



# HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS THINK TANK

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## ISLAM AND HUMANITARIANISM: A LONG DRINK OR A MOLOTOV COCKTAIL?

Stand Up Report - Live Debate on Humanitarian Issues

JANUARY 2015

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**Save the Children**



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Summary report of the fourth Stand UP- Live debate on humanitarian issues that took place on December, at the IRIS conference center in Paris, with **Djamel Misraoui**, specialist in international solidarity within the Muslim world and the participation of **Ghaleb Bencheikh**, (PhD), President of the World Religion Conference for Peace, **Jean-François Riffaud**, communications and humanitarian development expert, former Red Cross Communication Director, **Kader Abderrahim**, associate researcher with IRIS and professor of Political Science Institute (Sciences Po Paris), and **Christian Troubé**, MD of Rue Principale Agency, and the members of the public present at the conference.

The title theme of this conference, purposely controversial, allows us to address the many questions surrounding Islam, source of amalgam, misunderstanding, suspicion and interrogations, fuelled by the world's violent current events and the terrorist activity committed in the name of a certain vision of Islam.

In the current climate, the Muslim humanitarian approach is more than often misunderstood and has to be constantly justified by those who are active. When we speak of Islam, it is frequently associated, compared or opposed to something: Islam and humanitarianism, Islam and women, etc. The following stand-up on «Islam and Humanitarianism, a long drink or a Molotov cocktail» allows us to examine our vision of Islam, and in particular the uncertainty and lack of knowledge that surrounds it, so we can explore ways in which we can crush prejudices and learn to work more effectively together.

### Stand UP from Djamel Misraoui

In order for us to appreciate the sometimes complex relationship between Islam and humanitarianism, we must retrace history back to 1859. All humanitarians are familiar with the date of the Battle of Solferino, which saw the beginning of the fundamental humanitarian principles of the Red Cross International movement. However, 1860, a little-known date on the humanitarian calendar, is just as important. In 1860, Damas was struck by some very dramatic events: fires were deliberately started in Christian quarters following Muslim riots that rocked the city. Thanks to the Emir Abd el-Kader, many victims were saved from the fires in the affected areas. This was the first

time a Muslim helped and protected Christians in a risky initiative that saved between 12,000 and 15,000 lives. Nevertheless, the Emir is rarely mentioned when the subject of the history of International Humanitarian Law is raised. How can we explain that the thinking behind both initiatives and that of the values of neutral assistance to those most vulnerable has never been analysed together?

**The problems of misunderstanding and incorrect perceptions, plus a lack of will to open up and understand each other, have created barriers that make it difficult to bring these two worlds together, despite the fact that both events are based upon the same universal humanitarian principles.**

In the current situation, it has become vital to re-establish the original meaning of these concepts, in order to remove prejudices and restore reality to words and concepts. An example could be the word « jihad » which when defined means “self-effort guided by the principals of justice, confidence and liberty committed to peace”, a far cry from the meaning that most people today would give “Jihad”.

Similarly, Zakhat<sup>1</sup>, the alms tax constituting the third pillar of Islam, is destined to those who are the most vulnerable - without any reference to their religion. Humanitarianism and Islam have a common principle of vulnerability as a selection criterion for those who benefit from its charity. Why then, for example, is Zakhat not used in conflict regions to create social unity where each and every minority could take advantage?

The coordination process between humanitarians, Muslim *and* non-Muslim, is more than often rendered complicated by the perceptions that people have of one another. These popular beliefs, attached to different faiths and cultures, prevent the reconciliation necessary for effective humanitarian actions. As a result, there exists a duality between Muslims and non-Muslims, without consideration for other religious humanitarian organisations.

For some Muslims, humanitarianism is equated to western cultures and accompanied with a feeling of threat. Westerners are sometimes regarded as colonialists - neo-imperialists whose control is economic, social and political. The western world is also considered a threat to social unity through its will to empower populations without acknowledging different cultures. Conversely, some

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<sup>1</sup> Zakhat is the third pillar of Islam (alms in English) whereby donations are made to the poorest of the community at the end of the civil year.

westerners still compare today's Muslims to the Muslims who stopped the progression at Poitiers. Arabic-Muslim societies are also viewed as a threat to the principals of secularism, empowerment and freedom. Given the current news climate and terrorist activity, amalgams and a lack of mutual confidence leave little place for reconciliation.

**A dualist vision has taken root and isolates Muslim humanitarians from international humanitarian actions.**

This vision is also the result of history. The war in Afghanistan (1979-1989) was the first time Muslim non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and western NGOs met in the field and served to highlight their incapacity to work together. At the time, western NGOs criticized Muslim NGOs for their lack of impartiality in the conflict in aiding solely Muslim victims and showing support to the afghan Mujahideen. During the conflict in Bosnia in 1992, despite, this time, a show of neutrality and impartiality by Muslim NGOs, western NGOs were reluctant to acknowledge the Muslim NGOs new course of action.

One of the biggest challenges facing aid workers will be to overcome these divisions and develop stronger relationships. Everyone needs to leave their comfort zone where they believe that only their convictions, approach and vision can save the world. Diversity and multi-culture must be the trademarks of tomorrow's humanitarians. Participatory governance must be encouraged, and, in the field, we need to build together a sense of citizenship. Citizenship will encourage social inclusion for better social justice, and will consequently curb social conflict at its roots.

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*Following M. Djamel Misraoui's talk, Ghaleb Bencheikh, (PhD), President of the World Religions Conference for Peace and Jean-François Riffaud, communications and humanitarian development expert and former Red Cross Director gave their impressions of M. Misraoui's talk, followed by a public debate and conclusions led by Kader Abderrahim, associate researcher at IRIS and professor at the Political Science Institute of Paris. The discussion was chaired by Christian Troubé, Director of the Rue Principale Agency. The following remarks constitute a synopsis of the ideas discussed by all participants.*

The lack of conceptual clarity requires genuine lessons in semantics for aid agencies and western societies. It is vital that amalgams are avoided, and that the popularization of concepts and terms related to cultures and cults are addressed, otherwise we must face the risk of false propagation.

Added to this, we cannot consider Muslim NGOs as a homogenous group. Some NGOs claim to be Islamic, others do not, and they can be susceptible or not to coordinating work with other aid agencies, whatever their faith may be.

However, generalisation must be avoided; not all Muslim aid agencies show this withdrawal into their own community. Yet the risk of generalisation is constantly present. Media influence and the numerous amalgams that they are accused of committing, the lack of importance attached to human sciences in universities only succeed in accentuating the fact that history is forgotten, knowledge disappears and prejudices reign.

**Does a religious label increase the effectiveness of aid work?** Operationally-speaking, the foremost concern for aid agencies is the access to victims and agencies must do everything necessary to break down any barriers that contrive this access while at the same time ensuring they do not create any additional ones.

Reference to faith or religion can, in certain contexts, create more barriers than it breaks down. The question of the necessity of a religious « label » in terms of access to victims must therefore be raised.

A religious label does however allow NGOs to surf on the religious calendar wave and helps improve the collection of funds that in turn helps to improve relationships with donators, at the same time diversifying collection sources. But in doing so, religious tagging also creates expectations from donators in terms of populations that are helped, and therefore one can question the impartiality of the aid from faith-based aid agencies.

Similarly, the principle of neutrality calls for the rejection of debates. Yet a religious tag makes voluntary withdrawal from debates more difficult and NGOs risk being accused of having a partial approach to situations or of being too silent on the subject by their donators.

**The neutrality requirement for faith-based NGOs generally requires that religious reasoning is abandoned.** If religion can help motivate humanitarian action, it cannot be seen to use this as a means for proselytism of those beliefs. The faith associated to an NGO must not build a dogmatic barrier that could limit access to victims. In order to achieve this, constant work and dialogue are necessary so that action is efficient. Muslim NGOs must be inclusive and choose local partners in

terms of professional qualities rather than religious affiliation. In the same way, vulnerability and not religion should be the main criterion in aiding populations.

**Religious thinking should be reviewed.** The primary function of Ijtihad is the effort of analysis needed to interpret the fundamental texts of Islam. Religious reasoning and dogmatic closure need to be abandoned so that a radical reform of theological reasoning can be obtained. Today, there is a need for subversive thought, transgression from taboos and an end to the race to the bottom in the thinking behind international and community reports which only lead to misunderstanding - a far worse enemy than ignorance.

Ultimately, what are the specificities of Muslim humanitarian action? Do we act because we are Muslim or because we are humanist? What is the added value when faith accompanies humanitarian action? Should the relationship to faith remain intimate? History is awash with examples of faith leading to conflicts and sometimes even genocide: Rwanda, Bosnia, Burundi, etc. Shouldn't it be better to overcome religious belonging and promote the idea of citizenship so that each individual, and not the community as a whole, becomes responsible for his acts and words?

The questions raised demonstrate the scope of shared teamwork that needs to be actively fulfilled by all humanitarian players. Firstly, to create mutual comprehension based upon exact knowledge rather than approximation. Secondly, to prove that concerted action is possible in the field and should be prioritised. Finally, to explore a new way of addressing aid work, which should encourage the idea of citizenship. Acting as a citizen, and considering beneficiaries as citizens rather than victims, could become the common base for an inclusive humanitarian action, freed of all religious considerations. ■

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