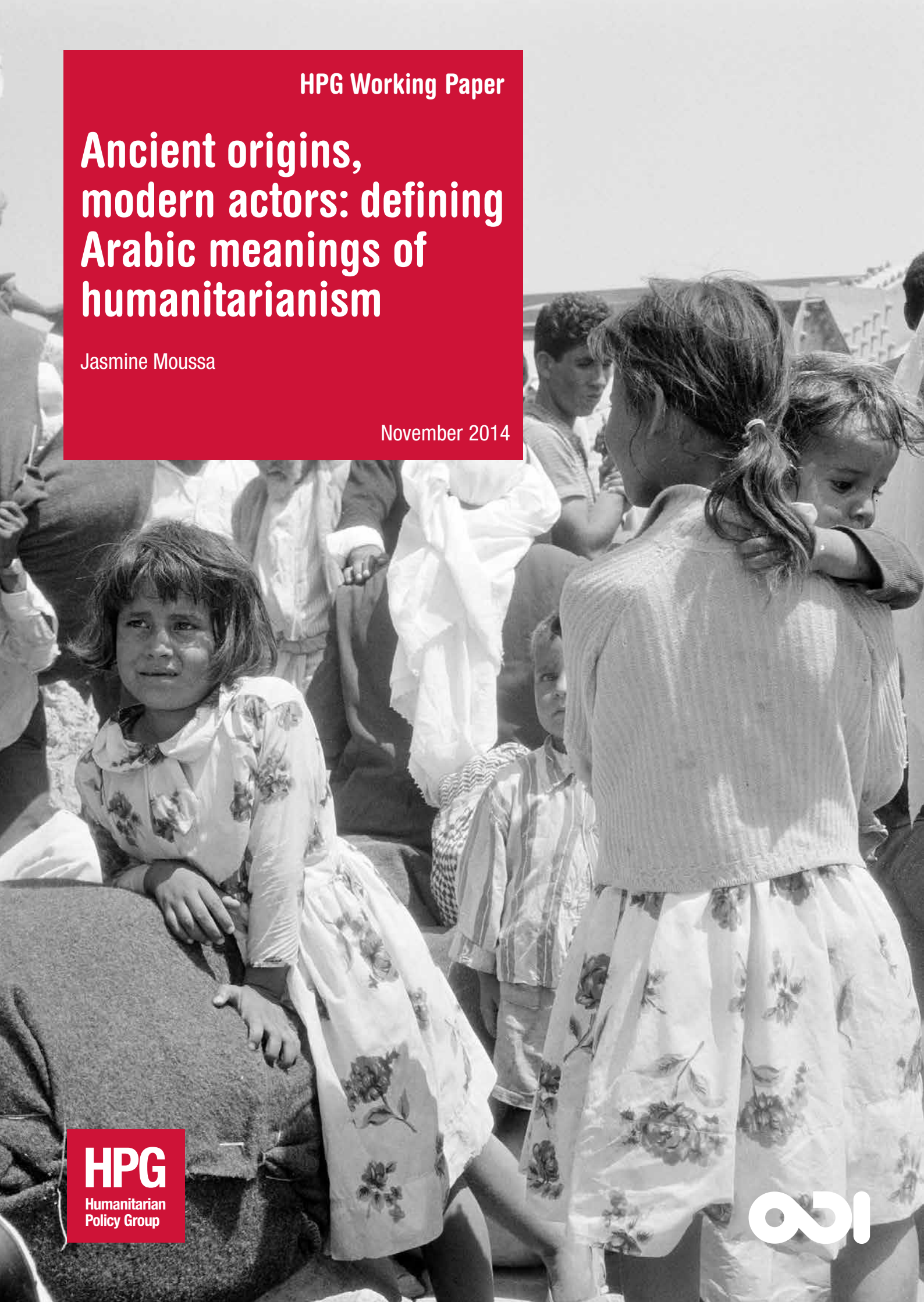


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Ancient origins, modern actors: defining Arabic meanings of humanitarianism

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1 Introduction

Humanitarianism in the Arab region is in perpetual evolution. Although it has a relatively constant essential core, it has undergone multiple modifications, adapting with time, place and circumstance. While there is very little scholarship in Arabic on ‘humanitarianism’ as either a lexical term or as a concept, the majority of Arabic scholarly work that does exist uses the term *insāniya* (and the masculine form *insānī*) to denote charitable work in general. Neither term appears in classical Arabic dictionaries, yet the values each embodies are reflected in a number of other concepts, such as *an-najda* and *al-is‘āf* (help, rescue), which were embedded in ancient Arab culture. These concepts originated from an Arab moral code that encouraged generosity towards the needy, particularly through providing water, food and shelter in a hostile natural environment.

This study – part of the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)’s project on ‘A Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action’ – examines the concept of ‘humanitarianism’ as it has evolved in the Arabic language, particularly over the twentieth century. The study explores the aetiology and evolution of the Arabic definition of humanitarianism and the context in which it has been used. Because it is concerned with both the lexical and idiomatic definitions of *insāniya*, as well as the concept’s historical development in a more general sense, it explores how different terms have been used to denote what is now understood to comprise humanitarian action. It also examines how humanitarianism has been practiced in the region, and how different actors converge or diverge from the ‘classical’ conception of humanitarianism guided by the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

1.1 Methodology and scope

In all Arab states Arabic is spoken as an official language, while the majority religion is Islam. The principles of the Islamic faith, therefore, have had a decisive influence on the framework under which local (and regional) humanitarian action takes place, although other faith-based humanitarian action (most notably Christian) is also influential.

The complexity of the Arabic language and the multiplicity of meanings of the term *insānī/insāniya* present formidable challenges to tracing the concept’s historical origins and the evolution of its usage. Although written Arabic is more or less uniform throughout the Arab world, the vocabulary of modern Arabic is not standardised. This is due to the character of written Arabic, which is strongly influenced by tradition (adherence to ancient linguistic norms), while simultaneously seeking to adapt and express a multitude of new concepts – many of which are foreign – for a considerable number of countries situated over a large geographic area (Wehr, 1961: vii, ix).

Another peculiarity of the Arab region, which has greatly influenced the present study, is that during the historical period under investigation, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Cairo became the centre of a cultural and intellectual renaissance (known as the Revival or *an-nahda*), which later spread to Beirut and Damascus (Hourani, 2002: 303–304). The influence of Egyptian (and to a lesser extent Lebanese and Syrian) literary sources and other publications on the development of the Arabic language was remarkable,¹ and this is reflected in the sources used in this paper, many of which were produced in Egypt.

In terms of scope, the study is limited to West Asia and North Africa (hereafter referred to as the ‘Arab region’). This region spans a large geographical area between Iraq to the east and Morocco to the west. Until the end of the First World War, the states currently comprising the Arab region were all part of the Ottoman Empire. As a consequence, the modern history of humanitarianism in the region cannot be understood in isolation from the broader political context, namely internal developments within the Ottoman Empire and European ambitions in the Empire during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

1 For example, Wehr’s *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (1961), published in Germany and then in Lebanon, relied mainly on Egyptian primary source materials, such as the writings of Tāhā Husain, Mohamed Husain Haikal, Tawfiq al-Hakīm, Mahmud Taimur and Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfalutī, as well as Egyptian newspapers and periodicals, in addition to some sources from other Arab countries.

The study begins by examining authoritative Arab language and bilingual dictionaries in order to trace the evolution of terminology used to describe what is now understood to constitute humanitarianism, and analyses the impact of Islamic and Arab culture and tradition on humanitarianism. Section 3 discusses the influence of colonial interventions on the evolution of humanitarianism in the Arab region. It investigates local narratives, which indicate that the concept of *insāniya* has been greatly influenced by the legacy of Western colonial ambitions in the Ottoman Empire, and discusses the rise of ‘Islamic relief’ as a tool of resistance against the hegemony of ‘Western’ notions of humanitarianism. Section 4 addresses the rise of

institutionalised forms of humanitarianism, with a case study on the Egyptian Red Crescent Society, whose humanitarian relief agenda was historically influenced by notions of solidarity and nationalism. Section 5 examines the impact of the Arab–Israeli conflict on ideas of humanitarianism. In particular, it examines the interaction between the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and local humanitarian actors in the Occupied Territories, and its impact on understandings of humanitarianism. Finally, Section 5 explores the development of institutional discourses on ‘humanitarianism’ within the Arab region’s most important inter-governmental organisation, the League of Arab States (LAS).

2 The meaning and roots of humanitarianism in Arab tradition

2.1 Defining humanitarianism

The term ‘humanitarianism’ does not have a single accepted rendition in the Arabic language. The most comprehensive and authoritative Arabic dictionary, *Mo‘jam Lisan al-Arab*, compiled in the thirteenth century and reprinted in 1882 and 1968, contains no entry for *insānīya* under the root *ins* (Ibn Manzur, 1968: I, 150). Although the term does not appear in authoritative dictionaries of classical Arabic, it does appear in bilingual dictionaries, which indicates that it may have come into use in Arabic through translation.

The values reflected in the concept *insānīya* find their origins in the Arabic words *an-najda* and *al-is‘āf*. The development of these two words is closely tied to the particular environment of water scarcity in the Arab region, which led to rivalry between Arab tribes over control of water and pastures. The word *an-najda* (help or rescue) was the first term used by Arabs to describe the provision of assistance during raids by other tribes. *Al-is‘āf* has a similar meaning to *an-najda*, but includes an element of urgency. The meaning of both of these words has evolved in modern times, and today they are used to denote the institutions of the police and ambulance (or emergency) services (Shousha, 2014).

While the word *insānīya* does not appear in the classical Arabic dictionaries, the concept is captured by a number of other terms, including *najda*, *is‘āf*, *ighātha*, *ghawth*, *musā‘ada*, *i‘ana* (and its root ‘*awn* and derivatives such as *mā‘una*). These words have overlapping meanings and can all be used to describe assistance, aid, rescue and relief. *Mo‘jam Lisan al-Arab* defines the word *ighātha* and its root *ghawth* (which both have the same meaning) as ‘God has responded to his call for assistance’, while *is‘āf* is defined as ‘*al-i‘āna wa qadā’ al-hāja ... wal-musā‘ada*’ (‘help, meeting someone’s needs ... and assistance’) (Ibn Manzur, 1968: V, 3,312). The *Dictionary of*

Modern Written Arabic (Wehr, 1961: 687) defines *ghawth* as ‘to help, succor someone, go to the aid of someone’, and *ighātha* as ‘help, aid, succor’. *Al-Mawrid* (Baalbaki, 1981: 774), an authoritative English–Arabic dictionary, contains an entry for relief, which is translated into *is‘āf* and *i‘ana* (assistance) ‘to the poor, elderly, etc.’, as well as *najda harbiya* (wartime rescue) ‘to rescue a besieged city, etc.’. All these words have wide semantic ranges and overlapping meanings. These terms have been used since the late nineteenth century to denote what is now considered humanitarian action or assistance, while the terms *insānī* and *insānīya* appear to have developed a specialised usage only very recently.

The word *insānīya* appears in a number of bilingual (Arabic–English and English–Arabic) dictionaries published in the second half of the twentieth century. The *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, compiled mainly between 1940–44 and 1946–48, contains an entry for both *insānī*, which is translated as ‘human, humane, humanitarian, philanthropist’ and *insānīya*, translated as ‘humanity, civility, mankind, the human race’ (Wehr, 1961: 687). Similarly, the English–Arabic dictionary *al-Mawrid* (Baalbaki, 1981: 438) defines ‘humanitarian’ as *khayir* and *muhsin*. It elaborates that *khayir* means someone who likes the public good and social reform, while *muhsin* means someone who provides *ihsān* or good deeds. It translates ‘humanity’ to *insānīya*, but also *shafaqa* (pity or sympathy) and *honow* (compassion). The same definitions appear in consecutive editions of *al-Mawrid* from 1981 to 2007. The complete and unabridged edition, published in 2008, includes a more detailed entry for ‘humanitarianism’. In addition to the definition in previous editions, the 2008 edition defines humanitarianism as ‘*al-khayirīya*: (a) the belief that human obligations are limited to the good and interest of the human race, (b) the belief that the human race can progress and achieve perfection without divine assistance’ (author’s translation) (Baalbaki,

2008: 917). This definition seems to have confused ‘humanitarianism’ with ‘humanism’, a theoretical and philosophical standpoint which also translates into *al-insānīya* in Arabic. In both the bilingual dictionaries examined, humanitarianism is equated with charity and philanthropy, indicating the lack of a specialised meaning for this term.

The word *insānīya* was popularised during the 1960s through the proliferation of scholarly works on ‘humanism’ (Esposito, 2004; al-Hakīm, 2003: 21; Abu Zahra, 1967: 10–12). This use of the word *insānīya* crystallised as a reaction to the growing influence of leftist political thought in the Arab region. One of these studies describes Islam as a humanitarian system (*nizām insānī*). Throughout the study, the author uses the term *insānīya* in three different contexts. The first is Islam’s cosmopolitanism (having transformed the social and political systems in the Arabian Peninsula from tribalism to internationalism – simultaneously referred to as *umamīya* and *insānīya*). This is predicated on the idea of the unity of the human race (*al-wehda al-insānīya*), reflected in verses 23:51 and 23:52 of the Quran, which stipulate the following: ‘O Messengers, eat of the good things and do righteousness; surely I know the things you do. Surely this *umma* (community/nation) of yours is one *umma*, and I am your Lord; so have piety towards Me’. The second sense of *insānīya* relates to Islam as a worldly religion that is not confined to the realm of spirituality, but is equally concerned with matters of daily life and hence capable of adapting to the needs and developments of modern society. The third sense of the word *insānīya* relates to Islam’s early endorsement of human values and human rights principles, such as justice, tolerance and equality (al-Rifā‘ī, 1964: 16, 20–21, 47–48, 49–50, 48–60).

Al-insānīya is at once a noun, an adjective and an adverb. *Al-insānīya* (and *al-insānī*) as an adjective and an adverb can only be given meaning when associated with a particular actor or action. For instance, humanitarian work or action translates to *al-‘amal al-insānī*, humanitarian assistance to *al-musā‘ada al-insānīya* and humanitarian intervention to *al-tadakhul al-insānī*. Humanitarian workers are *al-‘āmilīn fīl-majāl al-insānī* (literally those working in the humanitarian field). Defining ‘humanitarianism’ in Arabic is further complicated by the fact that the suffix ‘ism’ – used in English to denote a particular philosophy or ideology – does not exist in the Arabic language. The Arabic word *al-insānīya*

at once translates to ‘humanity’, ‘humanitarian’, ‘humanitarianism’ and ‘humanism’, contributing to the ambiguity of the term (Benthall, 2012: 2).

Much of the scholarly work from the region uses the words *insānīya* (humanitarian) and *khayrīya* (charitable) synonymously. For example, Ṭal‘at Ibrāhīm Lutfī (2004: 17, 49), a sociologist at the United Arab Emirates University, explores the development of charity work (*al-‘amal al-khayrī*) and humanitarian work (*al-‘amal al-insānī*) in the UAE without any distinction between the two terms. He refers to charitable organisations as *al-jam‘iyāt al-khayrīya al-insānīya* (‘charitable humanitarian organisations’), which suggests that he is using the two words *khayrīya* and *insānīya* interchangeably. He provides a typology of non-governmental ‘charitable humanitarian organisations’ based on eight categories: religious, feminist, professional, folkloric arts, cultural, humanitarian service organisations (which includes charitable organisations), theatres and emigrant organisations. Although Lutfī uses the terms synonymously throughout his work, at some points he implicitly distinguishes between charitable and humanitarian work: charitable work involves providing *sadaqa*, *birr* and *ihsān*, constructing mosques and caring for orphans, while humanitarian work involves caring for ‘particular disadvantaged segments of society’, such as people with disabilities, the elderly, juvenile delinquents and prisoners, as well as social work in areas that pose a threat to society such as ‘protection of the environment, consumer protection and the work of the Red Crescent’ (p. 18). Again, this suggests a conflation of the two concepts *insānīya* and *khayrīya*.

2.2 Islam and charitable giving

As the predominant religion in the Arab region, Islam has had an important impact on the development of the concept of *al-insānīya*. Just like the English term ‘humanitarianism’, the origins of *al-insānīya* cannot be dissociated from the concepts of charity, philanthropy and compassion (Barnett, 2011: 20). This is even more so in Arabic, where the distinction between these concepts is not as developed as it is in English. Numerous studies from the region refer to humanitarian and relief work under the rubric of philanthropic activity or social service (Jawad, 2009: 100; Lutfī, 2004; al-Shakiry, 2002: 60–61, 100). The discourse and practice of Islamic charitable giving are

therefore central to humanitarian and relief work in the Arab region.

Arab societies were among the first to establish specialised charitable organisations (through charitable arms within religious institutions). Although traditional giving practices were historically managed by religious bodies, modern philanthropic institutions are increasingly gaining prominence throughout the Arab region (Ibrahim, 2008: 10–11). There is a wealth of literature analysing religious (particularly Islamic, but also Christian) conceptions of charity and philanthropy and grounding Arab charitable and voluntary work in religious principles (Jawad, 2009: 100; Lutfi, 2004; Ibrahim and Sherif (eds), 2008: 3–11).

Although the 1999 *Mu‘jam al-mustalahāt wa-al-alfāz al-fiqhīya* (*Dictionary of Jurisprudential Terms and Words*) does not include the term *insāniya* or *al-‘amal al-insānī* among the terms of art that exist under Islamic jurisprudence, the concept of ‘humanitarianism’ is reflected in key Islamic principles. The dictionary, for example, includes the word *ighātha*, which is defined as assistance (*i‘āna* and *nusra*) in the case of hardship or distress (*al-shidda* or *al-dīq*) (Abdelmon‘em, 1999: 222, 240, 309). Local scholars refer to the Muslim Prophet Mohammed as a strong proponent of generosity and social solidarity, values that encouraged the provision of relief or assistance to the distressed (*ighathat al-malhūf*) (Lutfi, 2004: 16–17).

There are several concepts for charitable giving in Islam. These include: ‘*atā’ khayrī* (charitable giving), *birr* and *mabarra* (good works), *sadaqa* (voluntary giving), *awqāf* (endowments – the plural of *waqf*) and *zakāt* (obligatory religious tithing – derived from the Greek word δεκάτη (*dekate* – a tenth part) (Ibrahim and Sherif (eds), 2008: 3; Shousha, 2014). Under Islamic rules on *zakāt*, there are eight categories of persons to whom *zakāt* is owed, including ‘travellers (in distress)’ and ‘the passing stranger’, which could include refugees in modern-day parlance. The early Islamic Caliphate collected *zakāt* and redistributed wealth by providing food for the needy, particularly in times of famine. Projects financed by *waqf* included shelters and mobile hospitals (Krafess, 2005: 333–34; Mansour and Ezzat, 2009: 119). Within the category of *sadaqa*, there is a special type of giving known as *sadaqa jāriya* (recurring alms/charity, a concept closely related to *waqf*), which is a type of charity that perpetually benefits people even beyond the almsgiver’s lifetime (such as digging wells or providing

water supply systems from which people can benefit over a long period of time). Scholars refer to Quranic verses on *khayr*, *sadaka*, *birr* and *ihāsān* as well as prophetic *ḥadīths* (sayings and traditions of the Prophet Mohammed) as a framework for charitable and humanitarian work, such as the *ḥadīth* enjoining Muslims to ‘rescue prisoners, feed the hungry and look after the ill’ (Krafess, 2005: 328; Lutfi, 2004: 16–17; Atia, 2011; Atia, 2008: 28).² Theoretically, non-Muslims can also be beneficiaries of charitable giving by Muslims (Mansour and Ezzat, 2009: 119; Krafess, 2005: 333–34). Islamic philanthropy and social work are inspired by visions of achieving justice and the ‘common good’ (Mansour and Ezzat, 2006: 122). These concepts have validated humanitarian action by local actors within the borders of single states in the Arab region, as well as across political boundaries. Although many of these humanitarian actors avoid religious rhetoric, a distinctly Islamic ethos has influenced the range of actions and services that they are willing to provide.

In addition to *khayr*, *birr*, *sadaqa*, *kaffāra* and *zakāt*, another Islamic principle – *jihād* – has also been advanced as a foundation for modern-day humanitarian and voluntary work. Translated literally, *jihād* means ‘striving’ or ‘effort’, and when followed by the phrase *fi sabil Allah* it means striving in the path of God. *Jihād* is widely understood as having two aspects: military action with the intention of spreading Islam or in its defence (also known as ‘lesser *jihād*’); and ‘greater *jihād*’, which represents the inner struggle against the self or the exertion of ‘spiritual warfare’ against human passions and desires (Cook, 2001: 2–3; Bonner, 2006; Streusand, 1997: 9–17). A number of contemporary scholars have advanced doctrines of peaceful *jihād* as a concept that encompasses social and political action for justice and equality. While the view of *jihād* as humanitarianism or voluntary or social work is not yet widespread, it is increasingly being adopted by non-governmental organisations and political leaders in order to mobilise for social reform, economic development and poverty eradication (al-Shakiry, 2002: 35–43; Streusand, 1997).

Some scholars, such as Farouk Shousha (2014), the Secretary-General of the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo, also relate the concepts of ‘humanitarianism’, philanthropy and charity to pre-Islamic Arab tribal values, including *karam* and *jūd* (generosity). These

2 Sahih al-Bukhari, Volume 7, Book 70, No 552.

values developed within a particular milieu in which constant competition over water and scarce resources (pasture and food) compelled small tribes to seek the assistance and protection of larger ones. The concept of generosity central to Arab culture and tradition arose from this phenomenon. The *karīm* was the person who gave life through providing food and water, while the *bakhīl* was the person who took life by depriving the needy of food and water. From generosity, the values of charity and compassion were born, as well as a system of social solidarity to support weaker members of society. With the advent of Islam, these ancient values were reinvented under different names.

More recent local tribal traditions provide another source of inspiration for humanitarianism, voluntary and charitable work, particularly in the Arab Gulf. One example is a principle known as *faz'a* (a synonym of *ighātha*), according to which members of the extended family or the tribe would provide assistance to those in distress in circumstances such as illness, death of the family breadwinner, the sinking of a ship or other disaster. The principle of *al-shufa* guaranteed that citizens would assist their leader in cases of emergency or extraordinary circumstances. The principles of *al-ijāra* and *al-dakhla* provided protection for individuals and tribes fearing for their lives and security. Finally, through the tradition of the *mesafer-khana*, shelter, food and material assistance were provided to travellers and those in need (*'al-takāful al-ijtimā'i*; Lutfi, 2004).

The influence of pre-Islamic and Islamic notions of charity on local and 'Islamic' humanitarian and relief organisations has practical manifestations. For example, local organisations involved in relief and humanitarian work include the digging of wells and provision of water as a central part of their mandate to provide humanitarian assistance. Similarly, several relief organisations, such as United Muslim Relief (based in the United States), include the provision of 'Ramadan Food Baskets' among their range of activities, or focus on providing aid to orphans, a well-grounded Islamic practice (Benedetti, 2006: 95). Although the provision of water and food is also a feature of Western relief organisations, in the context of Islamic local and regional organisations it is inspired by the value attached to providing water to the thirsty in pre-Islamic Arabia (where the Arab traditions of *karam* and *jūd* were founded on the provision of food and water) and Islamic Arabia (where providing water

is considered *sadaqa jāriya*) (al-Khan, 2014).³ One prophetic tradition describes the provision of drinking water as the best form of charity (Sunan Abu Dawud, 1681: Book 9, *ḥadīth* 126).

2.3 Early actors in the humanitarian field

Attitudes towards the concept of 'humanitarianism' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be discerned from some significant early writings, such as those of Sheikh Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905), a judge and later the Grand Mufti of Egypt and one of the most prominent figures of the modernist renaissance movement (*an-nahda*). This movement was later extended to Damascus partly through the intellectual contribution of 'Abduh's disciple, Rashid Rida. 'Abduh was a staunch proponent of voluntary work and published frequently in national newspapers on issues related to charitable giving and volunteerism.

'Abduh's writings indicate that providing relief and assistance to people in disaster and conflict situations was already a well-developed practice in nineteenth century Egypt. In an 1881 article, 'Abduh expressed his support for the Egyptian government's decision to establish a 'Committee for the Assistance of Pilgrims' (*lajnat i'ānat al-ḥujjāj*) in the wake of a cholera epidemic. In what he described as an act of 'benevolence', the Committee was to provide medical assistance and clean water to affected pilgrims ('Abduh, 1972–74: II, 162–64). The word 'Abduh used to describe the assistance provided is *i'āna*, which can be translated as subsidy, help or assistance. In 1902, 'Abduh established a separate branch of the Islamic Charitable Association (*al-jam'īya al-khairīya al-Islamīya*) to provide *i'āna* to the victims of a large fire. The appeal, published in an Egyptian newspaper in 1902 and referring to the Islamic principle of *birr*, stated that funds would be used to provide food, clothing, shelter and livelihoods for the injured ('Abduh, 1972–74: II, 212–14).

These writings reveal that a specialised meaning of the concepts of *i'āna* and *musā'ada* existed as early as the late nineteenth century. These concepts, which specifically indicated the provision of assistance to

3 See also Islamic Relief UK, <http://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/water>.

people in disaster and conflict situations, may be considered a precursor to the modern concept of *insānīya*. Providing *i'āna* and *musā'ada* (assistance) in disaster and conflict situations seems to have been distinguished from other forms of *khayr* (charity) through separate institutional structures and sources of funding, although they were sometimes justified on the same religious grounds. It is notable that fund-raising for relief relied on motives that were not overtly religious, such as principles of chivalry and solidarity. Although theoretically there was no distinction between beneficiaries of relief, 'Abduh's writings are imbued with an implicit nationalist consciousness and the idea of national solidarity.

The term *insānīya* appears in one of 'Abduh's articles, published in 1880. In the article 'Abduh commends the Egyptian government's role in supporting civil society, particularly to instil in Egyptians a sense of nationalism, 'humanitarian familiarity' (*'ulfa insānīya*) and a duty to cooperate in promoting the public good and alleviating poverty and suffering ('Abduh,

1972–74: II, 7–9). The notion of *insānīya* advocated by 'Abduh denoted a general concern for the welfare of others and a sense of benevolence. *Insānīya* was therefore more broadly defined than *i'āna* and included in its scope all forms of voluntary and charitable work.

In an article published in 1898 'Abduh enjoined Egyptians to donate money to a fund established to assist wounded Egyptian soldiers, over which he presided. This fund seems to have been the precursor to the Egyptian Red Crescent. In the article, 'Abduh uses the terms *i'āna*, *ma'ūna* and *musā'ada* to describe the forms of assistance provided, which included aiding the wounded and providing means of livelihood to injured soldiers and the families of the deceased. The article bases the appeal not on Islamic principles but on the principles of *murū'a* (chivalry), *'ukhuwa* (brotherhood), *khayr* (charity), *shafaqa* (sympathy), *rahma* (mercy) and *ta'āwun* (cooperation). There is only one reference to the Islamic principle of *sadaqa*.

3 Humanitarianism and the colonial legacy in the Middle East

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the Ottoman Empire's treatment of its Christian minorities (the so-called 'Eastern question') became the locus of repeated attempts at intervention by the European powers (Russia, Britain and France). These interventions were born out of the Capitulation agreements, which expanded the European powers' scope for interference in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire from the sixteenth century onwards. They were justified by the idea of 'protecting Christians ruled by a "despotic" and "barbarian" government' (Rodogno, 2012: 30–31). Meanwhile, Christian missionaries became active among Christian minorities, particularly the Greeks, Bulgarians, Assyrians and Armenians. These missionaries, who were convinced of the racial and civilisational superiority of the West, worked under the protection of Western governments and were vehemently hostile to Islam as a religion and way of life, often advocating the 'penetration' and 'occupation' of Ottoman territories (Tusan, 2012: 4; Salt, 2002: 290, 306). This historical backdrop of intervention – justified on moral, religious and humanitarian grounds – greatly influenced the development of the concept of 'humanitarianism' in the territories that emerged from the Ottoman Empire.

3.1 Local narratives and colonially imposed humanitarianism

A brief exploration of historical sources from the Arab region underscores how current attitudes towards humanitarianism reflect a tension between *insānīya*, as a principle born of Islamic and Arab traditions of charitable giving, and humanitarianism as a legacy of Western colonial ambition and an attempt to displace local (Islamic) practices, laws and customs. Local narratives of the so-called 'Eastern question' highlight the scepticism with which foreign intervention in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire was

viewed in the Arab territories under Ottoman rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Mustapha Kamil Pasha's⁴ account of the Eastern question (1909) locates its origin in the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca concluded with Russia in the aftermath of the Russo–Turkish War of 1768–74. For the first time, the treaty formally guaranteed Russian 'protection' (*himāya*) over Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire, in particular Eastern Orthodox Christians. The 'protection' of Christian minorities in Ottoman territories became the principal bone of contention in the Ottoman Empire's relations with Europe until the early twentieth century. Under the terms of the 1774 treaty, Russia intervened in Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, the Balkans and Georgia. Earlier, France had claimed the position of protector of the Ottoman Catholic and Maronite communities in Lebanon, while Britain became the protector of the Empire's Protestants and Jews (Hafez, 1986: 245; Rodogno, 2012: 29).

In his account, Kamil Pasha (1909) portrays European intervention in the Ottoman Empire through the lens of great power rivalry and geostrategic and economic interests, justified under the false pretext of protecting the 'rights of Christians'. To corroborate this, he repeatedly emphasises that Christian minorities were granted extensive rights and freedoms under Ottoman rule, as well as autonomy and official equality with Muslims.⁵ As part of this narrative, he argues that Christian minorities themselves (such as Greek rebels, for example) were engaged in massacres of civilians,

4 Mustapha Kamil Pasha was an Egyptian lawyer and nationalist who led the struggle against the British occupation of Egypt, which lasted from 1882 to 1922.

5 In order to counter Russian intervention, the Ottoman Empire agreed (under British and French pressure) to a series of administrative, political and economic reforms between 1839 and 1876, through which Christians were granted autonomy and formal equality (Rodogno, 2012: 27).

women and children. The word *insānīya* appears several times in Kamil Pasha's book, mostly in quotations from translated texts. For example, in relation to the Greek rebellion against Ottoman rule he quotes from a letter by an unnamed French official in Izmir which states that the rebels 'used all means of deception to collect money in the name of *al-insānīya*' (Kamil, 1909). He also quotes a translation of an article appearing in the London *Times* on 12 July 1877 in relation to the Bulgarian war, which stated that it was not a 'humanitarian war' (*ḥarb insānīya*) but rather a war of terror waged by the Russians and Bulgarians against the Turks. The text therefore implies that the discourse of humanitarianism was manipulated to promote the European colonial project.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Ottoman Empire had become materially and militarily weak; it had lost all its territories in Europe and was ravaged by separatist movements throughout the Arab region. Its demise was sealed by the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, which divided the spoils of the empire between Britain, France and Russia. After the end of the First World War in 1918, the former Ottoman territories fell under the tutelage of the international community through the League of Nations mandate system. Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine were mandated to the British, and Syria and Lebanon to the French. 'Humanitarianism' in the Middle East was henceforth brought under the ambit of the League of Nations' mandate system, although humanitarian efforts continued through volunteer and relief organisations such as the Armenian Red Cross, Save the Children, the Armenian Refugees Fund and Friends of Armenia (Tusan, 2012: 117–19; Wattenpaugh, 2010: 1,320).

Humanitarian work under the League of Nations was perceived by its protagonists as a 'permanent, transnational, institutional, and secular regime for understanding and addressing the root causes of human suffering', although it still possessed elements of earlier forms of 'humanitarianism' (Wattenpaugh, 2010: 1,319). For example, it was predicated on the occupation of Ottoman territories, the reduction of their sovereignty and the institutionalisation of their subordinate status through the mandate system. This meant that 'Western-originated' humanitarian projects, such as the rescue of deported and displaced Armenians, could now be implemented. Like its predecessor, this new, non-forcible 'humanitarianism' was perceived by Turks and Arab Muslims in the Middle East as a violation of national sovereignty and an affront to national and religious

customary practices (Wattenpaugh, 2010: 1,320–21, 1336; Tusan, 2012: 117–18).

In North Africa, local accounts of French colonial adventures in the Arab Maghreb similarly stressed that European powers were attempting to legitimise their colonial endeavours through paying lip-service to ideas of humanitarianism. For example, in the introduction to the Arabic translation of Albert Ayache's 1956 volume on the French Protectorate over Morocco (1912–56), *Al-Maghrib wal-Isti'mar*, Idris bin Sa'īd and 'Abd al-Aḥad al-Sabtī (1985: 6) discuss how French colonialists promoted the idea that the Arabs in Morocco were oppressive usurpers who had imposed their religion, culture and forms of social organisation on the indigenous Berbers. The only alternative to Arab/Muslim despotism was therefore French colonial rule. It is within this context that scholars from the region came to present humanitarianism and colonialism as two concepts in a symbiotic relationship.

This theme similarly appears in recent literature from the region on forcible humanitarian intervention (*al-tadakhul al-insānī*). For example, the former president of the Arab Organisation for Human Rights, Abdul Husain Sha'bān (2004: 34–41), traces the rise of modern 'humanitarian intervention' – in particular the imposition of no-fly zones over Northern Iraq – to the legacy of protection of religious minorities and foreign nationals in the region. The author portrays such intervention as hegemonic; it is political but dressed in 'humanitarian' garb. Sha'bān argues that, despite recent developments that have 'universalised' human rights, the legacy of foreign intervention under the guise of humanitarianism has allowed Arab governments to dismiss 'humanitarian intervention' as a politically motivated form of foreign intrusion. Although the core values of 'humanitarianism' are arguably of universal validity (a number of works (Krafess, 2005; Mansour and Ezzat, 2009; Jawad, 2009; Luṭfī, 2004) are dedicated to unearthing the roots of humanitarianism – broadly defined – in Islamic thought), the colonial legacy has nonetheless informed attitudes and policies towards Western humanitarian and relief work in the region.

3.2 'Islamic relief'

Another legacy of colonialism in the Arab region has been the so-called 'Islamic resurgence', a twentieth century movement of renewed interest in Islamic

identity and community born as a form of anti-colonial liberation discourse. One manifestation of this development has been the rise of ‘Islamic relief’⁶ as a reaction to ‘Western’ relief organisations. Islamic actors posit ‘Western’ humanitarianism as a tool of power and hegemony, and Islamic relief as a tool for resistance against neo-colonialism and marginalisation. This has led to three dichotomies that shape the language of humanitarianism in the region: universality versus solidarity, neutrality versus justice and secularism versus religion (Juul Petersen, 2011: 73, 84).

‘Islamic relief’, or *ighātha islamīya*, has been adopted by several charitable organisations as an expression of Pan-Islamic solidarity coinciding with the rise of more conservative forms of political Islam in the 1970s and 1980s. The famines and conflicts in Sudan, Somalia, Bosnia and Afghanistan provided an important field of action for these organisations, many of which operated on the premise that Islamic obligations in the area of charitable giving are owed to Muslims only. They did not restrict their actions to the ‘neutral’ and ‘universal’ provision of humanitarian relief, but often provided solidarity and support for a particular party in a conflict, such as supporting the Afghan *jihād* against the Soviets, declaring solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada and calling for mobilisation in support of Bosnian Muslims (Daly and Petry (eds), 1998: 383; Abdo, 2000: 97; Wickham, 2014: 219). In other words, Islamic relief sometimes included moral support to suffering Muslims or outright *jihād* (such as the armed struggle to support the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan and later the Bosnian Muslims). The concept of ‘solidarity’ – which is not only advocated by Islamic relief NGOs but equally by NGOs from the Third World as well as some ‘Christian’ NGOs – is rooted in Islamic notions of the pursuit of justice and the ‘common good’ and is inherently at odds with the concepts of neutrality and impartiality at the core of ‘classical’ humanitarianism (Juul Petersen, 2011: 96; Slim, 1997).

‘Islamic relief’ developed as a reaction to the increased role of what were perceived to be ‘Western’ NGOs and inter-governmental agencies in conflict situations

in the Arab and Muslim worlds: it was an attempt to ‘reappropriat[e] contemporary forms of humanitarian action’ and ground humanitarian work in the Islamic tradition of charitable giving (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan, 2003: 70). Although small in number, some organisations providing ‘Islamic relief’ include proselytising or ‘spreading the *da‘wā*’ within the ambit of their humanitarian work (Mansour and Ezzat, 2009: 128; Weissman, 2007: 321; Abdel Hady, 1995: 98–102). These organisations are strongly grounded in Islamic religious discourse and are predominantly active in Africa and in countries with sizeable Muslim minorities (Benedetti, 2006: 856; Mansour and Ezzat, 2009: 128; Juul Petersen, 2011: 153–55). The diversity of action of Islamic relief organisations has often blurred the distinction between humanitarianism, militarism and missionary activities.

Some Islamic relief organisations, such as the International Islamic Relief Organisation in Saudi Arabia, enjoy strong state support (Benedetti, 2006: 855). States in the region with more secular political regimes, however, view such organisations with suspicion, accusing them of pursuing an exclusively political rather than humanitarian agenda. This was the case with the Humanitarian Relief Committee of the Doctors’ Syndicate in Egypt, which was taken over by the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s, and the Jordanian ‘Green Crescent Society’ established in the aftermath of the 1990–91 Gulf War. By providing relief where government entities have failed, these organisations are considered a challenge to the state’s authority and competitors with national Red Crescent Societies, which have largely resisted Islamist infiltration (Mansour and Ezzat, 2009: 118; Abdo, 2000: 96–97; Benthall, 1997: 176; Daly and Petry (eds), 1998: 383; Wickham, 2014: 219).

Fundraising for ‘Islamic relief’ organisations occurs through contributions by Muslims, particularly through *zakāt* and *waqf*. This often necessitates an alternative interpretation of the categories of recipients of *zakāt* and an expanded notion of *sadaqa*, which emphasises volunteerism in addition to financial contributions (Atia, 2013: 156; Abdel-Hady, 1995: 98–102; Mansour and Ezzat, 2009: 120). The rise in oil prices in 1979 prompted a trend in Arab Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait – which espoused Pan-Islamic ideologies – to contribute financially to Islamic relief organisations. This coincided with the Soviet invasion

6 Because the term ‘Islamic’ can be contested and can carry different meanings according to the context, ‘Islamic’ organisations as referred to here as those that identify themselves as such (see Juul Petersen (2011: 46) for a similar definition).

of Afghanistan (1979–89), which was politically opposed by the Arab Gulf. The result was increased financial support for Islamic relief in Afghanistan (as well as political support from the United States) (Juul Petersen, 2011: 96–97).

However, this support began to wane in the 1990s and was radically reversed after the events of 9/11, which had a profound effect on Islamic relief organisations. Many of these organisations were accused of condoning or even actively supporting and funding terrorist activities. Subsequent counter-terrorism legislation has led to increased regulation and control over Islamic relief organisations, putting further pressure on Islamic relief and charitable organisations. Many have seen their financial support dwindle as donors (individuals and international organisations) feel that they could inadvertently breach legislation and be accused of supporting terrorist groups. A distinction has emerged between ‘extremist’ and ‘moderate’ organisations, with many of the former banned and many of the latter reinventing themselves – for pragmatic purposes – as quasi-secular organisations (Juul Petersen, 2011: 49, 100–104).

The recent emergence of the term *takāful insānī* (humanitarian solidarity) has contributed to the

ambiguity of the term *insānī/insānīya* in Arabic. Although this term is not in wide circulation, organisations with the words ‘humanitarian solidarity’ in their names are cropping up throughout the region. One example, the Society for Humanitarian Solidarity in Yemen, provides relief services to Somali refugees, as well as supporting orphans, the elderly, the poor and needy, in addition to ‘humanitarian and relief work’ (Ibrahim, 2008: 10–11).⁷ The term ‘humanitarian solidarity’ arises most frequently in relation to humanitarianism in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where local Palestinian humanitarian actors reject the principles of neutrality and impartiality as having an ‘Israeli bias’, and emphasise the importance of demonstrating solidarity with what they perceive to be the just cause of the Palestinian people. The concept of a secular approach to humanitarianism as practiced by many ‘Western’ NGOs is not easily understood by some Islamic actors, many of which adhere to a culture of Islamic aid that perceives religion as ‘all-encompassing and relevant to all spheres of life’ (Juul Petersen, 2011: 85). Neutrality is replaced by solidarity – which inevitably involves taking sides.

7 See also Society for Humanitarian Solidarity, http://shsyemen.org/en/?page_id=147.

4 Institutionalised humanitarianism: the Egyptian Red Crescent Society

Red Crescent societies in the Arab region were initially concerned with providing medical assistance to sick and wounded soldiers, then later expanded their mandates to include charitable and development work during times of peace. The policies, practice and rhetoric of these organisations oscillated between the religious and the secular, universalism and nationalist loyalties, while their mandates were often influenced by broader political considerations and ties of nationalism. Because the Egyptian Red Crescent Society (ERCS) is the oldest Arab Red Crescent Society and the second to operate in the region after the Ottoman Red Crescent, its historical evolution will be examined here as a case study of the role of institutionalised humanitarianism.

On 19 April 1898, the official state newspaper *Al-Ahram* reported the establishment of the ERCS with a mandate to provide *musā'ada* (assistance) to Egyptian casualties of the Sudan Campaign (a joint Anglo-Egyptian military campaign to quell the Mahdist Revolt in Sudan) and their families. The article refers to this effort as a 'charitable project' (*mashrū' khairī*) and a humanitarian act ('*amal insānī*'), in what appears to be a very early use of the term *insānī*. The article appealed to readers' sympathy (*shafaqa*), compassion (*ḥanān*) and 'humanitarian chivalry' (*almurū'a al-insānīya*) (Kemali (ed.), 2008: 10). Less than a month later, the ERCS was officially established under the royal patronage of the Khedive, with Sheikh Muhammad 'Abduh as its chairman. However, the organisation proved short-lived; it ceased to function once the mission to assist the casualties of the Sudan Campaign had been completed.

After several years of inaction, the ERCS was re-established in 1911 under the chairmanship of Sheikh Yusuf Ali, a prominent journalist and Islamist thinker. At the time Egypt was under Ottoman suzerainty but had been occupied by the British. The Society was established as a response to the conflict in

Libya between Italy and the Ottomans which began in September 1911. The ERCS's stated objective was to provide assistance to civilians and military casualties in Tripoli, with the aim of assisting (*musā'adat* and *nusrat*) the Ottoman Empire and the people of Tripoli against the Italian invaders (Kemali (ed.), 2008: 16–18; de Zogheb, 1943: 3).

The ERCS's role in the conflict must be assessed against the backdrop of the political circumstances of the time (reflected in a number of contemporaneous newspapers, including the popular *al-Mu'ayid*, published by Yusuf Ali). When the war broke out, the United Kingdom (which had established a protectorate over Egypt) declared its support for the Italian invasion, forcing Egypt's government to declare neutrality. Egypt was thus formally prevented from providing any military or other assistance to the Ottoman Empire or the people of Tripoli. However, both weapons and troops were smuggled from Egypt to assist the resistance. A huge campaign was launched by privately owned newspapers to collect financial contributions to assist the Ottoman Empire, while the ERCS provided emergency medical relief (*is'āf*) to Ottoman war casualties. The Egyptian royal family, which was connected by blood to the Ottoman royals, was one of the largest (if not the largest) contributors to the ERCS assistance effort during the war, organising donation drives and providing from their own personal wealth. The largest contributor, who later came to be known as *Um al-muḥsenīn* (the mother of benefactors), was Khedive Abbas Helmy II's mother, Amina Hanem Elhamy, who remained one of the largest supporters of the ERCS until her death in 1931 (Kemali (ed.), 2008: 32–35). The ERCS was therefore an instrument in the broader Egyptian endeavour to support the Ottoman war effort, possibly even acting as a substitute for political or military assistance.

Sheikh Yusuf Ali's statements on the 'neutrality' of the ERCS mission are mixed. In October 1911 he said the following:

the people of humanitarian sympathy [shafaqa insānīya] and merciful emotions [al-‘awāṭif al raḥīma] gathered a few days ago in the headquarters of al-Mu‘ayid seeking to establish the Red Crescent Society, whose membership is to be composed mainly of doctors and pharmacists to treat the wounded, nurse the sick and provide emergency relief [is‘āf] to the injured Ottoman [soldiers] in the Italian war. And we have responded to the request of these zealots who call for the most noble humanitarian service [khidma insānīya], urging every doctor or pharmacist who would like to join the Red Crescent mission to inform us (Kemali (ed.), 2008: 22 [author’s translation]).

The organisation’s mission was therefore principally devoted to providing medical aid and assistance to the Ottomans. Kemali (2008: 42) concludes that the ERCS was established ‘to provide humanitarian assistance (*al-musā‘adāt al-insānīya*) to the Arab and Islamic worlds’. This, however, is not consistent with Sheikh Yusuf Ali’s instructions to the members of the Egyptian Red Crescent. In his speech on the occasion of the departure of the first medical mission, he stated:

you will find many Italian casualties who will seek refuge in the hospitals you establish in the name of the Egyptian Red Crescent Society – and perhaps they will be multiples of the casualties of your Muslim brothers there. Treat them as you would treat your brothers equally because the life [nafs] of which the Provider of life [God] said ‘[and whoso saveth the life of one], it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind’⁸ is not the life of an Arab or Turk or Italian, but it is any human life (Kemali (ed.), 2008: 44 [author’s translation]).

When the Italians refused the ERCS entry into Benghazi and Tripoli, Sheikh Ali issued a letter of protest (which was translated and published in the British press) in which he stated that the ERCS’s mission did not discriminate according to belief or race, while claiming that Italy had committed atrocities against ‘general humanity’ (*al-insānīya al-‘āma*). Also notable is the religious rhetoric used to justify the ERCS’s policies and activities, and to generate donations. Local Egyptian newspapers covering the ERCS’s activities used the religious terms

birr and *ihsān* as well as the more neutral *ighātha* to describe the assistance provided (Kemali (ed.), 2008: 42, 47).

Similarly, during the First Balkan War between the Ottomans and an alliance of Balkan territories in 1912–13, the ERCS sent three large missions to Constantinople, Scutari and Yanina made up mainly of medical personnel who provided care for the wounded, in addition to evacuating and feeding tens of thousands of refugees. In order to meet the demands of this large mission, Sheikh Ali ceded the chairmanship of the organisation to Prince Mohamed Ali Tawfiq, the brother of Egypt’s ruler Khedive Abbas Helmy II. The ERCS was therefore officially brought under royal patronage. It continued in its mission of providing medical assistance throughout the First World War (Ibrahim, 2008: 16; Blanchod, Thormeyer and Schoch, 1917; de Zogheb, 1943: 26–31).

Although the ERCS’s ‘impartiality’ and non-discrimination was officially consolidated with the adoption of a new statute and by-laws in February 1913, its operations were still not entirely ‘neutral’. According to the new statute, which was based on the 1864 *Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field*, the ERCS was officially required to provide relief and assistance to enemy casualties. However, the ERCS’s transnational humanitarianism was still often motivated by political factors. For example, in November 1921 it addressed a letter to the Ottoman Red Crescent authorising the transfer of five donations of £1,000 each. This was intended as relief for the victims of the Turkish War of Independence waged by nationalists against the Allies after the occupation and partition of the Ottoman Empire. The letter requested delivery of the money to ‘Marshall Gazi Mustafa Kemal Pasha’, the leader of the Turkish nationalists (later Mustafa Kemal Atatürk), who was not yet the recognised ruler of Turkey.⁹ This is significant in light of the political circumstances at the time, as Egypt itself had recently undergone an unsuccessful attempt at independence. Addressing the donation to Mustafa Kemal Pasha indicated Egypt’s *de facto* recognition of the Republicans before they had gained international

8 Quran, Surat al-Mā‘eda, verse 32; Pickthall’s translation.

9 The letter, held in the Turkish national archive, is reproduced in Chris Gratien, ‘Pounds for Gazi: Charity and Sovereignty in Proto-Republican Turkey’, <http://www.docblog.ottomanhistorypodcast.com/2013/09/kemalists-egypt-red-crescent.html>.

recognition (a year later the Ottoman sultanate was abolished, and in 1923 the Treaty of Lausanne established international recognition of the Turkish Republic). The ERCS's interaction with the Ottoman/Turkish Red Crescent indicates once more that, although 'neutral' in the sense that it was required to treat injured soldiers from all parties to a conflict, in effect its humanitarianism was often in the service of political objectives.

During the 1930s the ERCS underwent several significant changes. Women were admitted as volunteers under the Women's Committee, and over the next decades became important actors within the society (Badran, 1996: 117). The ERCS became engaged in providing relief and assistance to Palestinians and to Ethiopians during the second Italo-Ethiopian War in 1935–36. As part of its transnational activities, the ERCS provided financial assistance during the Second World War to Polish refugees in Romania and Hungary. During this period, however, most of its work was confined to local relief activities, such as distributions of food and clothing, the construction of refugee camps near Alexandria, the establishment of hospitals and the provision of medical aid and assistance for Italian POWs. According to Count de Zogheb, a humanitarian worker who established the first ICRC field office in Egypt in 1940, the ERCS was keen on safeguarding 'the Society's purely philanthropic character' and distancing itself from politics (de Zogheb, 1943: 4–5, 7).

After the 1952 military coup that deposed Egypt's monarchy, the ERCS entered a new phase. In 1969, state involvement in running the ERCS became institutionalised. Presidential Decree 1925/1969 established that the ERCS chairman would be appointed through presidential decree. For almost four decades, the post of chairman was held by the wives of Egyptian presidents and some scholars considered it state-run (Abdo, 2000: 97). This is not unique to the ERCS; it is common for national Red Crescent Societies to enjoy the same level of official support and to act as 'auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments' (Benthall, 1997: 172). The Society became increasingly active in domestic crises. For example, it provided relief to victims of the massive earthquake that hit Cairo in 1992, as well as

undertaking other, less conventionally 'humanitarian' activities, such as providing first aid and medical services at polling stations during elections. It also increasingly became engaged in activities that would qualify as charity and development, rather than humanitarian action, such as providing orphanages, homes for the elderly, youth clubs, education and women's empowerment (Darwish, 1987: 686–87; Egypt State Information Services, 2014).

As the preceding analysis indicates, 'humanitarianism' by the ERCS went through a number of phases. In its early years, the ERCS's policies were clearly inspired by nationalist loyalty. Although its 1913 statute declared it officially 'neutral', until 1923 it was influenced by allegiance to the Ottoman Empire and a desire to assist it in its struggle against foreign invasions such as the Italo-Turkish War. During the ERCS's early campaigns, the prominent role played by Egypt's royal family – which was connected by blood to the Ottoman royal family – contributed to this trend. Although the ERCS was also inspired by a more general concern for 'humanity', in its early phases this was often only rhetorical, as decisions to provide assistance and relief of a transnational nature were often motivated by political considerations. This seems to have changed in the 1930s, and by the Second World War the organisation was clearly promoting itself as 'neutral'. The ERCS's mandate also gradually expanded to include peacetime relief activities, including in natural disasters. It therefore acted as a catalyst for the development of a specialised understanding of *insānīya*, which evolved from the delivery of battlefield assistance to wounded and sick Egyptian soldiers to a much wider concept of providing transnational humanitarian assistance during both wartime and peace. In the 1930s, the ERCS increasingly tended towards universality and cosmopolitanism as its humanitarian services came to be less politicised. This trend was largely reversed, however, with the curtailment of the ERCS's independence, particularly from the 1970s onwards. The close ties between Red Crescent Societies and repressive governments in the region is a trend that can also be seen in Jordan, Algeria, Iraq, Syria and other Arab countries, acting as a further catalyst for the growth of parallel Islamic relief organisations in these states.

5 The Arab–Israeli conflict and its impact on ideas of humanitarianism

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the ensuing Arab–Israeli conflict constituted a key turning point in the development of the concept of humanitarianism in the Arab region. A principal feature of this prolonged conflict has been the blurring of the distinction between wartime and peace. The reality of prolonged occupation meant that the effects of displacement were no longer confined in time. According to UNRWA's 1967–68 report, between 1947 and 1949 some 750,000 to one million Palestinians were displaced within and beyond the borders of Palestine. An additional 350,000–450,000 were displaced in the aftermath of the 1967 war and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights (the Occupied Territories) (Viorst, 1984). The large-scale displacement and forced transfer of the Palestinian people presented a new reality: a humanitarian crisis that was massive in proportion, but also indefinite in duration. With the temporary aspect of occupation eroded, 'humanitarianism' could no longer be limited to providing emergency relief and assistance. It became necessary to provide basic needs, healthcare, education, livelihoods, infrastructure and other services that clearly crossed the line from 'humanitarianism' to 'development'.

The Arab discourse regarding humanitarian action in support of the Palestinians went through two distinct phases. In the immediate aftermath of the first mass displacement, local and regional actors were concerned first and foremost with the 'higher' goal of liberating Palestine and the right of Palestinian refugees to return, according to the terms of UN General Assembly Resolution 194 of December 1948. Relief work focused on caring for and evacuating the wounded. At the political level, the humanitarian situation of Palestinian refugees was considered secondary to the primary goal of liberation, self-determination and the right of return.

As the reality of prolonged displacement came to be recognised, the humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people acquired greater urgency. At the same time, however, Israel placed large impediments in the way of the work of humanitarian and relief organisations, including refusing to allow the Red Cross and Red Crescent to provide material aid and relief to the population of the West Bank and preventing local civil society groups from carrying out relief activities (Abu Haydar, 1968: 15–16; Dib, 1968; Institute of Palestine Studies, 1968). A large number of civil society organisations also became involved in humanitarian relief work in the Occupied Territories. Many were headquartered outside Palestinian territories, and focused on providing funds to local organisations. Although they referred to themselves as relief organisations, most made no distinction between relief work and charitable activities, such as the construction of orphanages, or long-term development work, such as the establishment of schools, health and other public syndicates, cultural institutions and women's organisations (Levitt, 2006: 57, 61, 81–82, 157).

In the period following the Oslo Accord in 1993, there was an expansion in the activity of non-governmental organisations based in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, relying on funding mainly from Western donor agencies and governments. After the second Intifada, these NGOs were inundated with emergency assistance, leading to a critical dilemma: whereas local NGOs sought to channel funds towards medium- and long-term development goals, international donors prioritised immediate humanitarian concerns such as food aid (Hanafi and Tabar, 2003: 208). Although donor-driven agendas led many Palestinian humanitarian actors to focus on short-term emergency relief work, some (particularly those active in refugee camps in relatively stable neighbouring states) were able to adapt, functioning as emergency relief NGOs during periods of crisis, and as development NGOs during

periods of relative stability (Raunsgard, 2009: 83). Local humanitarian actors have been unable to convince international donors to recognise Israel's responsibility for the humanitarian crisis in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Hanafi and Tabar, 2003: 208–209). A gap has therefore emerged between donor-driven agendas based on the concepts of classical neutrality and impartiality and local humanitarian organisations whose mandates are driven by the principle of solidarity with the Palestinian political cause. The prolonged occupation and the dire human rights and humanitarian situation have prompted local humanitarian organisations and some of their international counterparts to abandon neutrality and take a more active advocacy stance (Fast, 2006: 11). The humanitarian relief culture in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, as in the wider Arab region (Juil Petersen, 2011: 15), is therefore not static, but has rather adapted over time – largely in response to pragmatic considerations. This adaptation has occurred in both directions, with local actors influencing the approach of international actors, and *vice versa*.

5.1 UNRWA and multi-faceted humanitarianism

UNRWA is the largest, oldest and most extensive humanitarian relief agency within the UN system. It operates in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Through its 30,000 employees, it is unique among UN agencies in that it was set up to provide services directly, rather than through local partners (Wright, 2014; Dale, 1974: 579–80; Nachmias, 1997: 69). UNRWA had a two-pronged mandate when it was established by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 1949: it was required to implement direct relief and works projects for Palestinian refugees as well as to consult with host governments about measures to be taken once international assistance was no longer available. This mandate has changed considerably since then to include aspects of development work and solidarity.

The 1967 war was a turning point for UNRWA. First, its mandate was extended to provide emergency humanitarian assistance to the hundreds of thousands of people 'displaced' by the war, in addition to the original Palestinian refugee population (UNGA Resolution 2252 (1967)). Second, UNRWA's

humanitarian role became entangled with its quasi-governmental functions (Dale, 1974: 589). As the vast majority of international donors have preferred to channel aid to Palestinians through UNRWA, this has curtailed relief activities by local actors (Raunsgard, 2009: 91).

Following the outbreak of the Palestinian Intifada in 1988, General Assembly Resolution A/43/57 I (1988) created a new function within UNRWA, the 'Refugee Affairs Officer', to ensure the safety and security of Palestinian refugees and their legal and human rights. This meant that UNRWA's humanitarian mandate was extended to include the physical protection of civilians, human rights monitoring and advocacy (Hanafi, 2014: 139 n. 4; Wijewardane, 2007: 69–70). For example, UNRWA officials released information collected from the agency's health clinics showing the number and severity of attacks against Palestinians and brought to the UN and the media's attention Israel's use of toxic riot-control gasses. Israel responded with accusations of political partisanship and accused the agency of inefficiency and mismanagement (Schiff, 1989: 64, 72; Nachmias, 1997: 77).

As it became clear that UNRWA would remain permanently in operation in the absence of a political settlement between Israelis and Palestinians, it increasingly assumed responsibility for providing public services and other quasi-governmental functions. The agency's focus thus shifted from so-called 'first generation strategies' or relief-focused activities based on meeting basic needs to 'second generation strategies' involving recovery, reconstruction and other long-term work under the 'development' rubric.¹⁰

UNRWA is unique as an international humanitarian agency in that its mandate is to provide assistance to one party in a prolonged, ongoing conflict. Its close relationship with the Palestinian refugee community has complicated efforts to implement its humanitarian mission, as it has been portrayed by Israel as being pro-Palestinian (Wijewardane, 2007: 74). Simultaneously, pressure from Palestinian activists has meant that international humanitarian actors in the Occupied Palestinian Territories frequently come up against the question of whether and how they should engage in advocacy or solidarity work (Fast, 2006: 12). After the first Intifada, the squalid

¹⁰ A discussion of this categorisation appears in McLeigh (2011: 18) and Korten (1990).

conditions and dire human rights situation of the Palestinians prompted UNRWA to undertake advocacy efforts on their behalf. A 1988 report by the UN Secretary-General described UNRWA's task as 'general assistance' for the protection of the refugee population, rather than the more limited provision of humanitarian assistance (Schiff, 1989: 70). The agency's work therefore expanded beyond relief and economic assistance to include a more political role outside the scope of traditional humanitarianism.

Although the agency has adopted this 'rights-based' approach to its humanitarian mandate, it has not responded to pressure by Palestinian activists to take up the issue of a durable political solution and refugees' right of return (Hanafi, 2014: 131–34). Nevertheless, UNRWA's dual mandate has meant that it is seen on the one hand as a 'surrogate state' providing social services and education (Khallaf, 2014: 28), while also being tasked to protect the refugee population and provide humanitarian assistance.

6 Institutional discourses: the League of Arab States

The League of Arab States (LAS or Arab League) was established in 1945 by seven Arab governments with the principal aim of promoting and safeguarding the independence and sovereignty of Arab states. Because many of these states had struggled to gain their independence from colonial rule (or were still in the process of achieving independence), the League Charter reflects a deep preoccupation with the notion of sovereignty and non-intervention (Khadduri, 1946: 765, 768, 776–77). This has had a lasting impact on attitudes towards humanitarianism in the Arab region.

Initially, the Arab League's institutional structure took little heed of humanitarian affairs. A series of developments in the 1960s and 1970s, however, led to some important changes. First, Arab states, which had previously focused on Palestine's right to independent statehood and the right to return for Palestinian refugees, recognised that the 'human rights' and humanitarian situation of Palestinians could be used as a tool to embarrass and pressure Israel. This gained increased prominence as it became clear that no resolution to the Palestinian issue was likely in the near future. In 1967, the Arab League established the Permanent Arab Commission for Human Rights. The first item discussed by the Commission was the violations committed against Palestinians during the 1967 war. Second, the LAS's failure to deliver on major regional political issues such as the Arab–Israeli conflict, civil wars and inter-Arab conflicts created momentum to channel the organisation's energy towards humanitarian and social issues (Sha'bān, 2004: 20–21).

The earliest Arab League resolution relating to humanitarian relief was adopted during the Lebanese civil war in 1976. For the first time within LAS, the resolution used the term humanitarian assistance (*musā'adāt insānīya*), stipulating that Arab governments would provide fuel, medicine, medical equipment and food aid to those in need. A series of resolutions followed during the 1980s on providing relief to refugees fleeing from drought, famine and conflict in the Horn of Africa and for victims of natural disasters in Somalia, South Yemen, Sudan and Djibouti.

The term *insānīya* is used inconsistently throughout these resolutions, alongside a vocabulary of terms that describe the type of assistance provided (humanitarian/urgent/emergency/in-kind/immediate) and delimit the scope and reach of regional relief efforts. The terms *musā'adāt insānīya* (humanitarian assistance) and *ihtiyagāt insānīya* (humanitarian needs) appear in LAS Council Resolution 3890 on humanitarian assistance to Somalia, while LAS Council Resolution 3912 (1980) speaks of the 'national and humanitarian imperative to save the lives of refugees' in Somalia. LAS Council Resolution 3965 on the Sudanese refugee problem charges the Secretary General with seeking assistance (*'awn*) to 'help resolve the problems faced by refugees in all humanitarian fields'.

Most other resolutions, including some related to droughts and famine in Africa, use terms such as *musā'adāt 'ājila* (urgent assistance), *musā'adāt 'aynīya 'ājila* (urgent in-kind assistance), *ighātha* (relief) and *al-'awn al-'ājil* or *al-tari'* (urgent or emergency assistance) (LAS Council Resolutions 3912 (1980), 4505 (1985), 4895 (1989) and 4454 (1985)). In the cases of Yemen and Sudan, the League Council called on Arab states to contribute (*'ishām*) towards reconstruction and reversing the damage caused by floods (LAS Council Resolution 4206 (1982)). The words '*insānī/insānīya*' do not appear in these resolutions. By avoiding any reference to them, LAS could practice humanitarianism while eschewing the *ideology* behind it, while sidestepping controversies related to the relationship between sovereignty and humanitarianism.

Over the past two decades, the Arab League has adopted several resolutions related to relief in a number of civil conflicts, including in the Comoros Islands, Sudan and Somalia. Initially it did not use the term 'humanitarian assistance'. However, it described conditions in Somalia as a 'catastrophic humanitarian situation'. In later resolutions, the LAS Council welcomed the international community's efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to Somalia and urged it, along with Arab states and specialised regional

organisations, to continue these efforts (LAS Council Resolutions 5097 (1991) and 5463 (1995)). It invited member states to provide immediate relief (*ighātha fawrīya*) to Somalia in 1991, and *ighātha ‘ājila* (urgent relief) to Lebanon in 1988. Such *ighātha* was not restricted to the provision of emergency assistance; in addition to fuel, food and medical aid, it included assistance in the field of education through supporting schools and providing books and stationery to pupils (LAS Council Resolution 4765 (1988)). In 2002, the LAS Council called on Arab governments in Resolution 6165 to provide humanitarian assistance to Sudan to assist refugees and internally displaced people in the context of the civil war between the government and South Sudanese separatists. A number of resolutions (6494 (2005), 6868 (2008) and 6800 (2007)) also addressed relief in the context of the conflict in Iraq. These resolutions avoided the use of the term ‘refugees’ to describe people fleeing across Iraq’s borders, referring to them instead as ‘forced migrants’ (the same is true of resolutions relating to people fleeing the current violence in Syria). This is particularly significant as denying people displaced to other countries their formal status as refugees risks depriving them of important protections, notably against forcible return (*refoulement*) (Grahl-Madsen, 1997).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s humanitarian relief efforts by the Arab League lacked a formal institutional structure and were predicated on the individual efforts of member states or on cooperation with other humanitarian organisations. For example, LAS Resolution 3912 (1980) on the Somali refugee situation called on Arab governments to contribute medical assistance through the Executive Bureau of the Arab Council of Health Ministers. It also requested the Secretariat to urge Arab Red Crescent Societies to provide assistance. In some instances, *ad hoc* mechanisms were established within the secretariat, for example during the African drought crisis in 1985, to assess needs and follow up on measures to provide relief (LAS Council Resolution 4454 (1985)).

On 22 September 1987, the LAS adopted an *Arab Framework Convention for the Organisation and Facilitation of Relief Operations*. The convention developed a regional strategy for cooperation for the provision of relief, focusing on natural disasters and other emergencies (including major accidents and armed conflicts). Article 1(c) defines relief operations (*‘amaliyāt ighātha*) as ‘the various services related to relief, particularly material required in an urgent

manner [such as food, clothing and shelter] as well as people and other services arriving from overseas based on the consent of local relief entities’. Two aspects of this definition are particularly striking. First, ‘relief operations’ by definition originate overseas. Second, it emphasises that overseas relief can only be provided with the consent of local relief organisations. The convention’s aim is to allow transit and access for relief workers and materials in situations of natural disasters and other emergencies where the local authorities are incapable of addressing needs. The only mention of the word *insānīya* is in the ambiguous preamble, which refers to the state parties’ desire to develop the ‘humanitarian links’ between Arab League member states. This indicates that the specialised term ‘humanitarian action’ (linked to helping victims of war and natural disasters) is best captured by the word *ighātha* (relief) within the Arab League system, while the word *insānīya* reflects a more general moral standpoint that the people of the Arab region are linked by an ethic of benevolence.

The *Framework Convention* was amended in 2009. The new Articles 3, 4 and 5 modified the regulation of ‘relief operations’ such that the provision of relief from overseas entities now requires the consent of local authorities rather than local relief organisations. The definition of ‘relief operations’ was also expanded to include ‘assistance operations (*‘amaliyāt mosā‘ada*) provided in order to confront the disaster/crisis/emergency situation’. The convention does not further define ‘assistance operations’ or clarify how they differ from other ‘relief operations’. Article 3 emphasises the ‘full respect for the sovereignty of the state parties to the Convention’ and the primary responsibility of the affected state to respond to disasters and emergency situations. Assistance may be provided only upon the affected state’s request, in which case that state remains in full control of ‘assistance operations’ within its territory. This indicates a deep concern with the concept of sovereignty and a rejection of overseas relief and assistance that is not explicitly endorsed by the state (contrasting the trend in the UN, which is theoretically moving towards allowing the ‘international community’ to provide impartial humanitarian assistance in conflict situations, where a state is unable or unwilling to do so itself, and prohibiting the arbitrary withholding of humanitarian aid). Also in 2009, the Arab League convened the first Arab Conference for Humanitarian and Development Organisations, which included among its recommendations the establishment of an Arab Relief

and Emergency Fund. In its preamble, the conference declaration stressed the importance of ‘coordinating joint efforts for solidarity’, highlighting the influence of Arab and Islamic traditions of humanitarian work (‘Recommendations’, 2009).

The use of the term ‘humanitarian assistance’ by the Arab League Council has been inconsistent. Whereas it has been used in resolutions on the refugee situation in Somalia and Sudan, the civil conflict in Lebanon and the humanitarian and refugee situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, it has been avoided in relation to natural disasters such as floods and droughts. Instead, LAS Council Resolutions have used the more neutral term *ighātha* (relief), which is also the term adopted in the Arab Framework Convention. The amended convention indicates a preoccupation with the concept of sovereignty that implies a particular sensitivity to foreign assistance and relief that is not endorsed by the host state and emphasises that states are under no obligation to provide relief and assistance, which are deemed purely voluntary (Article 4). It is possible that the term ‘humanitarian assistance’ was deliberately avoided due to a perception ingrained in Arab and Islamic culture that humanitarian and philanthropic giving is obligatory or because of political and historical scepticism towards action designated as ‘humanitarian’. The term, however, has not been avoided in civil society conferences held under the League’s auspices during the same period. It is also possible that, at the regional level, a distinction is emerging between the provision of assistance in times of armed conflict on the one hand, and in situations of natural disasters and other emergencies on the other. This is reflected in the wording of the amended *Arab Framework Convention*, which implicitly distinguishes between ‘relief operations’ and ‘assistance operations’ (although the convention does not clarify the difference between these terms, nor does it mention ‘humanitarian assistance’, which appears in several LAS resolutions). The avoidance of the qualifier ‘humanitarian’ raises questions about

whether the assistance covered by the *Arab Framework Convention* is intended to abide by the guiding principles of neutrality, impartiality, humanity and independence, or whether it would be influenced by Arabic and Islamic notions of justice and solidarity.

In 2011, the Arab League Secretary-General appointed a special envoy for humanitarian affairs, indicating growing interest in humanitarian action. This was partly motivated by the League’s desire to carve out an acceptable role for itself in the conflicts that engulfed a number of states in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. This period has been characterised by widespread use of the terms *musā‘adāt insānīya* (humanitarian assistance) and *ighātha insānīya* (humanitarian relief) in LAS resolutions, statements and press releases to describe the assistance provided to Libya, Syria, Yemen and the Comoros Islands (e.g. Bahooth, 2012). This shift in the language of humanitarianism within the Arab League system could reflect a convergence between the understanding and practice of humanitarianism within the Arab League and classical humanitarianism, brought about by increasing cooperation and interaction with the humanitarian apparatus of the UN and other international humanitarian actors. It is also illustrative of the demand for change that organisations such as the Arab League and perhaps to a lesser degree the Organisations for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have increasingly felt from the ‘Arab street’ leading up to the various revolutions in 2011. For decades the LAS and the OIC have been seen by many Arabs/Muslims as ineffective and irrelevant at best and as an instrument of repressive governments at worst. For example, despite numerous resolutions on the Arab–Israeli conflict neither organisation has been able to change the situation in any way. It will be interesting to see whether the convergence evident in LAS official documents is followed by a real change in understanding at the level of the LAS and more broadly in the Arab region.

7 Conclusion

Humanitarianism in the Arab region has undergone multiple modifications, adapting with time, place and circumstance. The concept of *insānī/insānīya* has covered charitable giving, relief and emergency assistance, development work and human rights advocacy. There is no mention of the specific words *insānī/insānīya* in classical Arabic dictionaries, yet the ideals they encompass are reflected in other concepts entrenched in Arab culture and tradition since pre-Islamic times. These concepts include *an-najda* and *al-is'āf* (help, rescue), which have at their core an Arab moral code that advocated generosity (*karam, jūd*) through the provision of water, food and shelter to the poor and needy. The Islamic notions of philanthropic giving, which have remained hugely influential in the region, were born from these values.

Similarly, the vocabulary denoting humanitarian action, and the way in which humanitarianism is practiced in the Arab region, has developed continuously since the late nineteenth century. Initially, the words *ghawth, ighātha, musā'ada* and *i'ana* (all synonyms for help, aid, relief and assistance) indicated humanitarian action. Early humanitarian actors, such as Egypt's Sheikh Muhammad 'Abduh, used this vocabulary mainly to denote relief work to assist victims of disasters such as fires and epidemics and victims of war. Such assistance, which sometimes transcended national boundaries, was largely justified through secular principles such as chivalry, pity, mercy and compassion, but also through Islamic concepts of philanthropic giving such as *zakāt*.

The specific use of the words *insānī/insānīya* to denote humanitarianism seems to have entered the Arabic language through translation. They appear in the writings of the Egyptian nationalist figure Mustapha Kamil Pasha, who translated articles appearing in the Western press in the nineteenth century which used the terms 'humanitarian war' and 'humanitarian appeal'. In the 1940s, *insānī/insānīya* began to appear in bilingual English–Arabic and Arabic–English dictionaries, although they were only incorporated into monolingual Arabic dictionaries much later. In the purely lexical sense, *insānī/insānīya* mean charitable, philanthropic and compassionate. The use of *insānīya*

in a sense that reflects a transnational and universal empathy towards all members of the human race became widespread in the 1960s, particularly through the writings of scholars of 'humanism', who argued for the compatibility of Islamic principles with humanism's core values, such as justice, dignity and human rights. Most scholarly works from the region have not used the words *insānī/insānīya* in a specialised sense that is distinguishable from charity, philanthropy or other forms of social work or development.

The words *insānī/insānīya* take on different meanings depending on the actors involved, the context and the historical period. *Insānīya* became linked to the provision of emergency aid, assistance and relief in times of conflict and disaster through the work of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement starting in the early twentieth century, although the terms *is'āf, ighātha* and *musā'ada* remained widely in circulation. Simultaneously, the range of actions and services comprising humanitarianism was expanding. For example, the Egyptian Red Crescent Society's humanitarian mandate was initially confined to the provision of battlefield assistance to wounded soldiers and financial assistance to their families. It eventually evolved to include the distribution of food and clothing and assistance for refugees. In times of peace, the ERCS became active in assisting the poor, constructing orphanages and tackling illiteracy, and, later, in unconventional roles such as providing medical services at polling stations during elections.

Twentieth century humanitarianism as practiced in the Arab region has used the rhetoric of classical humanitarianism, while often pursuing political objectives. In its early days, the ERCS's transnational relief and assistance sometimes acted as a substitute for political support for a government or regime (such as the Ottoman Empire in the Libyan war and the First Balkan War and Turkish nationalists in their war of independence). Local humanitarian action remains entangled in local, regional and global politics. The notion of 'Islamic relief' is predicated on the concept of Islamic humanitarian solidarity, while local Palestinian humanitarian organisations advocate a solidarity-based approach that eschews neutrality in

favour of a strong political stance, based on support for the Palestinian cause. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the reality of prolonged occupation has both blurred the line between humanitarianism and development and compelled humanitarian actors to engage in human rights advocacy. For example, UNRWA, the oldest and most important relief actor in the Territories, has evolved to incorporate long-term development projects, quasi-governmental functions, protection and human rights advocacy.

Within the League of Arab States, the institutional discourse on humanitarianism, though inconsistent, has moved towards convergence with classical humanitarianism, particularly since the Arab Spring. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, local humanitarianism developed amid scepticism towards foreign intervention and humanitarian rhetoric. The perception that foreign humanitarianism and the

colonial project were organically linked has had a lasting impact on the reception of humanitarianism in the region. The *Arab Framework Convention* on relief operations therefore emphasises the centrality of sovereignty and state consent. Until very recently, the majority of resolutions, treaties and official Arab League documents used the seemingly neutral terms *musā'adāt 'ājila* (urgent assistance), *musā'adāt 'aynīya* (in-kind assistance), *ighātha* (relief) and *al-'awn al-'ājil* or *al-tari'* (urgent or emergency assistance), avoiding any reference to the words *insānī/insānīya*. As a consequence of increased interaction with international relief actors in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, however, the vocabulary of humanitarianism has changed noticeably. It is still unclear whether this changing discourse will be accompanied by a change in policies and perceptions and the practice of humanitarianism, which remains heavily influenced by local religious, cultural and traditional values.

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