizens and specifically, on what they shared regarding their own habits and what they surmised about others.

<sup>9</sup> See, in this regard, Sethi (2017). Closer to home, consider the treatment of asylum seekers at the US southern border and the enforced separation of families: see, for example, Hackman (2019).

From the outset, international giving by Gulf monarchies has been a vehicle for advancing political interests. Beginning in the early 1960s, several multilateral (aid) agencies were created, with the Saudi monarchy as their driving force. Each had a distinctly political agenda: to combat the rising tide of secularism, leftism, and republicanism in the Arab world—a phenomenon perceived as deeply threatening to the political authority of conservative royal families in the Gulf.<sup>10</sup> The basic strategy of these organizations was to promote Islamic identity—rather, a particular vision of Islam—by extending aid and assistance, in various forms, alongside religious instruction to Muslim populations where they lived. With the Crown Prince and then King Feisal of Saudi Arabia at the helm as prime mover and the Kingdom as chief financier, organizations such as the Muslim World League (MWL, 1962), the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC, 1969), and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY, 1972) contributed vastly to the spread of religious conservatism, in general, and Saudi-Wahhabi doctrine, in particular, and to bankrolling Saudi influence across the Muslim world.<sup>11</sup> During the “oil bonanza” decade (1974–1984), these politico-missionary—what could be called *daʿwa*—organizations were joined by other religiously tinged entities created with a focus on charity, humanitarian aid, or development assistance.

#### *Daʿwa or “Missionary” Work*

The first organization to combine material assistance with indoctrination and political mobilization is the Muslim World League, with roughly 90% of its funding from the Saudi government (Interview with secretary-general of MWL, Jeddah, April 17, 2012). Since its inception, MWL has been funding schools and Islamic cultural centers, building mosques and clinics, distributing religious literature, training imams, and offering scholarships to study at Saudi religious universities. It has also sent missionaries to Africa and elsewhere to spread Wahhabi doctrine, as well as supported *salafi* groups in South Asia and beyond (Commings, 2009, pp. 152–153, 174–175). Similar in its mission to the MWL, WAMY was also created to combat various forms of secularism and promote Islamic identity, and to do so by propagating Wahhabi views, but with a focus

<sup>10</sup> For thoughtful treatments of the regional context within which (politico-) missionary entities were created, see Chalcraft (2016, pp. 312–392) and Farquhar (2017, pp. 67–85). On Saudi Arabia as “counter-revolutionary state,” see Bsheer (2017).

<sup>11</sup> In 2011, the OIC changed its name to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. For a useful discussion on Saudi Arabia’s “export” of Wahhabism through different entities, see, among others, Mandaville and Hamid (2018, pp. 9–12).

on youth and, according to its Secretary General, through “development activities in the fields of education and institution-building.” It builds schools, offers scholarships and training courses, and organizes summer camps (Interview, Riyadh, April 4, 2012). Since 1988, it has also provided charity in the form of, for example, support for orphans (Bellion-Jourdan, 2001, p. 177; Lacey, 2014, p. 49).

The first of the international Muslim charities, the International Islamic Relief Organization, Saudi Arabia (IIRO or IIROSA), was founded with royal approval in 1978 as the humanitarian arm of the MWL, thereby explicitly integrating political interests, pursued via *da'wa*, with the Qur'anic injunction to be generous and compassionate by providing relief from hardship. It was through IIROSA, in fact, that the MWL became especially active in the 1980s and 90s, first in Afghanistan, supporting mujahidin materially in their struggle against the Soviet-backed government and Soviet forces, while “spreading their messages in refugee camps,” and then in post-Soviet Chechnya and Bosnia, combining material aid with “spiritual renewal” for the purpose of “re-Islamizing” society (Petersen, 2012, p. 774; Bellion-Jourdan, 2001). Then in 1984, the International Islamic Charitable Organization (IICO) was created in Kuwait at the recommendation of Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi—former member and spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood—who advocated the need to offset the impact on Muslim communities of Christian and secular NGOs in their use of aid and welfare. The IICO's expressed purpose was similar to that of Christian missionary-aid societies: to combine the provision of charity, relief, and development assistance with the promotion of religious identity and practice (Petersen, 2015, pp. 65–69; International Islamic Charitable Organization, n.d.). Eventually, IIROSA and the IICO, along with the MWL and WAMY, were brought under the umbrella of the International Islamic Council for Da'wa and Relief (IICDR), created at the behest of Saudi Arabia in 1988—during the height of the war in Afghanistan—to coordinate the activities, including charitable efforts, of the organizations and their member states and, although not stated, promote a single vision of Islam (Benthall, 2003, p. 75; Bellion-Jourdan, 2001, pp. 176–177).

Indeed, from the inception of these related organizations until the early 2000s, and with burgeoning oil revenues after 1973 especially, relief in the form of material support for Muslim communities and *da'wa* went hand-in-hand. Political goals—to consolidate monarchical conservatism and absolutism, while extending Saudi power and influence—couched in language about strengthening the *umma* in the

face of external challenges, were at the forefront of their activities (Petersen, 2015, p. 86).<sup>12</sup>

Since the early 2000s, numerous Gulf-based entities that had been providing material assistance abroad have claimed to have modified their activities significantly in keeping with new governmental regulations imposed in response to suspicions of Western powers since 9-11 regarding the sources of salafi-jihadi financing.<sup>13</sup> In an interview with this author in 2012, the MWL's leadership stated that the organization had cut by half its support for projects connected to religious instruction and practice; instead, it focuses mostly on hosting conferences and promoting inter-faith and intercultural dialogue (Interview, Jeddah, April 17, 2012). Nonetheless, according to Benthall (2018), the MWL today remains "a vehicle for Saudi influence" (p. 9); in the religious field, it continues to promote a particular vision of Sunni Islam in an effort to confront both the rise of Shi'a Iran and the attraction of "jihadi ideology." The Secretary-General of WAMY, at our meeting at its headquarters in Riyadh, insisted, unprovoked, that WAMY neither proselytizes nor engages with other (i.e., non-Wahhabi) *madhāhib* (Interview, April 4, 2012).<sup>14</sup> However, other sources maintain that the organization remained explicitly engaged in *da'wa* by publishing and distributing religious literature, offering classes in shari'a, training young men to become Imams and then paying their salaries at mosques throughout the world (Commins, 2009, pp. 192–193).

As for IIROSA, considered, until 2015 and the creation of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KS Relief), to have been the most prominent charity in Saudi Arabia that worked both inside and outside the kingdom, and said to have been the world's largest, or second largest, Islamic charity in the mid-1990s (Benthall, 2018, p. 2), its efforts, according to its spokespeople, are no longer centered exclusively on Muslim communities and "faith-based causes" (Al-Yahya, 2014, p. 189). Nonetheless, a perusal of its annual report for 2011/2012 suggests that the initial focus persisted: training in Islam

<sup>12</sup> No doubt, Christian missionary work has also been associated with humanitarian assistance/relief. See, for example, Rohde (2005). More often than not, it aims to convert non-Christian populations, while Muslim charities working in foreign lands are mainly focused on "re-Islamizing" Muslim communities. In both cases, though, a principal goal is to strengthen the ranks of the "believers."

<sup>13</sup> For legislation in Saudi Arabia regarding philanthropic activity since 2001, see ICNL (2017, pp. 8–12).

<sup>14</sup> In the Sunni jurisprudential tradition, there are four dominant schools of thought (*madhhab* / *pl. madhāhib*): Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanafi, and Hanbali.

continued and the universalization of aid pertained solely to emergency humanitarian relief. In fact, at least four of the seven programs described in that report were geared partially, if not exclusively, to Muslims and included religious content (International Islamic Relief Organization, 2012).<sup>15</sup> Be that as it may, KS Relief is said to now enjoy a monopoly over almost all Saudi foreign humanitarian aid; what's more, explicit religious content is absent from its programs and documentation (King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center, n.d.; Benthall, 2018, pp. 1–2).

Despite recent modifications in their operations, the five politico-*da'wist* agencies discussed above have remained closely interconnected. As evidence, the same individuals appear in the leadership structures of each. For example, the Secretary-General of WAMY, (Saudi national) Saleh Al-Wohaibi (2002–), is on the Board of Directors of the IICO, and a former Secretary-General of the MWL (1983–1994), (Saudi national) Abdullah Naseef, held the position of Secretary-General of the IICDR some years later. Indeed, Saudi-dominated transnational collaboration and efforts at forging ideological unity in the provision of “material and spiritual sustenance” were fostered decades ago; they have persisted, at least in part, as means to achieve political ends: the consolidation of monarchical autocracy/absolutism in the Gulf region, the strengthening of the position—both political and symbolic—of the Saudi state vis-à-vis other states in the Gulf and the broader Arab region, and the related diffusion of a conservative Sunni Islam with a Hanbali orientation.

### *Development Assistance*

As with charitable giving, Gulf-based development assistance through institutional channels took off in earnest after the 1973/1974 oil “shock” and was brought under an umbrella organization: in this case, the Coordination Group of Arab National and Regional Development Institutions (CG-ANRDI, 1975) (Momani, 2012, p. 616). Of the five multilateral aid agencies created by the Gulf monarchies (in which they have a heavy presence), the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) is the only one with an explicit religious orientation.<sup>16</sup> It was created as a

<sup>15</sup> According to Benthall (2018, 16), 2011 was the first time that IIROSA appointed external auditors.

<sup>16</sup> The other four are OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID), Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA), Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD), and Gulf Arab Program for UN Development Organizations (AgFund). Three national aid organizations—



“specialized institution” of the OIC to promote Islamic solidarity by addressing the “economic development and social progress” of its member states and assisting “Muslim communities within nonmember states” by financing approved projects in accordance with principles of the shari’a (Shushan, 2011, p. 1970; Interview with employee of the IDB, Jeddah, April 18, 2012).<sup>17</sup> While its membership, composed in 2019 of 57 countries with large Muslim populations, provides the bank’s capital through their contributions, Saudi Arabia, which houses the institution and has occupied the position of president since inception, is the largest shareholder by far at 23.5–26.5% (depending on the source); the remaining five states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) had been contributing roughly 40% of the bank’s capital, according to one source (Lacey, 2014, p. 23), although this proportion seems to have decreased considerably in recent years.<sup>18</sup> Despite the apparent dominant position of Saudi Arabia, a senior researcher at the bank said the following: “the IDB is independent of the Government of Saudi Arabia just as the World Bank is independent of the Government of the United States” (Jeddah, April 18, 2012). What he failed to add, however, is that, as in the case of the World Bank, the political-ideological positions and policies of the IDB reflect those of its principal financiers.

Especially active in the domain of development assistance, and part of the CG-ANRDI, bilateral organizations in several GCC states channel much of their governments’ foreign aid disbursements. The largest donors, the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED, 1961) and the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD, 1975), are closely connected to, if not supervised by, their Ministry of Foreign Affairs or of Finance. As such, it is neither surprising nor exceptional that their aid is politicized, in one form or another (Momani, 2012, pp. 617–618).<sup>19</sup> (To be sure, it is banal to point out that the donations of

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Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED), the Saudi Fund, and the Abu Dhabi Development Fund—figure under the umbrella group as well (Barakat, 2010, pp. 11–12; Momani, 2012, pp. 616–617).

<sup>17</sup> Additionally, according to a senior researcher at the Bank (Jeddah, April 16, 2012), a percentage of its net income is earmarked for charitable activities such as the provision of scholarships and other forms of support to educational institutions.

<sup>18</sup> The IDB website ([www.isdb.org](http://www.isdb.org)) suggests that today (2019), the five other Gulf monarchies combined contribute about 22%.

<sup>19</sup> Without providing details, Momani and Ennis (2012) report that the SFD extends two types of foreign aid: “one that is politically motivated and another that is oriented towards economic development.” The first, according to them, is the larger of the two, and administered by the Minister of Finance, “by whom an unknown amount of aid is predominantly funneled to Arab countries largely based on political motivations” (p. 619).

DAC member states of the OECD reflect those governments' political and ideological interests and concerns.) Take Kuwait, for example: because of its perceived geopolitical vulnerability—given its small size, peculiar demographic features and governance structure, and the capriciousness of regional relations—regime security, hence domestic political stability, has been at the forefront of the Al-Sabah monarchy's (existential) preoccupations since independence. From the outset, therefore, oil revenues have been instrumentalized in its foreign relations for political capital: referred to by Abdulreda Assiri as "dinar diplomacy," Kuwait's foreign assistance activities have been "...inextricably tied to its efforts to gain political support" (Leichtman, 2017, p. 5).

Founded just six months after the country's independence, the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) was the very first national aid agency established in a developing country and for more than forty years (1961–2006) it was the largest and most active Arab bilateral donor agency (Leichtman, 2017, p. 6). Like other Gulf aid agencies, it has prioritized Arab countries in extending development assistance.<sup>20</sup> While it denies a religious bias and avoids the kind of explicit conditionality and tying of aid practiced by the World Bank, on the one hand, and DAC donors, on the other (Leichtman, 2017, p. 8), its giving is strategically motivated: to gain friends.

Gulf aid has been most prominent in the Middle East and North Africa, although a growing proportion has gone since the 1990s to sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and even Latin America. The preference remains, nonetheless, for Arab and Muslim-majority countries, followed by Muslim communities in non-Muslim-majority countries (Momani, 2012, pp. 613–614).<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, to whom and how development assistance, as with charity, is extended is determined in response to changes in political circumstances and interests, as Cammett (2014) demonstrates with regard to welfare provisions in the Lebanese context (pp. 140–160). Thus, post-9/11 suspicions and local concerns regarding "negative publicity" have caused numerous Gulf aid agencies to redirect their attentions somewhat. As a former Secretary-General of the MWL stated: "We need to show the world that we care about humanity, no matter who they are" (Interview, Jeddah, April 21, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> According to KFAED figures cited in Leichtman (2017) for the period from Jan 1962 to March 2017, of the \$5.86 bill. of loans extended, almost three-fifths went to Arab countries, and of the \$233 mill. in grants and technical assistance, more than four-fifths went to Arab countries (p. 9).

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the main features of Arab development aid and a comparison with that of DAC member states, see Tok et al. (2014).

*International Giving as Politics*

Far more illuminating than the favoring of ethnic and religious ties when extending generosity is the instrumentalization of giving for political purposes: in the case of the Gulf monarchies, for example, as a form of “soft power” projection on behalf of the donor country; to promote a particular *madhhab* or religious ideology; to encourage and build support for a particular regional power, such as Saudi Arabia, and counter the spread of influence of another power, such as Iran; to reward a government for voting similarly to the donor country in a multilateral body; and to weigh in on the side of one party to a conflict (Barakat, 2010, pp. 13–28). Of course, the instrumentalization of international giving for political purposes is hardly unique to Gulf monarchies; most major donors, and particularly the United States government, the European Union, and Russia (as well as the former Soviet Union), have (had) powerful political agendas attached to their foreign assistance.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, it is the nature, manner, and assumed goal(s) of the politicized giving by the particular donor country that may be instructive with regard to their interests and concerns. Recall, for example, that Saudi Arabia (along with the UAE) reduced its financial support to Egypt from January 2014, eventually suspending part of its aid and energy grants through March 2017. While the purpose, it seems, was mostly to punish the Egyptian leadership for what was viewed as ungrateful behavior vis-à-vis its benefactors—it had been reluctant to send troops to Yemen and had voted in favor of a Russia-drafted UN Security Council Resolution on Syria—Saudi Arabia has since resumed its former level of support. It is inclined to bankroll the Sisi government, which it views as a bulwark against both the empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran’s further penetration of the region—which currently represent the regime’s foremost geopolitical concerns (see Saleh, 2016; Saleh & Kerr, 2017).

### **Organizational Giving at Home and Abroad: Governmental, Semi-governmental or Nongovernmental**

Across the GCC states, charitable foundations of various types abound. Often referred to as semi- or nongovernmental, many of them are, in fact, closely connected to, if not created by, (members of) the local ruling family or government, and many receive some portion of their funding

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<sup>22</sup> For a searing critique of the “development” paradigm and its political ideology and motivations, see Escobar (1995).

and operating costs from the government. Hence, the appropriateness of terminological designations ought to elicit closer examination.

While some charitable foundations specialize in a specific region and/or activity – as with the Kuwaiti NGO, ‘Awn Mubāshir (Direct Aid), that works in Africa among Muslim communities, Qatar’s Reach Out to Asia (R.O.T.A.), that supports education initiatives there, or the privately funded Qatif Charitable Society that provides services mainly to Shi’a in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province (Montagu, 2010, p. 82)—most of the larger foundations conduct similar activities, with considerable overlap and negligible collaboration among them: supporting the socially disadvantaged groups recognized in Islam (orphans, widows, and the sick and disabled), as well as digging wells, funding educational endeavors, and health services. Many include an explicitly religious component, as in providing Islamic education and building mosques, preparing *‘ifār* tables during Ramadan, or distributing sacrificial meat at *‘Eid al-Adha* (the Feast of Sacrifice). Alongside their routine activities, some foundations respond to emergencies around the globe, while an increasing number, having adopted the language of “empowerment”—at times linking it discursively to the Islamic tradition—offer skill-building and job-training programs of various sorts.

In Saudi Arabia, but especially in Riyadh, among the largest and most visible foundations are those associated with members of the Al Saud family or their closest associates (Le Renard, 2008, pp. 144–145), while in Kuwait, they tend to be affiliated with religio-political organizations. Although variants of both features are found in Qatar, neither accurately characterizes the philanthropic landscape in Oman. There, the largest and best endowed charity is the Oman Charitable Organization (OCO), a public entity founded in 1996 by royal decree. Its board of directors is composed of several members of government—including, today, one Bu Sa’idi—and prominent members of society. A spokesperson for the organization told me in 2013 that it receives about half its funding from the government and roughly 10% from private donations; the remainder comes from returns on its investments (Interview, Muscat, October 30, 2013).<sup>23</sup> The OCO’s activities comprise mostly relief work outside the country in coordination with international organizations, local officials, or other GCC states and several social programs at home (Interview with representative, Muscat, October 30, 2013).

<sup>23</sup>

Much of the private donations come from Omani companies, which are expected to contribute 5% of their net income to social works.

*Royal Connections*

Many of the nominally “nongovernmental” foundations in Saudi Arabia that operate internationally were established by royal decree for a member of the royal family, yet they are considered to be private; among them are the Sultan bin Abdelaziz Foundation (1995), Alwaleed bin Talal Foundation/Alwaleed Philanthropies (2003/2015), and King Abdallah International Foundation for Charity and Humanitarian Deeds (2010) (Al-Yahya, 2014, p. 180). One of the most visible of this type of philanthropic organization is the King Feisal Foundation (1976), established as waqf at the late king’s death by his children. While historically it built schools, libraries, hospitals, and mosques, today it focuses primarily on supporting education, providing scholarships, and funding research inside the country. Although created from the estate of a public figure—indeed, a former ruler—whose wealth derived, in large measure, from the oil-infused public purse, the foundation claims, remarkably, to be fully private: it was created by “private” citizens, receives no funding from the government, and cannot request donations from the public, although anyone can make a donation privately (Interview with a former employee of the KFF, Riyadh, March 26, 2012).<sup>24</sup>

In her studies of different forms of institutionalized charity in Saudi Arabia, Nora Derbal (2011, 2014) explains that while all not-for-profit philanthropic institutions (*mu’assasat khairiyya* and *jama’iyyat khairiyya*) must be registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), organizations established by royal decree and financed from the assets of the founder, like the King Feisal Foundation, enjoy somewhat greater autonomy than the far more numerous associations that do receive government funding but must follow MoSA’s rules and regulations and submit all programs and procedures for its approval.<sup>25</sup> Maintaining responsibility for the supervision and evaluation of these welfare associations, MoSA enjoys considerable powers: to veto programs, refuse particular board members, and define eligible recipients of services, et cetera (Derbal, 2011, pp. 48–50).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> In fact, I was told that “the Foundation has no relationship to the government,” despite that prominent members of the ruling family both founded it and hold key positions in it.

<sup>25</sup> In 2016, MoSA and the Ministry of Labor merged into the Ministry of Labor and Social Development (MoLSD).

<sup>26</sup> This information evokes Pollard’s (2014) study of the charity field in Egypt pre-1945. The Egyptian state recognized the potential influence of welfare provision and so, through the creation of the MoSA in 1939, it assumed control

Saudi royals are prominent in several of what are sometimes designated “nongovernmental” charitable associations, if not as founding members or patrons then as members of the board. As LeRenard (2008) notes, involvement in the charity sector is one of the principle roles of Saudi princesses today (pp. 150–152). Besides, their engagement is thought to be mutually beneficial: on the one hand, it practically guarantees the association’s approval by the MoSA and may even lessen the ministry’s oversight somewhat; it attracts important donations from private individuals, banks, and companies; and it improves networking possibilities and, therefore, access to resources.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the participation of royals enhances the family’s visibility and legitimacy: royals appear intimately connected to civil society and responsive to its various needs; thus, they are associated with compassion and care. In these ways, they gain allegiance from the population while bolstering discreetly their monitoring of society.

The Al-Wafa’ and the Al-Nahda Philanthropic Societies, which focus exclusively on poor women, were created in the 1960s; they are headed by princesses Latifa and Sara, respectively, both daughters of the late King Faisal, but from different mothers. They receive funding from the government annually and donations from private enterprises, prominent individuals, and other private citizens. The two foundations cooperate with each other insofar as they divide the poor neighborhoods of Riyadh between them; in their designated areas, they provide a variety of similar services to women and their children (LeRenard, 2008, pp. 146–147).<sup>28</sup> Beyond that, Al-Wafa’, for example, takes charge of individuals referred by the public hospital who travel to Riyadh for hospitalization and require lodging prior to and following their medical procedures. According to my interlocutors, the building in which these individuals are housed in Riyadh was provided gratis to the organization

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over welfare associations for its own political ends (p. 249). In so doing, it enhanced its ability to engage in surveillance, among other things. Caroline Montagu, in her 2010 study of the voluntary sector in Saudi Arabia, notes that the royal family’s efforts at oversight and regulation “reflect its concerns to control what could be a parallel power structure and threat” (p. 77).

<sup>27</sup> In April 2012, this author attended a fundraiser in Jeddah for a charity that focused on the handicapped and was closely associated with Princess Adilah, a daughter of the late King Abdallah. Individual donations were as high as \$45,000; the names of the donors were announced with great fanfare, while attendees rubbed shoulders with the princess.

<sup>28</sup> According to a representative at Al-Wafa’ (Riyadh, April 10, 2012), the organization, in 2012, was taking care of about 1,800 families, each with an average of seven members, in various ways, including providing job training, helping them acquire official papers and pay monthly rent and food bills, et cetera.

by a prominent donor—whose identity they would not share—who, at the end of each year, reimburses al-Wafa' for all that it had spent on this particular service (Interview, Al-Wafa', Riyadh, April 10, 2012). Coincidentally, it was announced in April 2013 that the Alwaleed bin Talal Foundation had made an important donation in kind to Al-Wafa's patient lodging units in Riyadh (Alwaleed, 2013). To be sure, the family connection makes a big difference: royals support royals, especially when there is no competition between them.

Among its activities, al-Wafa' runs a center for abused women and girls. However, it takes in only those who have been referred by the Ministry of Interior; it will not provide sanctuary or assistance to an abused person from outside an official channel. Thus, its attachment to, endorsement of, and collaboration with the Saudi government, as well as with other royals, is indisputable. In practice, therefore, Al-Wafa' is neither truly private nor independent.<sup>29</sup> Emblematic of what Derbal (2014) refers to as the “intense entanglement not only of individual members of the royal family, but also that of the Saudi state with private charities,” “loyalist” charities such as al-Wafa' actively uphold the national project of the state while providing another avenue for its infiltration of society (p. 163).

In Qatar, most of the prominent foundations were established as *awqāf* from the fortunes and in the names of members of the ruling al-Thani family—Sheikhs 'Eid bin Mohamed, Jassim bin Jabor, Thani bin Abdallah, and Faisal bin Jassem—by their heirs. Some of these, like the *salafi*-leaning Eid bin Mohamed al-Thani Foundation, follow a particular religious orientation (Interview with representative from 'Eid Foundation, Doha, November 11, 2013; interview with a consultant to charities, Doha, November 12, 2013). While these foundations are financially dependent on their endowments, all but one rely increasingly on private donations; at times, they solicit contributions through fundraising efforts for humanitarian crises.<sup>30</sup> Although their activities focus on both assisting local needy families and funding projects abroad,

<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that Al-Wafa' is not necessarily representative of women's organizations in Saudi Arabia, many of which would find ways to circumvent certain state impositions (such as, for example, the requirement that a woman produces consent from a *mahram*). I am grateful to Nora Derbal for sharing this insight and information.

<sup>30</sup> While the Jassim and Hamad bin Jassim Charitable Foundation does not collect donations, the Sheikh 'Eid bin Mohammad Al Thani Charitable Foundation has changed its status to a charity; as such, it receives an annual financial contribution from the government. Interviews with consultant to charities, Doha, February 29, 2012 and November 12, 2013.

it is said that more than 75% of Qatari charity goes outside the country since, in the words of one citizen, “there are not many things to do here” (Interview with consultant to charities, Doha, February 22, 2012). Despite their royal pedigree and branding, these establishments are considered to be private. Needless to say, they enjoy excellent relations with the Qatari government (Mohamed, 2014, p. 263).

In contrast, Qatar Charity, one of the largest and oldest charities in the country, was not created by royals. With an elected board and hired general manager, it is regarded as independent even though its chairman since 2002 has been an al-Thani.<sup>31</sup> While financially dependent on donations, it, like all registered charities, as distinct from *‘awqaf*, receives an annual sum from the government. Moreover, it absorbs some al-Thani initiatives: when the royal family wants to contribute to an effort abroad, it may choose to do so through Qatar Charity (Interview with Qatar Charity representative, Doha, November 13, 2013).

Unique at home, Qatar Foundation comprises numerous sub-organizations, including charitable initiatives. Registered as a nongovernmental organization, it was created as waqf in 1995 by the then-ruling emir, Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, with the addition of public funds and land granted by the government (Interview with Qatari scholar and activist, Doha, Nov. 10, 2013). His wife, Sheikha Moza, chairs the foundation; in addition to herself, three of their children are on the Board of Trustees and one on the Board of Directors). Reach Out to Asia, a sub-organization and charitable initiative of the foundation, is chaired by their daughter, Sheikha Myassa (Qatar Foundation, n.d.). Remarkably, Qatar Foundation is touted as “a private foundation for public purposes” even though it has been financed, both directly and indirectly, by the public purse. With its public-private, “loyalist” nature, Qatar Foundation is somewhat similar to the Syrian Trust for Development, an entity comprised of several government-created, but supposedly nongovernmental, organizations, a number of which were initiated by Asma’ al-Assad, the wife of President Bashar al-Assad (Ruiz de Alvira, 2014, pp. 334–340). With the resources to monopolize activities in the educational, cultural, and philanthropic spheres, Qatar Foundation, like “The Trust” is geared, in large measure, toward “reproducing patterns of authoritarian rule,” while enhancing the public image of regime figures (Ruiz de Alvira, 2014, p. 335). To be

<sup>31</sup> Founded in 1992, it emerged from the “Qatar Committee for Orphans of Afghanistan” created in the 1980s. Referred to today as a “faith-driven organization,” it is considered to “lean toward the Muslim Brotherhood” (Interviews with consultant to charities, Doha, November 12, 2013; representative from Qatar Charity, Doha, November 13, 2013).



sure, it is the darling of the most powerful branch of the ruling family, providing it with tremendous visibility and a tentacular presence.

The involvement of royals, whether directly or indirectly, combined with the branding of foundations with their name, is noteworthy for the ubiquity and authority it signals, despite their being advertised as private or even semi-private establishments. In the case of Qatar, consider that until recently, more than 75% of government revenues were derived from oil and gas—common property resources to be overseen by the leadership for the benefit of the community.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the former emir established the Qatar Foundation from his “private” wealth, accrued in large measure from hydrocarbons (and related investments) and supplemented from the budget of the government he controlled at that time as monarch and head of state. What ensues, as Le Renard (2008) identified in Saudi Arabia, is a pernicious mixing of and calculated confusion between public and private: royals take from what belongs to the people and invest those resources in the creation of entities that they oversee and that carry their name. By colonizing the charity field in this manner, they shore up a fabricated image of themselves as magnanimous benefactors and benevolent devotees of the faith, thereby bolstering their legitimation—both political and religious—and commanding allegiance. In fact, they have simply transformed public resources into private, or rather, royal resources and exploited them in ways that deepen their penetration of society, hence their power and control.

### *Doctrinal Connections*

Unlike in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, charities in Kuwait are not connected to the ruling family. Rather, the most prominent—excluding the Red Crescent Society—adhere to one or another religious tendency, which may or may not be affiliated with a political movement.<sup>33</sup> As such, they are equivalent to the “identity-based charities”—associations that prioritize welfare and charitable activities as goals and are linked to a particular (ethnic or) religious group—discussed by Cammett (2014).

‘Awn Mubāshir (Direct Aid) was created some thirty years ago by Abdelrahman al-Sumeit, a Kuwaiti physician and *‘ālim* with a *salafi* orientation. Formerly called Africa Muslims Committee and reliant on

<sup>32</sup> From 2006 to 2011, 50–65% came from hydrocarbon exports and 25–30% from investments made possible by resource rents (Ibrahim, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Recall that political parties are banned in the four countries. In Kuwait, however, several political movements are tolerated and remain active in politics.

private donations and regular contributions from the government, the organization digs wells and builds schools, clinics, and training centers in Africa. It also builds mosques, teaches Arabic and Islam, and helps African Muslims make the pilgrimage. According to one of its representatives, “where there are Muslims, we work.” Furthermore, “we are involved in helping Muslims be better Muslims,” and so “*da’wa* is part of our work” (Interview, Kuwait, May 13, 2012).<sup>34</sup>

Jama’iyyat al-Islah and Jama’iyyat al-Turath belong to Kuwait’s Muslim Brotherhood (*al-haraka al-dusturiyya al-islamiyya*, Islamic Constitutional Movement, or HADAS) and Salafi movement (*Tajama’a al-Islamiyya al-Salafi*), respectively, both of which are active in Kuwaiti politics and, typically, hold seats in Parliament. Both are engaged in vast philanthropic activities at home but especially abroad in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and in countries in crisis (e.g., Afghanistan, Bosnia in the 1990s, and Syria since 2012). According to their representatives, their work is funded principally by donations from Kuwaiti nationals and residents. Both are explicit that an important goal is to “preserve Islamic culture” wherever there is a Muslim community (Interviews with representative of al-Turath, Kuwait, May 13, 2012; representative of al-Islah, Kuwait, 14 May 2012).

While Jama’iyyat al-Islah insists that recipients of their aid do not have to be Muslims, *da’wa* is, nonetheless, central to the mission of both associations. According to a member of HADAS, “(M)ost charities in Kuwait have a *da’wa* component because in Islam you need to both encourage *da’wa* and help people live the best way as Muslims.... Much of the charity we give is about supporting Muslims in their way of life...” (Interview, Kuwait, May 7, 2012).<sup>35</sup> In short, these three organizations combine the provision of assistance with efforts to strengthen the ranks of the Muslim community and their particular orientation within Islam.

To be sure, the *da’wa* of the Muslim Brotherhood is distinct from that of the Salafi and certainly of the Shi’a. In this regard, it is noteworthy that during my meeting at Jama’iyyat al-Islah, the representative mentioned Iran’s charitable work, referring to the Islamic Republic as “a major competitor in Africa.” He expressed concern about how Kuwaiti Shi’a, who constitute about 35% of the population, extend

<sup>34</sup> See, [www.directaid.org](http://www.directaid.org). For “Islamic charity” elsewhere in the MENA, see, for example, Atia (2013), Jung (2014), and Isik (2014).

<sup>35</sup> More specifically, “...of course *da’wa* is very important: we can’t just let anyone do the work of teaching Islam.... In Indonesia, for example, we have an Islamic training school where we train Imams and then send them elsewhere in Indonesia to work in a mosque we’ve built. We also write the Islamic curriculum for the schools we build” (Interview with representative from Mujama’ Sanabeel al-Khiir, Jama’iyyat al-Islah, Kuwait, May 14, 2012).

charity: “I’m convinced their money goes to initiatives supported by Iran and to strengthening Shi’a networks (in West Africa)” (Interview with representative from Mujama’ Sanabeel al-Khiir, Jama’iyat al-Islah, Kuwait, May 14, 2012). In short, charitable giving, as described above, is intimately connected to politics and competition to gain adherents.

### *“Unaffiliated” Charity*

Across the region, there are numerous charitable organizations that are linked neither to royal families nor to religious tendencies or religious-political movements. To take but one example, in Oman, Dar al-I’tā’ is an important local charity. It was created in 2002 by a group of women married to Omani businessmen and became an official organization in 2006. A distinctly private initiative, its revenues come exclusively from private sources, via a host of donation strategies and fundraising events, as well as from companies. Its ambitions and capabilities are relatively modest, and its activities are confined to Muscat (Interview with a founder, Muscat, October 29, 2013).

Distinct from the above in their status as “unaffiliated,” several prominent business families, like Al-Rajhi and Olayan in Saudi Arabia and Bahwan in Oman, who enjoy clientelistic relations with the regime are engaged in broad-based philanthropic activities, while others, like the Sultan family in Kuwait, have created issue-specific entities (see, Sultan Education Fund).<sup>36</sup>

## **Who’s in, Who’s out? The Politics of Exclusion**

In the four countries, many charities extend assistance to long-term residents who do not hold local citizenship.<sup>37</sup> However, except for very few cases, charities tend not to help poor migrants apart from offering *ifṭār* during Ramadan and Friday meals at some mosques. Recall the words of a Qatari national: most charitable giving by Qataris is sent abroad because “there are not many things to do here” (Interviews with consultant to charities, Doha, February 29, 2012 and November 12, 2013)—despite the vast numbers of indigent foreign laborers often living in conditions of precarity.

One charity in Qatar and one in Oman told me that, in fact, they do give to laborers, but not systematically and certainly without

<sup>36</sup> Space restrictions prevent me from including a deeper discussion of these types of charities.

<sup>37</sup> Indeed, a representative of Al-Wafa’ claimed that 20–25% of those who request help from them are non-Saudis. (Interview, Riyadh, April 10, 2012).

publicizing it. The representative of the Omani charity elaborated thus: “Once you open that door, it will never close” (Interview Muscat, October 29, 2013; Interview Doha, November 13, 2013). This rationalization—that obliquely acknowledges the dire circumstances—was echoed almost verbatim by a representative of al-Islah (Kuwait): “If we open the door to helping the more than 1 million foreign laborers, our work would be insurmountable” (Interview, Kuwait, May 14, 2012). In contrast, “loyalist” (or rather, explicitly royalist) Saudi charities, when asked about the exclusion, inclined toward a legalistic explanation: according to Ministry of Labor stipulations, the *kafeel* (sponsor) is supposed to take care of his workers and abide by the conditions he agreed to in exchange for receiving visas. Apart from the *kafeel*, the worker’s embassy is responsible for him/her (Interviews with representatives of King Abdallah Foundation for Developmental Housing, Riyadh, March 28, 2012; Al-Wafa’ ..., Riyadh, April 10, 2012). To be sure, the response of an *‘ālim* with the Omani Ministry of *Awqāf* and Islamic Affairs was remarkable: “We already do a lot for them: we allow them to come here and work” (Muscat, May 31, 2013).

A more compelling explanation, I suggest, relates to the prevailing sense of community. In this regard, an Omani interlocutor noted that migrants’ exclusion is “merely a matter of priorities”: that “charity begins at home” (Interview with former minister, Muscat, October 30, 2013). He failed to add that for many, home is also where charity ends. As philanthropic organizations in these Gulf states routinely extend material support to causes and crises beyond their borders—for example, to Palestinian programs for decades, Syrians since 2012, victims of the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, and of other natural disasters since then—ignoring needy foreigners in their midst, rendering them virtually invisible, suggests that *takāful* (social solidarity) at home is a circumscribed notion that applies chiefly to the community that matters and compassion is not extended to those at home for whom one feels no obligation precisely because they are not part of that privileged group.<sup>38</sup> No doubt, the tendency to prioritize one’s own is universal, and the disadvantaged are more-or-less invisible everywhere. Nonetheless, the “invisibility” of the disadvantaged in Gulf monarchies is especially striking given the vast unearned wealth there from which they are excluded.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See note 8. For a discussion of the relationship between the Gulf citizen and imported labor that develops this argument (and others), see Lowi (2018).

<sup>39</sup> In this regard, it is worth reflecting on the fact that in spring 2015—my last

While exceptions do exist, they are few. In the four countries I encountered only three charitable initiatives created by nationals for the foreign community specifically.<sup>40</sup> Two of them, Lajnat al-Ta'arīf b'il-Islam (Islam Presentation Society) in Kuwait City and ḍyūf Qatar (Qatar's Guests) in Doha, target non-Muslims, offering Arabic language instruction, Islamic education, and conversion. While they couch their activities in philanthropic sentiments, *da'wa* for the purpose of expanding the Muslim community is what motivates them.<sup>41</sup> The only program that—at least until summer 2015—explicitly addresses the material conditions of migrants is, like ḍyūf Qatar, part of the *salafī*-directed Eid bin Mohammed al-Thani Charity Foundation. Referred to as ḥafīz 'ala na'ima (Preserving Grace), its volunteers collect leftover food from hotels and private dinners in Doha and distribute it in industrial zones where the poorest workers live.<sup>42</sup> They also distribute used clothing at construction sites and buy and distribute phone cards “so that laborers can remain in touch with their families back home.” Alas, a program officer mentioned to me, parenthetically, that preachers from Ḍyūf Qatar go to industrial zones following distributions to encourage conversion (Interview, Doha, November 11, 2013). Alas, there is “no free lunch”; charity and proselytism often go hand-in-hand.<sup>43</sup>

## Individual Giving

Recall that there are two types of individual giving in Islam: obligatory *zakaṭ*—a tax equivalent to 2.5%, levied on “capital gains” in one’s

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<sup>40</sup> research trip in the Gulf—per capita income in Qatar was the highest in the world (\$130,000); at that time, the lowest paid migrant workers there (those in the construction industry) were earning roughly \$160 monthly (or \$2,000/year). There are, however, expatriate-founded initiatives that assist migrants. In Oman, for example, the Charitable Wing of the Indian Social Club gives to needy Indians, and the Ecumenical Council for Charity, connected to the Reformed Church in America, does not discriminate among those in need. Another project—recently discontinued—that addressed migrants, albeit on a tiny scale, was “I Care.” The inspiration of a young resident of Palestinian descent, it was active from May 2011 until 2017 and brought together volunteers to distribute bottled water at construction sites in Muscat and thank laborers for their work (Interview, Muscat, October 29, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> Such programs exist in Oman and Saudi Arabia as well through the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs.

<sup>42</sup> Al-Wafa' in Saudi Arabia also collects and distributes leftover food, but for poor Saudis (Interview, Riyadh, April 10, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> Again, this is not uncommon (see note 13). Atia (2013) notes that in Egypt, *zakaṭ* committees at mosques make assistance conditional on submission to religious instruction (pp. 55–76).

possession for at least one year—and elective *ṣadaqa*.<sup>44</sup> Typically, zakat contributions are transferred to the Public Treasury (*beyt al-māl*) or its equivalent, then distributed among the poor, needy, and other Qur'anically defined appropriate recipients, while *ṣadaqa* is given to whomever, however, and in whatever amounts the donor chooses. Among Muslim countries today, there is little uniformity in the role the state plays as collector and distributor of zakat. Furthermore, there is no consensus about whether zakat payments should be voluntary or imposed, or even the forms of wealth that are “zakatable” (Kahf, 1989; Kuran, 2003, pp. 277–283; May 2013).

In Qatar and Oman today, there is no formal, government-enforced collection of zakat; giving, in whatever form, is left to the individual. In Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, in contrast, governments impose and collect zakat, but only from companies. In the former, Saudi- and GCC-owned companies, including banks, pay zakat. Funds are collected by the Ministry of Finance and transferred, in full or in part, to the MoSA/MoLSD for distribution for the purpose of poverty alleviation: in the form of, for example, social security payments to those considered to be the poorest Saudi nationals, allocations to unemployment programs and to charitable foundations (LeRenard, 2008, pp. 142–143, 146).<sup>45</sup>

In Kuwait, it was only in 2006 that formal collection of zakat was imposed on companies. Interestingly, the mandatory 2.5% was reduced to 1%: many had complained that the former was too onerous, while others suggested that since the country had a Shi'a population who were required to pay *khums* to their religious leaders, it was preferable to reduce the obligatory contribution to the state and trust that each company would, independently, pay the remainder to an entity or initiative of its choosing (Interviews with M.P. for HADAS, Kuwait, May 7, 2012; former M.P. for *tajama'a al-islamī al-salafī*, Kuwait, May 8, 2012).<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, until 2015, the controversial “white lands” in Saudi Arabia—extensive, undeveloped properties owned privately by wealthy Saudis (and blamed, in some circles, for exacerbating the housing crisis in the kingdom)—were not subject to zakat. The regime

<sup>44</sup> Muslims whose assets fall below *niṣāb*—a minimum, predetermined value necessary for subsistence—are exempt from having to pay *zakat*.

<sup>45</sup> For a rich discussion of the history of state-imposed *zakat* in Saudi Arabia, see Derbal (n.d.). She notes, among other things, that the collection of *zakat* holds both symbolic and political value for the Al Sa'ud in that it underscores “the Islamic character of the nation” and the legitimacy of the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance at its core.”

<sup>46</sup> *Khums* refers to a 20% tax on annual profits, half of which is meant for *marāji'* (the highest, Shi'a clerical authorities) and half for orphans, the poor and needy.

'*ulama*' maintained, remarkably, that they constituted "hidden wealth" that, according to several schools of Islamic jurisprudence, is not subject to zakat (Interview with Saudi Shari'a scholar and specialist in Islamic finance, Riyadh, April 25, 2012).<sup>47</sup> That the Kuwaiti and Saudi governments endorsed such claims and, in doing so, essentially revised a religious edict or judgement intimates that they aimed thereby to appease a particular social category.

Alongside innovative forms of "zakat evasion," Kuwaiti companies, like their Saudi counterparts, may take advantage of the weak regulatory environment by failing to divulge their true net worth so as to contribute less than they would have otherwise (Interview with former M.P. for HADAS, Kuwait, May 11, 2012; Interview with member of Supreme Economic Council, Riyadh, April 2, 2012).<sup>48</sup> In the words of a Saudi economist who sits on the shari'a boards of several Islamic banks, "there is a lot of deception and trickery in the payment of zakat by the very rich: many are not prepared to pay 2.5%, especially since 2.5% of a few billion [Saudi riyals] is a lot of money" (Riyadh, April 5, 2012). Thus, while zakat was meant to counter hoarding, reduce inequality, and combat material hardship, it, like taxation systems in Europe and North America, is manipulated by some to facilitate private accumulation.

Although private giving is said to be substantial in Gulf monarchies, statistics are lacking (Hartnell 2018, pp. 42–43).<sup>49</sup> Moreover, many who are employed in the philanthropic sector voice skepticism about the true extent of generosity. According to a representative of Oman Charity, "What is said and what is true are not always the same; there is a lot of exaggeration about the generosity of Gulf nationals" (Muscat, October 30, 2013). A prominent Kuwaiti philanthropist went further: "We are still a tribal society, and being tribal means that in order to give, we need to first find out who is involved, who will get the credit, et cetera. We are not yet ready to give magnanimously" (Kuwait City, May 15, 2012).<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> See al-Jassem (2013). This changed, however, with the gradual imposition of the "White Land Tax Regulation, 2015," issued pursuant to Royal Decree no. (M/4), dated 12.2.1437H, equivalent to November 24, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Kuran (2003) reminds us that opposition to and evasion of *zakat* payments were not uncommon even in early Islamic history (pp. 278–282).

<sup>49</sup> Coutts's (2015) *Million-Dollar Donors Report* relates that 34 donations worth at least \$1m each and totaling \$894m were made by GCC nationals in 2014; these figures do not include unannounced donations.

<sup>50</sup> On characteristics of individual giving in the Gulf, see Hartnell (2018, pp. 30–35).

As elsewhere in the Muslim world, giving is greatest during the holy month of Ramadan and through mosques, especially following Friday prayers. People donate to different sorts of entities: individuals in need, government offices, charitable organizations, and campaigns focused on particular causes or crises at home or abroad. There are thousands of private charitable initiatives, as well as highly publicized, government-sponsored campaigns that, until recently, solicited contributions via telethons or television, or collection boxes in malls.<sup>51</sup> No doubt, some private giving circumvents organizations, foundations, and government agencies. Several interlocutors explained that it is characteristic for individuals with means to help a select group of people recurrently. In Qatar, for example, they may have a roster, constituted over time, of needy individuals or families, inside and sometimes outside the country, as well, to whom they give on a regular basis; and this roster, revised over time, may be handed down from one member to another within a family (Interview with lawyer and former minister, Doha, February 21, 2012). In Kuwait and Oman, where an underdeveloped culture of giving outside the family was noted repeatedly by my interlocutors, the focus remains on one's tribe, ethnic or confessional community (Interview with member of prominent Omani business family, Muscat, January 31, 2012; Interview with former minister, Muscat, October 30, 2013; Interview with former member of majlis al-dowlā, Muscat, November 5, 2013; Interview with leading philanthropist and businessman, Kuwait City, May 15, 2012). Across the region, building a mosque is another popular form of giving, as is establishing a *waqf* to address a particular concern.

### What do Citizens Say about Charitable Giving Today?

Many of my interlocutors pointed out that although giving is said to be extensive, poverty still exists in GCC states—certainly in Bahrain, Oman, and, most notably, in Saudi Arabia. They insisted that if zakat were paid and distributed appropriately, poverty would have been eliminated (Interview with religious activist, Riyadh, April 2, 2012; Interview with economist with the Islamic Development Bank, Jeddah, April 16, 2012).<sup>52</sup> Some went further, suggesting that persistent poverty in these petro-monarchies is the result of greed—among Gulf elites especially (Interview with prominent economist and former member of

<sup>51</sup> Due to transparency-related concerns, these collection methods are less common today.

<sup>52</sup> Atia (2013, pp. 111, 132) reports of similar comments by Egyptians, and Jung (2014, pp. 294–295) does likewise by Jordanians.



*majlis al-shūrā*, Riyadh, April 1, 2012; Interview with economist with the Islamic Development Bank, Jeddah, April 16, 2012). Others suggested that in the current environment, characterized by abundance, rampant consumption, and waste, commitment to social welfare and recognition of the social value of money are wanting, while “piety, to the extent it does exist, is de-linked from social responsibility” (Interview with prominent philanthropist, Kuwait, May 15, 2012).

When asked about prevailing concerns for *maṣlaḥa ‘amma* (the common good), several interlocutors responded, tongue-in-cheek, that *maṣlaḥa khaṣṣa* (private interest) was far more prevalent (Interview with member of *majlis al-dawlā*, Muscat, February 5, 2012; Interview with renowned *‘ālim*, Muscat, February 13, 2012; Interview with philanthropist, Kuwait, May 15, 2012). An oft-cited example was the penchant to construct a mosque and attach one’s name to it. As a successful Omani businessman remarked: “mosque building .... is not about Islam; it’s about status and posterity” (Muscat, January 31, 2012).<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the predilection for public posturing and ostentation, for cozying up to the powerful, was underscored repeatedly: “The preference is for big, well-advertised projects—promoted by the Emir, perhaps—that glorify the selves.... Some want to show off that they’re giving. Look at charitable societies, like....money goes to the media first, to make a big splash about them, and the founder uses the foundation to enrich his other projects. He makes sure the Emir knows about his charitable acts and so, gives him more business” (Interview with professor, Shari’a College, Qatar University, Doha, February 27, 2012; see also LeRenard (2008, p. 151) and Derbal (2014, pp. 153–154). Of course, this is not unique to Gulf states; similar behavior has been identified in Syria among government-sponsored NGOs and “loyal philanthropists” (Ruiz de Elvira, 2014, pp. 337–340), as well as in Egypt (Atia, 2013, p. 121), among others. According to some, “Islam is a big business...; it’s an instrument for making more money and increasing popularity...” (Interview with member of al-Thani family, Doha, February 20, 2012).

There are, for sure, exceptions to these patterns, but they exist because “the philanthropist is exceptional” (Interview with Lebanese scholar of religion, Muscat, February 10, 2012; Interview with Saudi former deputy minister, Riyadh, May 1, 2012). Bab Rizq (Door to Livelihood) is a community service program within the Saudi business organization Abdellatif Jamil Group (AJG) that is named for its

<sup>53</sup> Petersen (2015) quotes a manager at IIROSA who says that donors “...want to see buildings.... They want somewhere they can place a sign” (p. 93).

founder.<sup>54</sup> It was established in 2004 as a microfinance initiative modeled on the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh to assist poor Saudis through their self-designed income-generating projects. Like Grameen, it lends to women who have formed a group of five borrowers, each of whom has a plan for a small business and only one of whom may be a non-Saudi resident (Interview with CEO of AJG, Jeddah, April 17, 2012; Interview with representative at Bab Rizq, Jeddah, April 21, 2012). As in the Grameen Bank model, lending to the group is meant to encourage solidarity and shared responsibility. Bab Rizq also runs free job-training courses for poor, unemployed men and women and assists successful graduates in finding employment. This multifaceted CSR operation, financed almost entirely from the family's fortune, is focused on helping the poor get themselves out of poverty.

### Conclusion: Charity as Metaphor for Politics

What can be deduced about such practices of giving and their implications for politics? First, a universal phenomenon, benevolence may be motivated by political ambitions in addition to charitable feelings. Giving at home and providing assistance abroad can be sources of political capital: means to extend influence, establish networks, gain recognition, and secure allegiance, et cetera. This is true for governing authorities and multilateral entities, as well as for clientelist business groups, and "loyalist" and "identity-based" organizations. As we have seen with ideology-driven entities, for example, their generosity is tied to adherence to their *da'wa*. Thus, conformism and obedience are enforced, the ranks of the believers grow, and the particular ideology gains influence.

Charitable giving may be a (more-or-less) deliberate conservatizing force: rather than promote real socioeconomic change, it is, as Derbal (2011) observes, a means to reinforce difference and consolidate the hierarchy in place (pp. 63–64). It is not a strategy to address poverty at its source or effectively mitigate inequality (Cammatt, 2014, pp. 218–227; Isik, 2014, p. 322). Furthermore, while "named" giving—in contrast to the Qur'anic preference for anonymity—may indeed provide a positive example for others to follow, it is, as well, an

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<sup>54</sup> Abdellatif Jamil began his career subcontracting with ARAMCO and running gas stations, later becoming the sole distributor of Toyota vehicles in Saudi Arabia. Today, AJG is the largest private independent distributor of Toyotas in the world, with operations in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and Asia; it is involved in real estate and financial services, as well. In 2005, it endowed the Poverty Action Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

unequivocal expression of relative status and, hence, a solicitation of recognition. To be sure, “named” giving may offer the benefactor an array of public relations benefits related to his/her stature and ambitions—of a social, political, or economic nature (Cammatt, 2014, p. 203). Added to that, when not extended anonymously and/or when conjoined with ideology, benevolence presupposes indebtedness; and what more effective a way to repay a debt than through submission—to the benefactor’s authority and/or beliefs?

Second, when the ruler or members of the ruling family extend charity and/or are active in charitable associations, there is a blurring of the distinction between public and private, with important effects (LeRenard, 2008, p. 145). The “royal”—in the guise of an exclusively private citizen—is able to intervene more deeply in society; in so doing, s/he gains not only recognition, but also information that may be useful in the ruler’s public function, perhaps enhancing his domination of society. Furthermore, when the state gets involved in the domain of charity and philanthropy by encouraging citizens to give, decreasing requisite (zakat) contributions from some social categories, or withholding access (to charity) from other social categories, it is using charitable giving as a tool for social management and control. By appealing some and marginalizing others, it consolidates the contours of the community via hierarchy and exclusions.

Third, while international giving has prioritized Arab and Muslim countries and communities, giving at home tends to concentrate on one’s family, tribe, ethnic, and confessional community. Those at home who are disadvantaged, but not considered part of the community to which the Gulf state and citizen feel an obligation, are not merely distanced, but are denied assistance. To be sure, the allegiance of migrant laborers is unnecessary and their submission expected.

In conclusion, highlighting exclusions and other features of charitable giving in Gulf monarchies demonstrates that in these states, as in other environments, the normative inferences, supposedly at the source of charitable giving, are not always obvious or primary. Beyond that, the study of charity in Gulf monarchies offers a window on the practice of politics and state-society relations.

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**Miriam R. Lowi** is a Professor of Political Science at the College of New Jersey. Miriam Lowi is from Montreal, Canada. Her B.A., in History and Economics, is from McGill University; her M.A. and Ph.D., in Politics, are from Princeton University. Her research and teaching interests are in Middle East Politics and the Comparative Political Economy of Development. She has written extensively on conflict over scarce water in the Middle East and oil and instability in Algeria. Currently, she is writing about Islam and Politics in the Arabian Gulf oil monarchies

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