Arab Foreign Aid in the View of Islamic Faith

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In the field of international development assistance, Arab foreign aid has become an indispensable component because of its strength, proportion, and scope. Compared with traditional aid countries, Arab donor countries pay more attention to the infrastructure construction and economic development indicators of recipient countries. In addition to taking into account the needs of foreign policy and economic development, they also strictly adhere to the Islamic teachings. This paper focuses on the analysis of Arab foreign aid from the perspective of religious motives, which contains the most central part of Islam, such as Islam’s commitment to the ideal realm of “goodness”, the “Worshipping Allah and benevolence” as the core values of its teachings, and the linking of Muslim beliefs and good deeds. In concrete practice, Arab foreign aid is guided by the charitable concept of Islam; it is committed to strengthening Arab solidarity, practicing the humanitarian spirit, and playing an increasingly important role in the international aid system.

Keywords: Arab foreign aid, Islamic faith, South-South cooperation

In recent years, emerging economies are gradually becoming a new force behind international development and co-operations. As economic development and humanitarianism lead to more and more conflicts, South-South co-operation with equal and mutually beneficial results have attracted more and more attention of the international community. The foreign aids from these emerging countries are taking place under the framework of the South-South cooperation; their aid principles, policies, and ideals should keep in line with the core concepts of the South-South cooperation; the ultimate goal is to promote common development of the developing countries, and to promote the realization of the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals. In these countries, the affluent Gulf oil producing countries formed an Arab aiding alliance, providing large sum of financial support to other Arab countries and developing countries. The Arab Aids focus more about the infrastructure construction and economic development measures of the recipient; comparing to traditional aids, the preaching of Islamism is also an important factor to consider, alongside foreign policies and the needs of economic development. This article will analyze the foreign aids of Arab countries through religious motives.

General Situation of Arab Foreign Aid

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar are the main components of the Gulf Aid Alliance. This article will focus on the first three Gulf countries as the information on Qatar is relatively limited.
Saudi Arabia Oversea Aid Programs

Saudi Arabia is the largest economic entity in the Arab world; it has an important part in global economic management and development with its diversity, enormous oil reserves, and the oil dollars thus accumulated. Saudi Arabia seized the chance to turn profits from oil into political weapons in the 1970s, and enhanced the nation’s international influence as well as winning the oil war. During this period, Saudi has provided large sum of aids to developing countries. When some countries experienced emergency situations like abnormal weather, economic instabilities, and sudden fall into poverty, etc., Saudi often provided direct aid. For example, to Algeria in 1980, Italy in 1980, Iran in 1978, Pakistan in 1975, and for the earthquake in Turkey in 1977; helped Jordan to reconstruct after the flood and snow storm in 1980; assisted Somali in the fight against poverty and drought; provided aids to support the development and government expenses of Yemen, Oman, Tunisia, Nigeria, South Korea, Malaysia, Malta, Egypt, Lebanon, Djibouti, Sultan, and Syria. Moreover it also loaned large sums to developed countries, including one billion loans to Japan and 200 million loans to France (Paleslay, 1984, p. 25).

Saudi’s foreign aid programs consist of the institutions for policy making and execution on behalf of the royal household. Report in 2015 shows, 604 loans a total of more than 47 billion Riyals have been provided to more than 82 development programs and projects in 578 developing countries, since the founding of Saudi Fund dor Development in 1974. At present, Saudi invests 1.9% of its gross national income in oversea aids every year, which is much higher than the 0.7% suggested by United Nation Development Program (UNDP). By the end of 2016, the total sum of foreign aid has accumulated to 139 billion dollars, ranked 4th in the world. Asia, especially mid-Asia, has always been an emphasis in Saudi’s aid program, as a result of its “Riyal Diplomacy”. What Saudi lacks in military power, is made up by its economic strength, with its profound religious heritage and rich oil reserves; Saudi won its place as the head of the Islamic World through multiple Islamic diplomatic actions, like humanitarian support, religious propaganda and education. In a political forum held by Saudi and Uzbekistan in 2012, both parties agreed that Saudi and other mid-Asian countries share common interests in the fields of culture and humanitarianism, which demonstrates the diplomatic results of Saud’s oversea aids to mid-Asian countries.

Kuwait Oversea Aid Programs

Kuwait has always been a forerunner in the area of foreign aids amongst other Arab countries. Kuwait was one of the few countries in the Gulf region, which were the first to be industrialized. After realizing both industrialization and financial modernization, its national economy began to develop and diversify. Kuwait has accumulated large amount of oil dollars using its advantageous oil resources and excellent modern oil industry, which layed a strong foundation for it to implement aid programs. In the 1970s, many developing African countries, which just declared independence, were in desperate need of external support to maintain economic, social, and political stability. Kuwait drafted policies towards Africa under the framework of Organization of African Unity (OAU), which were based on principles of universal equality, respect for national constitution, and forbid any intervention in the internal affairs; it aims to solve conflicts through negotiation, reconciliation, bilateral agreements, and international arbitration. Meanwhile Kuwait also supports non-Alliance, international organizations, and the independence movements in Africa. These principles helped

1 Relevant data are retrieved from the official website, http://www.sfd.gov.sa.
to promote co-operations between Kuwait and African countries, thus Kuwait Oversea Aid Programs have been successfully implemented. The official statistic given by Kuwait amounts to 20 billion USD in aids between 1973 and 2008 (Li, 2017, p. 51), which is far higher than 0.7% of its gross national income (GNI).

Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development is the main executor of Kuwaiti foreign aids. The Fund did not stop granting loans even in the midst of the chaos of the Gulf War in 1990. During the occupation, the Fund signed 11 new agreements, which value more than 330 million USD in total, to fund development programs in other Arab and non-Arab countries (Turki, 2014, p. 425). On the other hand, the Fund also provides support to Arab citizens, who are forced to leave their country because of wards. This charitable act at a country’s most desperate moment has helped Kuwait to establish a profound relationship with the countries that received aids from it. The Fund, apart from loans, also gave grants to foreign institutions or countries in need. These grants cover all aspects of economic development of the recipients and the recipients come from all over the world. Studies show that African countries south of the Sahara and heavily populated Asian countries are emphasized in Kuwaiti foreign aid programs. Note that Kuwait was the first Arab countries to offer Chinese government loans at discounted rate. By the end of 2015, the Fund provided China a total of 952 million USD in loans, to be used in 37 middle to large sized projects in areas like infrastructure, education, health, agriculture, and environments (Cheng, 2017), etc., which proved to be a strong support to the economic and social development in the mid-west regions in China.

United Arab Emirates Oversea Aid Programs

United Arab Emirates’ (UAE) economic growth reached 6.1% between 2005 and 2010, which is 4.3% higher than the average in the Gulf region, and even 5.3% higher than the global average (Neumayer, 2004, pp. 281-300). As UAE’s economy gradually develops, it becomes more focused on its diplomatic power and tries to gain a higher status in the Gulf and Middle East with its oversea aiding schemes. As one of the important sponsors of the global official development programs, UAE has provided funds totaling more than 255 billion dirhams (70 billion USD), to over 100 countries worldwide by 2013 (Li, 2013, p. 196). According to the report by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2015, UAE’s total foreign aids were 32.339 billion dirhams (8.8 billion USD) in that year, which is 2.72% of its GNI and ranked No. 1 in the world.3

Oversea aid is an important element in its foreign diplomacy; rant aids (about one third of the total) and loans (about two thirds of the total) are channelled to the recipients. The main charities include UAE government, UAE Abu Dhabi Fund for Development, Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation, and UAE Red Cross, etc. Emirates’ own charities and private institutions take up a smaller proportion. Unlike other Arab countries, UAE has a clear foreign aid strategy: first of all, an effective decision making platform and a complete and comprehensive archive; then help UAE to become a main aid sponsors worldwide; last but not least, provide high quality, effective, transparent, and timely complementing services (Li, 2013, p. 197). Just like the president of the UAE’s words,

Foreign aid is a core pillar in our foreign diplomatic policy. Because we believe, that our own wealth is not real, unless it helped those in need, no matter where they are and no matter what their nationalities or faiths.4

3 Relevant data are retrieved from the official website, http://www.oecd.org/dac/.
Religious Thoughts of Arab Foreign Aid

Islam is committed to achieving the ideal of *perfectness*. “By worshiper” and “doing good” link Muslim faith and good deeds together, giving Islamic charity ideas and practicing a very unique and broad spirit and philosophy. Islamic charity is the spiritual or material concern that Muslims personally or collectively give to others. Its ultimate goal is to obey Allah’s intentions, to gain its joy, and to expect to gain happiness in this life and afterlife. Under the stipulations of the Islamic Shariah, Islamic charities have established a lasting and stable operating mechanism with zakats and charity (including Waqf System of Islamic Law) as the core, and have become the ideological source of Arab foreign aid. It mainly includes four aspects: first of all it is embodying the concept of Islamic charity; the second is embodying a systematic and normative construction; thirdly, it advocates invisible funding; and fourthly, it encourages various forms of donation.

First of all, Islamic teachings advocate Muslim compassion and magnanimity. One of the important acts is charity, which includes money, clothing, food, material, time, labor, service, knowledge, and technology. Islam believes that the most direct manifestation of the fear of Allah is to give all forms of wealth that Allah has bestowed to those who are in urgent need, and that the givers will also receive compensation and various kinds of assistance. Although the alms giver, he received the rewards of Allah virtually, not only material and spiritual gain, but also to avoid the current world disaster and Hell Penalty. The Holy Quran states: “For those who give property for the Lord, like a farmer sowing a grain, and a grain of 100 grains per ear. Allah doubles his reward, Allah is generous and omniscient” (2:261) (Ma, 1996). “The people, who give away their possessions day and night, regardless of their ability, will enjoy the reward of their Lord. They will have no fear and will not be troubled in the future” (2:274). The “Hadith” also discusses this issue. The Prophet Muhammad said: “Alms! Even if you give someone a candied fruit, it will help you to avoid the punishment in the prison” (Yu, 2009, p. 231). “Every Muslim should give alms. Even if he persuades others to do good things, and exhort others to do bad things, is also a charity act” (2009, p. 232).

Moreover, Islamic charities have positive factors that respect the systematic and normative construction. Like other religions, Islam guides Muslims to pursue justice and friendship, which is committed to eliminating the gap between the rich and the poor, and does not admit individuals’ absolute rights to their own properties. Not only that, but from the perspective of Islamic teachings, Islamic charities are a collective obligation with a certain religious obligatory, not entirely personal and voluntary. The Holy Quran states that, “Wealth originates from Allah, and the wealth of the rich has its own rational composition of the poor” (24:33). “The rich do good is not only his duty but also the natural gift of the poor” (70:24). Caliph Oumeier (AD 592-644) had explicitly emphasized that alms is not to help the poor, but to realize the rights of the poor included in wealthy property. For example, the main aid agency development fund is similar to the Wagf system in the Islamic charity system, which is the “reservation” of Allah’s ownership of all human wealth in the world, or the retention of part or all of the wealth or the land and industry that can generate revenue value. It is used exclusively for religious and social charities that comply with Islamic law. This system later developed into a special economic system, and the related laws and regulations became the “Wagaf Law”. It can be seen that these Islamic provisions give philanthropy a clear basis for religious jurisprudence, which has obvious mandatory meaning, and is very similar to the “institutional aid” of modern society.
Once again, advocating invisible funding, but not advocating the promotion of Islam is another distinctive feature of charity ideology. *The Holy Quran* states: “It is good if you openly give alms; it will be better if you secretly give aid to the poor. This will eliminate some of your sins” (2:271). The teaching jurist further elaborated on the religious doctrine of secretly doing good in this principle. They pointed out that

The right to give is your “accumulation” and your deposit in Allah which you should know. It does not require any witnesses, because you know that secretly (what others don’t know) for Allah is more convincing than doing openness. It is commendable that this alms only you and Allah know and will not be seen... this matter will only benefit you. (Zeng, 2012, pp. 76-82)

The formation and development of this idea is consistent with Islam’s advocacy for protecting the dignity of the recipient. *The Holy Quran* stresses in many places that “secrecy is better”, respecting the recipient, and prohibiting “blaming the grantee”, while “the highest principle of relief is to protect the dignity of the recipient”. The prophet said that seven people on the resurrection birthday were shaded by Allah, and one of them was “secretly giving away property, and his left hand did not know the right-hander” (Yu, 2009, p. 129) (The other six are just officials, the youth who grew up in praying Allah, those who care about the mosque, the people who cooperate or disassociate with each other for Allah, people say “I fear Allah” when being tempted by a beautiful woman, prayer weep in silent to Allah). Islam promotes secrecy and good deeds, fully revealing the main reasons why the Arab foreign aid is secretive and not transparent.

Eventually, Islam encourages various forms of donation. In addition to the donation of charitable statutes and the donation of interest for banned obligations, there is also a more extensive donation known as affair, which is performed in a very convenient and flexible manner, with money, behavior, and substance which can become a donation carrier. In addition, there is a special form of charity: Wagf, which is a religious fund organization (form) that benefits both long-term recipients and donators. These donations are based on self-conscious and voluntary psychology, aiming at helping the poor and helping others. *The Holy Quran* says: “You must not receive all goodness until you give away your loved things” (3:92). The “Hadith” also emphasizes: People who do not love their brothers and only love themselves do not have faith. People who are full whilst their neighbors are hungry are not believers. Regardless of the difficulties of removing a Muslim in this world, Allah will remove his difficulties on Judgment Day. In this way, Islam encourages Muslims (this life) to actively forge ahead and create wealth, and on the other hand, encourages them to vigorously promote the spirit of the charity, alms to wealth, and builds good for future generations.

Under the guidance of religious doctrine, a large amount of Arab aid flows to countries dominated by the Muslim population. Taking the Islamic Development Bank as an example, its main task is not only to provide financial loans, but also to improve economic behavior in accordance with religious rules and to bundle aid and religion to promote Islam. This model of assistance is similar to the Western model of traditional aid, that is, the Christian organizations provide assistance and are labeled Christian. This can also explain why the Sudan has always been the main target of Arab aid. The civil war between northern Sudan (mainly Muslim) and southern Sudan (mainly Christian and primitive religious believers) began in 1955 (Jiang, 2004, p. 145). The Sudanese civil war is the result and manifestation of the intensification and continuation of religious conflicts. The inherently different political views of the two religions are the essential causes of the conflict between the North and the South. And it also determines the difficulty of the solution to the conflict. Therefore, the Sudan has always been considered to promote Islamic advancement to South Sudan, which is dominated by Christians and atheists, through the implementation of Islamic law.
Humanitarian Spirit: The Basic Principles of Arabian Foreign Aid

Islam advocates that people should deal with interpersonal relations with benevolence, which means human beings should show sympathy and mercy to each other and should help, love, and get along well with others. It is against hostile acts, such as animosity, hurts, or even arms between humanity. According to the Koran, we should do good to partners, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side (4:36). Islam sees helping the poor and the weak as righteous action which includes love for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves (2:177). As a basic factor of religious practice for Muslim, non-Muslims can also be beneficiaries of humanitarian aid (Zhang, 2016, p. 37). The Prophet has clarified that “helping the poor and giving peace greetings to acquaintances and strangers is the most noble merits”, “People who bully peace-loving infidels are also bullying me”. So, helping and loving each other not only consists of the theoretical basis of Islamic humanism. It is also a guideline for Arabian foreign aid.

Saudi Arabia is the largest country for humanitarian aid in the Middle East. It has long carried out these programs through more than 70 international and local organizations such as the International Red Cross (IRC) and the World Health Organization (WHO). In order to further coordinate resources and effectively push forward the work of humanitarian aid, the government established the Salman King Relief and Humanitarian Assistance Centre in May 2015. Until the end of 2016, the center has provided $600 million foreign aid, benefiting 22 million people in 19 countries and has carried out 52 aid programs, covering various fields such as aid supplies and security safeguard. In July 2014, the Saudi government has offered $500 million humanitarian assistance for homeless Iraqis without regard to their religions, sects, or races. In 2015, it provided various emergency aid for Yemen, including medical and sanitary products, drinking water and food, which has totally reached $274 million and refugees, women as well as children are among its main beneficiaries. In February 2016, Saudi Arabia voluntarily donated $59 million to United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). It is reported that the Saudi government has provided a total of $500 million unconditional assistance to UNRWA since its establishment.5

Humanitarian assistance is a priority for Kuwait’s foreign aid. For example, it offered $5 million assistance for Pakistan in 2010 and 20 tons of relief supplies to Somalia in 2011. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Kuwait has been a role model in providing assistance to Syrians and its neighbor countries. Kuwait held two UN assemblies for donations to Syria in 2013 and 2014. The assemblies have collected $3.4 billion, among which Kuwait donated $800 million (Shukr, 2015). The Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) has also offered $50 million of help for Syria’s neighbor countries, especially Jordan and Lebanon, for relevant aid programs for Syrian refugees: About $23 million was used to finance the Jordanian government and emergency aid programs determined by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (Shukr, 2015).

Foreign aid of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) consists of three parts: development assistance, humanitarian assistance, and charitable assistance, in which the humanitarian one makes up 7%.6 During the Iraq war, UAE proposed to maintain Iraq’s sovereignty and its territorial integrity and suggested that the UN should play an important role in restoring Iraq’s security and in its reconstruction. In 2014, its humanitarian

assistance was mainly used to help Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and the Kurdish region in Iraq. In May, the UAE established the UAE Committee for the Coordination of Humanitarian Foreign Aid, whose members include humanitarian and charitable institutions in the country and relevant institutions for humanitarian assistance. In 2015, its priority moved to Yemen in assisting comprehensive programs such as, food, health, and drinking water.

In short, humanitarian crisis is frequent in the Middle East. Arabian assistance starts from humanitarian principles and focuses on undeveloped countries, so it has little geopolitical considerations. It also works hard to “maintain current situation to avoid the dissolution of the beneficiaries’ governments as well as the collapse of the countries’ domestic order in order to keep the current balance of power” (Hans, 1962, p. 302). Humanitarian assistance has become an important tool for improving the soft power of donor countries in Arab and has played an ever essential role in foreign affairs.

**Conclusion**

Similar to the principle of “salvation and saving heart” followed by Christianity, the Islamic charity concept is regarded as the spiritual or material care of Muslims individually or collectively, and its ultimate goal is to obey Allah’s intentions and gain its joy to get the happiness of this life and afterlife. Islam believes that aid is giving the blessings given by Allah to people in need. After the efforts for more than half a century, Arabian aid countries have become an indispensable part of the international aid field. They use foreign aid as a booster to actively practice the spirit of South-South cooperation, highlight the international social responsibility that developing countries have assumed, and gain recognition and support in international political and diplomatic affairs.

No matter it is a short-term emergency humanitarian assistance or long-term development assistance, Arabian aid countries are striving to follow the doctrine of Islamic teachings, generously and secretly. In this regard, Saudi Arabia and UAE have performed most prominently. In times of distress for fraternal countries, they secretly provided massive amounts of humanitarian assistance. They not only contributed to the promotion of global economic recovery and development, but also effectively increased countries’ soft power. In addition, Arabian aid countries not only assist Islamic countries, but also provide assistance to non-Islamic countries. In this regard, Kuwait has performed most prominently, particularly in terms of aid to African countries; Kuwait’s funds and technology have spread over almost every corner of Africa. While granting new impetus to Kuwait’s relations with Africa, Kuwait also constructed the strong presence and influence on the African continent.

**References**


