



CHS Event Report

CHS-RACA Joint Symposium: The Experience of Qatari Humanitarian Organizations in Adapting to a Changing Regional Landscape

21 June 2022

1. Synopsis

On 15 May 2022, the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) and the Regulatory Authority for Charitable Activities (RACA) organized a joint symposium on the experience of humanitarian organizations in Qatar in adapting to the changing regional landscape, particularly following the GCC crisis from 2017 to 2021. Held at CHS and moderated by the Center's Director, Dr. Ghassan Elkahout, the symposium convened: Ali Al-Ansari, Consultant to the General Manager's Office in RACA; H.E. Ali bin Hassan Al-Hammadi, the General Secretary of the Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS); Mohammed Al-Ghamdi, the Executive Director of International Cooperation at Qatar Charity (QC); and Dr. Iyad Nasr, an international humanitarian affairs expert and the former Head of the Regional Office of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in MENA. It saw the wide attendance of humanitarian practitioners, experts, and other interested individuals.

The event arose from CHS' guiding principles of contextualization, participation, and collaboration for enhancing the resilience of humanitarian work in the face of political crises.

The evening commenced with opening remarks jointly provided by Dr. Elkahlout and Mr. Al-Ansari, who affirmed that this symposium is the first of many collaborations between CHS and RACA with the aim of benefitting the national and regional humanitarian sectors. Dr. Elkahlout announced that both organizations intend to offer an Executive Master's programme for GCC citizens and residents working in the humanitarian field. In the nearer term, CHS and RACA will also be publishing a National Strategy for Humanitarian and Charitable Work. Mr. Al-Ansari



then introduced RACA as the designated body in Qatar to regulate the humanitarian sector, a responsibility that emanates from a belief in the importance of strategic and informed planning to lead the sector to success.

2. Dr. Ghassan Elkahlout: Background

Dr. Elkahlout began by emphasizing the fast-changing nature of the world that has massively impacted the form and direction of humanitarian work. Crucially, as politics continues to drive humanitarian crises, the number of actors in the humanitarian field is even greater. Unfortunately, political priorities often take precedence over humanitarian ones. This often comes in the form of equating humanitarian work with supporting terrorism, politicizing humanitarian work, or raising scepticism about the aims and forms of humanitarian assistance.

In Syria, although humanitarian needs are great and urgent, access to the most needy is difficult, risky, and can even come at the cost of human life due to the politicization of aid. This becomes a complicated topic to manoeuvre when one considers how aid can act as a tool of soft power for a state: the former U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, once remarked that NGOs are multipliers of force for the U.S., and that their role is to complement the country's policies.

Another challenge that arises in the nexus between humanitarian aid and politics is the militarization of humanitarian work, which occurs when militaries take over the delivery of humanitarian work. This violates the international legal principle of separation between humanitarian work and military activity.

These processes result in the shrinking of the humanitarian space – which is already threatened today by the global economic slowdown and the coronavirus pandemic – notably through the issuing of regulations and restrictions on humanitarian activity. For example, following 9/11 and the war on terror, many humanitarian organizations faced travel bans, asset restrictions, and limitations on their scope of work, all of which left vulnerable populations more impoverished. In some cases, humanitarian work was criminalized. These challenges make the work of humanitarian work even more difficult than before – and considerably different.

In fact, in the mid-1990s, the atrocities in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina transformed voluntary humanitarian work to a more institutionalized field. The move towards the



professionalization of the field brought about greater restrictions being imposed on practitioners and less room for creativity. Today, practitioners must obtain certain qualifications to work in the field, and certain security standards must be met in order for an organization to work in a particular context. Dr. Elkahout relayed a common saying that humanitarian workers spend most of their time in cafes in Cairo, Amman, and other capitals instead of being in the field in Yemen, for example, leaving the work for others. In Palestine, international organizations struggle greatly to carry out their work due to these restrictions. Dr. Elkahout stated that overall, the difficulties faced by the humanitarian sector in the MENA region are similar to those faced by the sector in other regions.

The G.C.C. crisis similarly saw greater institutionalization and bureaucratization of the humanitarian field in Qatar, which added greater time and resource costs to local agencies and increased their difficulties in accessing financial resources. These impediments disrupted Qatari organizations' humanitarian activities abroad: though many organizations had pledged to initiate or continue programmes and partnerships abroad, many were cancelled due to fiscal and regulatory restrictions.

3. Ali Al-Ansari: Regulatory Authority for Charitable Activities' (RACA)

Al-Ansari began by introducing RACA as the national authority, established in 2014, tasked with developing the national humanitarian and charitable sector and its risk mitigation methods. Whilst RACA also carries out its own humanitarian programmes in other countries, it is unique in its role in assessing and managing local organizations' risks. The humanitarian sector in Qatar consists of a diverse array of around 280 organizations.

Al-Ansari then focused his intervention on the changes to the finances of Qatari humanitarian organizations between 2017 and 2021, based on data of 14 humanitarian organizations (representing 6% of the sector). Echoing Dr. Elkahout's findings, some organizations were closed down and others downsized their offices during this time. However, for the most part in Qatar, this storm was weathered. Data from RACA show that in 2019, funding levels contracted due to the coronavirus pandemic. However, in 2020, funding returned back to its 2018 levels. This demonstrates that the humanitarian sector in Qatar is resilient. Another challenge that emerged for Qatar during this time were false accusations against its humanitarian organizations supporting terrorism and illicit activities. From 2017 to 2018, financial transactions in the field



contracted due to increased restrictions on organizations' activities. This also continued into 2019 due to the coronavirus pandemic. However, in 2020, financial transactions rose to over 1.1 billion QAR.

Overall, although numerous challenges emerged for local agencies, Al-Ansari maintained that their impacts were limited due to donors' trust in the work of local humanitarian organizations. He affirmed that whilst some countries oppose Qatari humanitarian organizations' work, others defend them, and Qatar continues to play a major role in the greater Arab humanitarian field.

4. H.E. Ali bin Hassan Al-Hammadi: Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS)

Dr. Elkahlout then introduced H.E. Ali bin Hassan Al-Hammadi, the General Secretary of QRCS and a humanitarian practitioner with over 40 years of experience spanning various contexts, including Mauritania and Yemen. H.E. began by providing a historical overview of QRCS, which was established in March 1978 as the first humanitarian organization in Qatar with the aim of providing relief to vulnerable communities in a non-discriminatory manner. Under the umbrella of the International Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, QRCS' approach rests on seven fundamental principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality, independence, voluntary service, universality, and unity.

H.E. remarked that QRCS' journey was not paved with roses. The impact of political developments were not only felt in the G.C.C. crisis, but even before, in which their programming was greatly affected. Echoing Dr. Elkahlout, he expressed that 9/11 was a watershed movement in the humanitarian field when humanitarian organizations became increasingly criticized for supporting terrorism, leading to the criminalization of such organizations in the post-9/11 era. Furthermore, QRCS staff continue to be military targets: just last year, the QRCS office was bombarded in Gaza.

H.E. Al-Hammadi added that there is an inextricable link between humanitarian work and diplomatic work, which function as two streams that work hand in hand. QRCS complements Qatar's diplomatic efforts and even builds bridges with other countries, which shows the state in a positive light. QRCS also works alongside RACA to apply Qatar's policies and promote transparency and accountability.



Al-Hammadi underscored the immense health challenges presented by the COVID pandemic to humanitarian agencies' abilities to provide aid and relief to vulnerable communities. However, he affirmed that QRCS was able to mobilize medical relief effectively to protect vulnerable communities by sterilizing public areas, providing medical assistance, raising awareness, and assisting those whose livelihoods were impacted by the pandemic. In this process, the organization expanded its ties with other international agencies.

On the issue of funding, H.E. noted that organizations are experiencing funding challenges due to internal pressures and the global economic slowdown. He noted that QRCS works with local organizations to mobilize support for them and promote their work.

H.E. concluded his remarks by summarizing the key challenges facing humanitarian organizations today: greater needs globally due to the proliferation of man-made and natural disasters; lack of in-kind and financial resources; restricted access to the needy; and the risks staff face in conflict zones in particular.

5. Mohammed Al-Ghamdi: Qatar Charity (QC)

Mohammed Al-Ghamdi then provided insight on Qatar Charity's humanitarian and charitable work during the GCC crisis. He highlighted the burgeoning humanitarian need globally and concomitant rise in global concern due to the exacerbation of conflict, the threat of climate change, and the coronavirus pandemic. Al-Ghamdi stressed that in spite of the presence of pressing global challenges, the sector must not neglect protracted conflicts in countries like Syria, Yemen, and Somalia, all of which will require greater assistance to weather the storm of the aforementioned challenges.

Furthermore, Al-Ghamdi described how RACA, in tandem with Qatari civil society, adapted to the changing political environment and accusations of terrorism borne in the GCC crisis. He commended Qatar's ability to refute these accusations of terrorism and to continue the state's regulated humanitarian despite regional pressures. This affirms Qatar's lack of dependence on its political relations with other countries and its ability to sustain independent humanitarian work. This is a strength that was facilitated by the investment in legal and international capacities that benefited Qatar's humanitarian authorities and strengthened the country's relations with UN



agencies. In addition, Al-Ghamdi stressed that: "humanitarian work in Qatar is not of a political nature, despite the changing regional landscape – Qatar has not put organizations under any pressure in this regard." Although Qatar demonstrated its self-sufficiency amidst the GCC Crisis, Al-Ghamdi expressed his sadness about the lack of cooperation between Gulf countries due to the missed opportunity to collectively learn from and benefit from regional actors. Thus, he expressed his hopes for future partnerships with Gulf countries in order to foster greater cooperation and efficiency in humanitarian aid distribution.

6. Iyad Nasr: Former MENA Regional Head, OCHA

Offering an international and regional perspective on Qatar's humanitarian contributions, Dr. Iyad Nasr shed light on the current humanitarian conditions in the MENA region and offered his advice for regional actors. He expressed hope for the GCC crisis to return to a time of joint-coordination efforts in order to establish a solid, responsive, and collective humanitarian sector, instead of a fragmented approach to humanitarian aid. Dr. Nasr praised Qatar's pioneering role in adopting the triple-nexus approach to its humanitarian and charitable sector, in which programming is designed based on considerations of the humanitarian, developmental, and peacebuilding sectors.

Nasr also raised the issue of the international community accusing Qatar of supporting terrorism, which he labelled as problematic. He confirmed that although Qatar's humanitarian landscape and charitable organizations were scarcely affected, wider impacts on the entire sector and state were felt due to the accusations. However, he highlighted how Doha has played an indispensable role in opening channels of humanitarian diplomacy and providing access to beneficiaries whose access was otherwise restricted. Based on his extensive experience in coordinating humanitarian efforts in the region, Dr. Nasr described how Qatar's humanitarian strategy is not based on simply distributing financial assistance, but it is based on a well-established system that bolsters different sectors to provide sustainable assistance. Even during the height of the blockade, Nasr stated that Qatar did not reduce the level of aid it contributed to the humanitarian sector, highlighting that "donor fatigue" did not reach Qatar. Ultimately, Nasr commended Qatar's efforts in recovering and developing the humanitarian sector, but also commented on the need to further expand its efforts to be better harmonized with the region.



7. Question-and-Answer Session

In an engaging question-and-answer session, the panellists entertained questions on the definition of terrorism and its implications on humanitarian work, the politicization of charitable work, the impacts of the pandemic on fundraising and financial transactions with the UN, and the triple nexus. These questions centered on the experiences of Qatar's charitable and humanitarian institutions and received valuable insights from the expertise of the panellists.

Definition of Terrorism

An audience member noted how the region often waits for others to define terrorism, which enables others to accuse Qatar of supporting terrorism based on their own subjective standards. Countries in the region must put their own definitions of the convoluted term. H.E. Al-Hammadi responded saying that defining terrorism is not a job for Qatar, and instead should be defined by the UN and Arab League. He noted how the Global North and Global South often differ in their definitions of the term, whereby he regards Israel's occupation of Palestine as employing tools of terrorism, whilst international actors may not. Dr. Nasr explained how there is no single agreed-upon definition of terrorism under international humanitarian law – instead, it is determined by the perceptions of different countries. To illustrate this idea and its implications on humanitarian work, Dr. Nasr described how humanitarian organizations that offer assistance to widowed families may be seen by others as supporting terrorism because their family members were involved in terrorist groups. Hence, perceptions of terrorism are subjective.

Pre-emptive Politicization

Another audience member commented that politicization is inevitable. Instead of resisting politicization, humanitarian organizations need to pre-emptively politicize themselves instead of giving others the opportunity to politicize them. Dr. Elkahlout added that if organizations take up advocacy in the region, they must be willing to accept the costs of doing so. H.E. Al-Hammadi responded in the negative, reminding the audience of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' (ICRCS, to which QRCS is an entity of) fundamental principle of neutrality, which requires entities' abstention from adopting partisan positions. However, H.E. stated that although humanitarian work is not a direct function or expression of a state's politics,



it can still serve a political purpose. He relayed how, in the GCC crisis, humanitarian aid continued to be distributed to boycotting countries like Yemen. H.E. Al Hammadi reaffirmed the importance of politics remaining separate from humanitarian work.

Dr. Iyad noted a caveat in this discussion how some organizations' political stances, such as the ICRC and Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF), are misconstrued when they publish statements condemning certain parties for attacks against their staff. He reminded the audience that these organizations are not taking political stances when released such statements.

Progress of the Regional Humanitarian Field

Another audience member underlined the important progress the Gulf has made in the humanitarian field, noting the progression from rudimentary humanitarian assistance to well-advanced humanitarian aid systems that even exceed Western counterparts in terms of sophistication and effectiveness. The audience member shared their hopes of continued progress for QRCS and QC. In response, Al-Ghamdi emphasized the need to support vulnerable populations through aid provision and advocacy in order to ensure that their voices are heard. He also mentioned how the UN regards Qatar Charity as a partner, which disproves accusations of supporting terrorism against the organization. Dr. Al-Ghamdi also highlighted how his organization's approach to humanitarian aid has moved towards the aid-development-peace nexus, especially by supporting the agricultural, health, and educational sectors in affected contexts. In contexts like Syria that are suffering from protracted conflicts, this approach is necessary.

On ensuring continued progress for Qatar's humanitarian sector, Dr. Nasr stated that the roadmap of Qatari organizations must be more transparent and clear in a way that international agencies know where these organizations are heading. Regarding sectors' overall ability to employ the aid-development-peace nexus in their programming, Dr. Iyad frankly noted that whilst the commitment is there, the capacity to carry this out is not. This is a challenge not only for Qatar, but even the UN. Organizations must focus their programmes on enabling speedy recovery and ensuring sustainability.

Qatari Humanitarian Organizations & the Coronavirus Pandemic



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Another audience member inquired about Qatar's ability to provide humanitarian assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. He cited a study that found that in 2019, humanitarian contributions were at 7%, whereas in 2020, Qatar witnessed an increase to 21%. Ali Al-Ansari responded by attributing the increase in aid to the availability of the vaccines that allowed Qatar to distribute a greater amount of aid.

Humanitarian Agencies & Global Diplomacy

Dr. Iyad was posed with several questions on further clarity on the influence humanitarian agencies have on the global political agenda. He relayed how in his role as MENA Regional Head at OCHA, he continuously provided briefings to the UN Security Council on the status of different crises and offered his advice. He analogized his role to that of the Arab League. Sometimes, criticisms would be made to certain countries, which hindered the provision of humanitarian assistance.

8. Key Messages

Overall, the joint symposium highlighted that the Qatari humanitarian sector, to a large extent, was insulated from the repercussions of the crisis due to donors' trust in the work and effectiveness of local humanitarian and charitable organizations. Furthermore, the event highlighted the inextricable link that exists between the humanitarian field and politics, whereby humanitarian work can serve as a tool for soft power for a state. However, humanitarian work must necessarily maintain clear divisions between its own agenda and the state's, including by continuing to serve vulnerable communities in states that may not enjoy friendly relations with its own.