

THE BEHAVIOUR OF MUSLIM FOREIGN AID DONORS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF GCC STATES

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Abstract: This paper examines the foreign aid behaviour of Muslim state donors in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, both regionally and globally, focusing on Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. It explores patterns of foreign aid among GCC states using data from four member countries: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and UAE. This study also presents a framework for Muslim aid policy and compares it with the global response by non-Muslim states. Through qualitative and quantitative methods, this study shows the distribution of GCC aids and provides an analysis of its nature, characteristics, and mechanisms. Followingly, this paper shows that GCC donors have been effective participants in the global effort to tackle the pandemic while advancing their own political and national goals. Finally, this paper provides a critical review of GCC aid efforts in terms of policy and internal coordination, suggesting several remedial policy actions.

Keywords: Coronavirus, GCC, Foreign Aid, Muslim Donors, Humanitarianism.

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has put the global aid regime and international aid actors in a situation where responsive, effective, and timely aid is crucial. Apparently, donor governments and international organisations have played a significant role in providing influxes of foreign aid for countries fighting the pandemic. Foreign aid has been mainly diverted to sectors related to health and emergency, as well as to various humanitarian and economic causes. The year 2020 was a record year for foreign aid, which reached an all-time high of USD 161.2 billion.¹ Traditional and emerging donors, including GCC states and Turkey, have shown great solidarity with a wide range of recipients and countries.

Most Muslim foreign aid during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as that from GCC states, has been channelled to Arab and Muslim countries. Nevertheless, many other countries have also received aid despite being neither Arab nor

Muslim, including countries in Latin America and East Asia. In contrast to historical practice, GCC foreign aid during the recent pandemic has been less associated with political and cultural alignments. Due to the sudden outbreak and severity of the pandemic, it seems that GCC states have adopted a new approach to providing aid, targeting the neediest and most affected countries. This GCC aid mostly came from government resources, such as state finances and aircraft navies, and less from national foundations, charities, and NGOs.

Apparently, GCC aid efforts during the coronavirus crisis have been widely publicised and well-covered by both conventional and social media. Since GCC aid decision-making is mostly determined by their monarchies, aid is often influenced by state-owned media, news, and agencies. Additionally, as the Gulf donors have been generous in their past aid allocations, many international and regional agencies such as the WHO and UNRWA have become their strategic partners.

At the moment, the foreign aid behaviour of GCC states resembles the general practice of Muslim country donors, including big donors like Turkey or small regional donors like Malaysia and Kazakhstan. In these countries, socio-cultural factors implicitly play a role in setting the policy framework for aid allocation during disasters, pandemic outbreaks, and other crises. Although there have been certain universal similarities in behaviour among global aid efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper suggests that political and socio-cultural, including religious, elements are significant determinants for aid engagement among Muslim country donors.

This paper is structured around six main sections including the introduction. The next section presents an overview of the methods used in this study and its data sources. The third introduces a policy framework for Muslim donors, including the GCC states. The fourth covers the various aid responses used by traditional donors, Muslim donors, and GCC donors. It also provides a general overview of four countries, in terms of their aid engagement and humanitarian efforts in alleviating the pandemic crisis. The fifth, which is the analysis and findings section, offers a brief overview of the features and aspects of the GCC experience during the pandemic. Lastly, this paper concludes with a summary and five policy recommendations to enhance aid engagement by Muslim country donors in the international arena.

Methodology

This study gathered data from official aid reports issued by GCC state aid agencies and international organisations (like the WHO and OECD), NGOs

and charities, state-run news agencies, as well as general media, websites, and digital sources. Using the two languages of English and Arabic, considerable attention was given to traditional media, such as newspapers, TV, and press statements, published by relevant authorities from February 2020 to September 2021. The study is grounded in theoretical frameworks found within relevant pre-existing literature. All figures and statements were collected and analysed using a content analysis approach and other policy and social research techniques.

Muslim Aid Policy Framework

i. Aid Giving in the Muslim World

Aid-giving frameworks in the Muslim World differ from those in the West as aid from Muslim states is not usually given based on national interests. Foreign aid activities by Muslim countries can be traced to the second half of the last century, when they involved substantial transfers of capital in the form of loans, grants, and investments.² Donor states often claimed that their aid was aimed at developing self-reliance and a new global economic order among developing countries, which made it a commitment towards poor countries, which is in contrast with the Western practice of providing aid based on national interests.³

Muslim country donors usually claim that their aid is based on altruism and a framework rooted in humanitarian and international development factors, in addition to preserving their humanitarian commitment, solidarity, and brotherhood with fellow Muslims. Apparently, this reflects the Islamic obligation for the rich to give to the poor and strengthen unity among Muslim nations. This view proves to be valid when going through the aid reports of Muslim donors, especially in the last century. The religious, political, and cultural bias associated with the disbursement of Muslim aid is similar to how OECD DAC donors have their own biases related to their respective interests and goals.

Nevertheless, the motivation for giving foreign aid among Muslim donors is distinctive compared to other global donors. For Muslim countries, religious motives seem to be more influential. A substantial amount of Muslim aid goes to countries with a Muslim-majority population and is motivated by socio-political interests.⁴ For instance, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), the largest Islamic donor organisation, exclusively lends to member countries of the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

However, some donors see this bias as insignificant,⁵ arguing that although Islamic values and beliefs are embedded in their policy, they are not primary

motivations for giving aid, especially when they also have secular policy frameworks. However, some argue that aid from Muslim donors is often used as a diplomatic means of promoting friendly relationships and establishing partnerships with recipient countries.⁶

Commercial motives are less significant for Muslim country donors, due to the nature of their economies, which (except for Turkey) are not highly industrialised and dependent on external markets or trade deals. However, politics remains an important factor in influencing Muslim aid where donors use it for establishing political alliances and support for national and regional political issues. The number of Muslim donors is growing, especially if regional foreign aid is counted. Starting from GCC states and Turkey in the Middle East, Indonesia and Malaysia in ASEAN, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan in Central Asia, and Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria in Africa, other Muslim donors may emerge, especially with current trends in international development and the dynamics of regional politics.

ii. GCC Donorship

The GCC states have a long history of aid donorship, having been the main Muslim country donors for a long time. Since the early 1960s, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have been providing development aid, soft loans, and financial assistance to many Third World countries for their development initiatives, directly and through the GCC's own national and regional development funds.⁷ Some GCC donors have been donating around 2 per cent of their gross national income (GDP) as foreign aid, which is much higher than the 0.7 per cent proposed by the UN and OECD. The similar social and political backgrounds of GCC states have prompted consideration of them as a bloc in the global aid regime, especially due to their similar practices and frameworks in aid policy. These include the nature of aid, policy decision-making, political alignment, bilateral and multilateral coordination with recipient governments and international organisations, and the growing role of NGOs and the private sector in aid activities.

GCC aid donorship policy is mainly based on bilateral coordination and mechanisms. Multilateral aid engagements among GCC states are limited to UN agencies and related organisations. To manage aid, GCC states have provided their bilateral aid agencies (through which they channel the majority of their official aid) with standardised policies and procedures to govern their activities.⁸ Also, each GCC state's Ministry of Finance operates as a powerful aid institution that disburses bilateral aid. Recently, aid institutions and more

technical departments have been playing an essential role in managing foreign aid, especially with current challenges in the global aid regime and the growing role of local and private charities.

The GCC donors' absence from the global aid policy dialogue and their lack of involvement in multilateral engagements has allowed them to avoid external influence on their internal policymaking. This has resulted in a lack of adoption of global frameworks and approaches such as aid conditionality, tied aid, and aid effectiveness. GCC aid is rarely tied, except specific loans and grants associated with oil purchases.⁹ This can be considered a positive aspect of GCC aid as studies have shown that there is a significant loss of value by tying aid to procurements or rewarding recipient countries who import goods from donors. Additionally, factors like democracy, governance, economic reforms, and gender issues are not usually considered within the GCC aid framework.

For GCC countries, grants in the form of bilateral and regional development funds constitute a big proportion of their aid. Loans are provided as soft loans with a defacto 65–70 per cent grant element.¹⁰ This practice has widened the range of recipients among poor countries, from the Arab world to Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.¹¹

One of the most visible features of GCC's donation framework is its priorities. For instance, the GCC's bilateral and multilateral agencies have been shown to favour Arab states compared to others.¹² For example, when Kuwait established its bilateral aid agency (KFAED) in 1961, the mission was to support development in Arab states. This fund mandate was expanded in 1974 to include all developing countries following a substantial increase in its resources.¹³ This initial inclination towards fellow Arab countries is partly based upon the widely-held concept of wealth sharing among the Arabs rather than aid-giving. This relationship is also often depicted as a form of Arab solidarity, where rich countries assist their poorer cousins.¹⁴

However, this trend has marginally changed, with the GCC states appearing to lower their aid allocations for Arab countries in favour of more universal donations.¹⁵ This trend has been more visible since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, which affected the notion of Arab unity and spurred the GCC states to seek and establish strategic relations with international actors (such as the USA and EU) to preserve their regional and national security interests.

Muslim countries have been significant recipients of GCC aid, often as a means of enabling the latter to establish itself as a regional leader (i.e. Saudi Arabia). In addition to Islamic brotherhood and solidarity, GCC states have tried establishing political partnerships with many newly-independent states in the Muslim World for the purpose of international recognition and future regional clustering plans. Aid has been heavily used for this purpose, especially

by small Gulf states such as Kuwait, UAE, and Qatar, with huge financial outflows to Muslim countries like Indonesia, Pakistan, and Senegal.

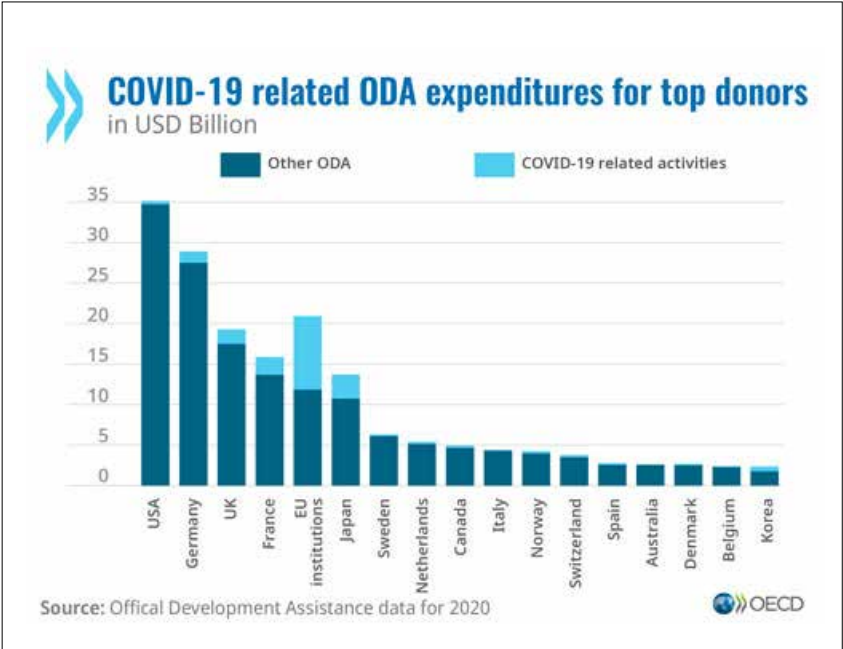
Aid from GCC countries is also influenced by developments in global politics, such as the Cold War and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. By the end of the last century, aside from helping crisis-affected countries, GCC aid has expanded to many other developing countries in an attempt to appeal more to humanitarian values and diplomacy. However, the 9/11 incident severely affected GCC aid activities both regionally and globally, due to the labelling of many charities and NGOs as terrorist and extremist organisations. Such allegations have made GCC donors rethink their aid approach and place more emphasis on Islamic solidarity and other ummatic themes.

Foreign Aid Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic

i. Traditional Donor Responses

The coronavirus pandemic has had devastating health, social and economic consequences for the world's poorest countries as well as middle-income countries. Aside from public health, various major sectors in these developing countries have suffered, such as trade, foreign direct investments and remittances. Foreign aid, as usual, is an essential tool used by donor countries to support other countries in times of crisis. According to the OECD, foreign aid hit a record high in 2020, reaching USD 161.2 billion, marking a 3.5 per cent increase in real terms from 2019 due to extra spending in helping developing countries deal with the pandemic. Short-term aid disbursements during the pandemic focused on health systems, humanitarian aid and food security, meanwhile medium-term aid focused on providing health equipment and vaccines and tackling the economic and social implications of the pandemic (OECD, 2021).¹⁶

Traditional donors, such as the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members, have responded by allocating extra aid for this purpose, either as new programmes or redirections of existing development projects (as indicated in the figure below). Although some DAC countries like Australia, Italy, South Korea, and the UK, have reduced their aid contributions, other member countries like Canada, Germany, France and the Scandinavian nations have notably increased their aid budgets. According to an OECD estimate, DAC members spent USD 12 billion on COVID-19 related activities in 2020.¹⁷



The global response to the coronavirus pandemic in the form of foreign aid or Official Development Assistance (ODA) was widely documented and presented at global summits such as the UN, G7, and G20, as well as on the platforms of DAC-EU donors and EU institutions. Certain new schemes and calls for funding were also introduced, in addition to commitments to extra funds in the form of humanitarian aid, medical supplies, and vaccines. Foreign aid is also expected to play a major role in the post-pandemic era, especially with current indicators signalling the impending long-term impact and side effects of the pandemic.

ii. Muslim Country Donor Responses

Major and minor Muslim country donors have proactively sought to support other countries during the global coronavirus outbreak. However, as most Muslim countries are low or middle-income countries (mostly aid recipients), less foreign aid has been reported as coming from them. Nevertheless, apart from the global role of big Muslim donors like the GCC states and Turkey, many other Muslim countries (mainly middle-income countries) have participated in various regional aid activities during the pandemic. For instance, Pakistan, Egypt, and Malaysia have provided humanitarian aid to India, Indonesia, and Tunisia.

Turkey has been a leading Muslim donor in various aspects of foreign aid despite not being a DAC member. The transformation of the Turkish political economy since 2002 has led to its emergence as a new and active actor in international development.¹⁸ As a global Muslim power and dynamic regional actor, Turkey has played a major role in foreign aid dynamics, especially in the Muslim world and the global south. During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, Turkey was one of the most active global donors, providing medical aid to more than 130 countries.¹⁹ Turkey's active engagement in providing humanitarian and medical aid to various parts of the world is primarily associated with the country's foreign policy and regional priorities. Turkey, in its aid allocations, often gives significant consideration to the economic, cultural, historical, and ethnic ties it has with the recipient states.²⁰ Thus, neighbouring and Muslim countries were targeted for receiving Turkish aid.

iii. GCC Donor Responses

The GCC states' foreign aid response to the pandemic crisis has been noticeable due to media coverage and the widespread presence of their diplomatic missions. Although GCC donors continue to adopt their usual aid frameworks, there has been a slight change in their aid-giving strategy and policy. They have widened the range of recipients to include non-traditional countries and even states they are not on good terms with. For example, China received aid and medical supplies from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and UAE. Aid was also sent to Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon.

Interestingly, despite being perceived as enemies and regional troublemakers, Iran and Israel both received medical aid and supplies from the GCC states (UAE is the sole donor to Israel).

In addition to their efforts to tackle the domestic impact of the pandemic, the GCC states have given tremendous effort to assisting other countries at the global level. Such efforts were initiated and implemented despite the severe economic challenges resulting from the collapse of oil prices as well as other related issues like the suspension of international air travel and the slowdown of economic growth. Substantial humanitarian aid and medical supplies have been channelled to a wide range of countries, including high-income countries like Italy, Spain, and France.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is the largest economic entity in the Arab World and a member of the G20. It owns enormous oil reserves and is a key global and regional economic and political actor. The kingdom is also one of the largest humanitarian donors

in the world and has a long history of supporting countries during emergencies, including developed countries.²¹ Additionally, the country's profound religious heritage and its substantial position in the Muslim World and among Islamic multilateral organisations such as the OIC, IDB, and MWL further strengthens its leadership position regionally and globally.

In responding to the coronavirus pandemic, Saudi Arabia provided multilateral and bilateral humanitarian and medical aid using its state agencies, such as the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD) and King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KS Relief). The kingdom also pledged several donations and supported several initiatives aimed at mitigating the pandemic and eliminating its effects. For example, Saudi Arabia announced during a debt relief conference in Paris that it will support African countries with investments and loans worth about \$1 billion in 2021 to help their economies recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.²²

In response to an urgent appeal by WHO to combat the spread of COVID-19, Saudi Arabia donated USD 20 million to support countries in the MENA region.²³ Additionally, in April 2020, the kingdom pledged USD 150 million to the Global Alliance for Vaccines (GAVI) as part of its USD 500 million package to support the global emergency and preparedness response.²⁴

Bilaterally, Saudi Arabia's COVID-19 related humanitarian and medical aid reached around 100 countries on five continents. For example, countries like Bangladesh, Malaysia, India, Comoros, Tunisia, and Afghanistan all received Saudi medical aid. While Saudi aid was sent to traditional regional recipients such as Africa, Central Asia, and South and Southeast Asia, it also reached non-traditional recipients in regions such as Latin America and Western Europe. For example, its medical supplies have reached countries like Spain, Italy, and Brazil.

Regionally, most Arab states have benefited from Saudi aid, especially countries severely affected by the pandemic, such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Iraq. For example, Saudi Arabia has allocated a USD 525 million aid package to Yemen, where it leads a military coalition against the Houthi rebels. Other countries like Somalia, Sudan and Lebanon have also received considerable amounts of Saudi humanitarian aid.

Qatar

Along with other GCC states, Qatar has been a middle-sized donor and a very deviant small state in the political arena. The emirate's engagement in the aid regime began in the twenty-first century. Qatari foreign aid volume has expanded tremendously to include various areas of development and

humanitarian programmes, reaching many recipient countries and regions worldwide. Although a small state, Qatar has the potential to become a key international donor due to its wealth. The small state has strengthened its international influence through aid partnerships in various fields and with a wide range of partners, especially international organisations such as the UN.

In responding to the coronavirus pandemic, Qatar has expressed its commitment to support other countries through humanitarian aid and medical supplies. Among the primary Qatari institutions leading the state's foreign aid activities are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Ministry of Defense, the Qatar Fund for Development, as well as several Qatari charitable organisations.²⁵ Qatar has made good use of its embassies, diplomatic and foreign missions, as well as its national carrier "Qatar Airways" to deliver aid supplies to targeted countries worldwide. For example, the QFD report stated that "delivery of the aid was achieved through the QFD, the Amiri Air Force, Qatar Charity and Qatar Red Crescent and the total aid delivered through QFFD has exceeded 247 tons of medical supplies and equipment..."²⁶ Qatar has also mobilized its internationally recognised organisations, such as Qatar Charity (QC) and Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS), to initiate several global projects in the fight against COVID-19. For example, QC stated that it has provided medical aid through Qatari embassies in 40 countries, benefiting 320,000 people.²⁷

In its efforts to respond to the pandemic crisis, Qatar has used its bilateral and multilateral channels to deliver medical supplies and humanitarian aid to about 83 countries.²⁸ The state has established field hospitals in Italy, Iraq, and Tunisia and donated USD 150 million to the Gaza Strip to support the city's health sector. Qatar has also sent shipments of medical supplies and emergency aid to Iran, Lebanon, Libya, and Jordan.²⁹

Qatar has also funded several international organisations and multilateral agencies related to the global COVID-19 response. It allocated USD 20 million to GAVI and USD 10 million to WHO.³⁰ Other UN agencies like UNICEF and UNHCR have also received funds from Qatar.³¹

Qatari officials and media have indicated that Qatar's aid efforts are a reflection of its brotherly and friendly attitude toward affected countries, being purely humanitarian in nature.³²

Kuwait

Kuwait was the first GCC state to introduce its own foreign aid programmes. Since the middle of the last century, it has been a forerunner among Arab countries in providing foreign aid. The country has a long history of supporting

newly independent states in Asia and Africa through several policy projects and in coordination with various partners, such as the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). Kuwait has established several bilateral and multilateral agencies for such purposes, including the Kuwaiti Fund for Arab Economic Development, the Arab Fund for Social and Economic Development, and the Arab Bank for economic development in Africa. However, Kuwait's foreign aid saw a noticeable decline after the 1990 invasion by Iraq, although it has continued to provide aid for some countries due to its political and humanitarian interests.

Regarding its response to the pandemic, Kuwait has also been very active in supporting many countries. However, its efforts did not have the same momentum (volume and frequency) as those of the other three GCC donors as its bilateral and multilateral efforts were focused mainly on its traditional recipients and usual partner UN agencies. For example, Kuwait has provided medical and humanitarian aid to Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, and Nepal and offered USD 40 million to WHO to help combat the spread of COVID-19 worldwide.³³ The state has also pledged an additional USD 100 million for the continuous fight against the coronavirus pandemic.³⁴

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The foreign aid programme of the UAE has been very ambitious, paralleling the country's mission to raise its diplomatic and political stature at the international level. With its rapid economic growth and huge oil production, the UAE has used its foreign aid policy to achieve its regional interests and political agenda. Its foreign aid has been used to counter various political movements that are not in line with its state ideology, such as the Arab Spring, democratic change, and the Islamic political movement. For example, in 2013, the UAE's massive increase in foreign aid to Egypt was a deliberate attempt to support the latter's military coup. On the other hand, despite Yemen's pressing need for aid, the UAE did not provide any significant assistance until 2015.³⁵

The UAE has several active aid institutions such as the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development, Red Crescent Society, Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation, and Dubai Care. Additionally, the UAE is a recognised donor by the OECD and has been involved in many regional and global aid appeals, especially in Eastern Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

Accompanied by intensive media coverage, the UAE has dispatched medical supplies and humanitarian aid to around 117 countries worldwide.³⁶ The UAE has utilised its large naval fleet to deliver a total of 2,154 tons of medical supplies and humanitarian aid through 196 flights.³⁷ The country's

medical supplies and humanitarian aid have reached a vast number of countries, including well-developed ones. Countries like Greece, Ethiopia, Somalia, Syria, Turkmenistan, Australia, and the UK are among the states which have received Emirati medical aid. The state has also funded various field hospitals in Sudan, Rwanda, and Jordan.

Similarly, the UAE has utilised its multilateral relations and technical capacity to host the Dubai Humanitarian City and advance its aid efforts. For example, the UAE has provided in-kind aid to WHO amounting to USD 10 million. Additionally, the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD) has pledged a donation worth USD 10 billion to the Arab Coordination Group to help developing countries recover from the economic stagnation caused by the pandemic. ADFD also launched a pioneering initiative that allowed the postponement of debt repayments by developing countries benefitting from the Fund's loans for the year 2020.³⁸

Efforts and foreign aid activities by the UAE during the COVID-19 pandemic were much more organised and strategised compared to other GCC donors. In March 2020, the UAE established the 'Fund of the United Arab Emirates: Homeland of Humanity' to unify its national efforts in combatting COVID-19. The government has also launched a portal website to increase public access to data and information about the country's plans, efforts, and achievements in eradicating the pandemic regionally and globally.

Analysis and Findings

The GCC states have demonstrated effective responses to the spread and effects of the coronavirus pandemic by providing large amounts of humanitarian aid and emergency medical supplies. Along with aggressive measures to control the pandemic domestically and protect the private sector, they have provided rapid and effective aid to other countries as well. In general, the aid responses of the GCC countries were assigned to government institutions, leaving only a small role for local charities and NGOs. GCC aid has reached almost all countries worldwide, showing that global aid engagement and humanitarian diplomacy are very significant foreign policy tools for the GCC states.

Referring to the available data and sources on GCC foreign aid engagement during the coronavirus pandemic, one noticeable trend is that GCC donors were more proactive and responsive in the first months of the pandemic outbreak compared to later. The year 2020 saw the largest amount of foreign aid come from GCC states, probably due to an initial emphasis on delivering medical supplies and equipment without much focus on long-term aid programmes and

strategies. Among GCC countries, the UAE has done the most to consider the future impact of the pandemic in its aid framework.

Additionally, most GCC aid engagement during the pandemic was initiated and implemented bilaterally instead of multilaterally—mainly with UN agencies such as WHO, UNHCR, and UNICEF. Such cooperation represents a potent opportunity for the GCC states to build and strengthen their bilateral relations, as well as boost their international image in terms of humanitarian missions.

To make a general comparison among GCC state donors in terms of aid programmes designated for tackling the coronavirus pandemic, the UAE and Qatar can be said to be the most responsive based on their number of aid activities, while Saudi Arabia is the biggest donor. Kuwait's contribution pales in comparison to other GCC countries in both responsiveness and donation size. Aid by the UAE reached the most countries, followed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. One element that helped GCC donors respond rapidly and effectively to the pandemic crisis, particularly the UAE and Qatar, was their ability to utilise available resources such as national air carriers, air forces, as well as diplomatic missions. With their huge fleet of aeroplanes, especially when international travel was suspended, the UAE and Qatar managed to reach many countries and deliver humanitarian aid and medical supplies quickly. For example, Qatar, which serves as a hub for trade and travel to over 100 destinations globally, capitalised on Qatar Airways to deliver aid as well as transport one million stranded passengers across the world to their respective countries. Similarly, the UAE utilised both Emirates and Etihad Airlines along with its air force to set up field hospitals and deliver medical supplies to various destinations.

In terms of the geographical distribution of GCC aid, three observations can be made. First, GCC aid has reached some countries for the first time, including in Western Europe and Latin America. Second, Arab and Muslim countries continue to be the most prominent recipients of GCC aid, although there are some changes in the size and frequency of aid due to political and regional factors. Third, the GCC states did not employ a particular strategy when selecting foreign aid recipients, as evident by the universality of their aid, which reached almost all countries in the world. However, an implicit criterion was used when it came to determining the size and nature of aid given to each recipient. In this regard, political, socio-cultural, and religious affinities continue to be significant determinants, as they have been historically.

In terms of sectoral distribution, most GCC aid was disbursed in kind with only a small proportion in hard currency (mainly the US dollar). Contributions mostly comprised medical supplies such as testing and laboratory equipment,

safety supplies, health staff materials, hygiene kits, and food supplies. The GCC states also provided support in the form of field hospitals, technical health staff and technical guidance, as well as logistic support. Recently, some institutions have been debating future projects that would include sectors like education and employment. For example, the Qatar Foundation is currently advocating including the topic ‘COVID-19 consequences’ in its education programmes.

Although GCC humanitarian efforts are similar in various technical and political policy aspects, there is a lack of coordination and an absence of common collective goals.³⁹ Consequently, there are various overlaps in the provision of humanitarian aid and medical supplies among the GCC states, as experienced by Tunisia, Jordan, China, Iran, and Italy.

Obviously, GCC donors have made certain priority choices regarding the countries and organisations their aid goes to, reflecting their national concerns and strategies. For example, Kuwait provided funds to the UN, Saudi Arabia focused its efforts on Yemen, Qatar preferred its traditional Middle Eastern recipients, and UAE provided aid to a broad range of destinations, especially in Africa.⁴⁰ The absence of a framework to set common objectives for their regional and global priorities has made GCC aid interventions scattered and less efficient.

In brief, GCC aid engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic resembles a competition between brotherly neighbours trying to score individual political influence, especially in the Arab and Middle East regions. In particular, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and UAE, which has characterised international relations in the Gulf over the past three decades, has extended into the realm of foreign aid. For instance, COVID-19 aid programmes in countries like Yemen, Libya, Iran, Syria, Palestine, and Tunisia reflect the proxy conflicts or powerplay between two or more GCC donors.⁴¹ This situation shows that there is still a level of mistrust between GCC donors, especially after the Gulf rift that occurred in 2017 between Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt on one side, and Qatar on the other. Apparently, the pandemic crisis has presented an opportunity to bring them together, although it is still too soon to see them united as before.

Lastly, when analysing GCC aid trends during the pandemic, three shocking findings were observed. The first is that all GCC donor aid documents and resources, including statements by top officials and government press releases, are devoid of an Islamic perspective. Islamic identity, faith and beliefs or other related Islamic concepts such as brotherhood, charity (*ihsan*), and solidarity (*al-takaful*) were not referred to. For example, the term “brotherly countries” was passingly used in some documents when referring to Arab and Muslim countries but no connection was made to Islamic concepts. Some aid documents also

adopted philanthropic terms but did not link them to any religious or Islamic principles.

Moreover, Arabic cultural and social values, which historically have been a source of pride and which include things like generosity, helping the needy, and *akhlak*, were not mentioned at all. On the other hand, modern global values like humanitarianism, universalism, and friendship were intensively used in all these documents. This reflects how secular thinking has become heavily embedded in the GCC states (and Arab states in general), including in their policy orientations and frameworks. It also shows an alarming level of identity crisis among GCC countries. The avoidance of Islamic frameworks and concepts has become more apparent in the last two decades, especially after the 9/11 incident and the frequent allegations of terrorism made against GCC donors and Muslim charities, which are mainly based in the Gulf region.

Another shocking observation is related to the size of GCC humanitarian aid during the pandemic crisis. Despite being expected to increase due to the extra aid programmes assigned for fighting COVID-19, data showed a radical decline in GCC aid. Based on the OCHA 2020 report, Saudi humanitarian aid was USD 504,585,815 compared to USD 1,371,520,273 in 2019, the UAE's USD 326,243,426 compared to USD 611,990,800 in 2019 and over USD 2 billion in 2018. Similar figures can be seen for Kuwait and Qatar.⁴² GCC development aid figures are predicted to decrease, especially with the operational and logistic challenges accompanying the pandemic. This confirms the need for GCC donors to adapt long-term aid strategies either for humanitarian or development aid engagements.

The third shocking observation is related to media propaganda and the availability of data. Although GCC donors have been very generous in past decades, data related to aid allocations are made accessible only through annual reports. Additionally, due to media outlets being the primary disseminators of information regarding GCC aid events, aid data is often prone to exaggeration and overestimation, especially when influenced by certain political interests. For example, UAE documents and media sources have reported that its COVID-19 aid accounted for 80% of the total global response against the pandemic without presenting any data or evidence.⁴³ Thus, the dearth of GCC aid data is still an evident challenge that needs to be addressed, especially concerning accessibility and transparency. In fact, this issue has been increasingly raised and debated by many researchers and international institutions.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

GCC donors, as well as other Muslim aid actors, have effectively responded to the coronavirus pandemic crisis. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and UAE have provided humanitarian aid and medical supplies to almost all countries worldwide. They have utilised their resources and capabilities to participate in global efforts to eradicate the pandemic since the first months of its outbreak. Nevertheless, most of their aid engagements have focused on mitigating the spread of the virus, with less attention being paid to the future impact of the pandemic. The GCC countries utilised both multilateral (limited to UN agencies) and bilateral channels when providing foreign aid, and have reached many new recipients states—in line with their foreign policy objectives.

However, certain shortcomings in the GCC's response to the pandemic were noticed, mainly concerning their policy frameworks, internal coordination, and use of political proxies. Additional issues that need to be reviewed are related to aid data and aid strategies, as well as the sustainability of humanitarian and developmental aid. Overall, through their global aid efforts, Gulf donors have provided an outstanding example of benevolence despite lacking an overt Islamic identity. This paper proposes the following five policy recommendations:

- Aid coming from Muslim country donors should incorporate aspects of Muslim identity and Islamic values to help enhance the global image of Muslims.
- GCC donors should reconsider their objectives and frameworks for coordination, both regionally and globally.
- The foreign aid policy of GCC and Muslim countries should be set based on clear political and humanitarian strategies, especially during crises such as pandemics.
- More aid transparency and data accuracy must be provided through accessible platforms.
- GCC aid engagement in pandemics, crises, and disasters should not hinder other humanitarian and development aid programmes.

Notes

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