

## Humanitarian Foreign Aid of Gulf States Background and Orientations

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### Introduction

Foreign aid from the main Gulf donors (the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) have been controversial for many years. This is due to the fact that Gulf foreign aid objectives and types are intrinsically intertwined. During the past fifteen years, humanitarian aid has transformed the Gulf states to become amongst the leading international humanitarian donors. However, the politicisation of humanitarian aid has done more damage to Gulf states than creating visibility and reputation. This article looks into the development of Gulf aid and the politics of humanitarian aid.

### The development of humanitarian foreign aid of Gulf States

The Foreign aid in the Middle East is perceived as a fundamental dimension in understanding politics and development in this region. It confirms the fact that the Middle East has some of the largest aid recipients in the world, and one of the longest receiving such as Egypt and Jordan. This attention towards recipients' countries has marginalised the fact that within this region itself, there are also major aid donors.

Over the past sixty years, the Middle East has witnessed a rise and decline of regional and international donors. Amongst the most active regional donors are the Gulf states. Although most of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are considered wealthy countries, yet there are only four main aid donors; the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The other two GCC states Oman and Bahrain, provide minimal aid. These states (the main four) are no longer 'emerging donors' as perceived by some scholars. Fifty years of aid giving for political, developmental and humanitarian purposes has transformed some of those donors, such as the UAE and Qatar into leading players at the regional level. Aid for diplomatic or political objectives is difficult to trace due to the complexities between Gulf donors and their aid recipients. Lack of transparent statistics concerning diplomatic aid raises many questions as to why some donors are considered leading at the international level. This is because the most visible type of aid that, to a great extent, is being monitored and reported is 'humanitarian aid'.

Since the emergence of the Gulf states as aid donors, humanitarian aid has received extremely little attention. This is because, during the 1970s and 1980s, aid for political reasons have been predominant. Gulf states perceive non-humanitarian aid as 'solidarity aid' and as a duty under also the so-called 'South-South cooperation.' There is no doubt that some humanitarian assistance provided during the 1970s and 1980s has very much been influenced by Islamic teaching and regional identities. Overall, the cultural dimension, such as ideologies and identities during that period influenced the orientation of Gulf aid. The rise of Islamism during the 1980s and Arabism before this period contributed to Gulf aid. The provision of humanitarian assistance, however, began and increased significantly by early 1990s, with the decline of the influence of such cultural factors in the foreign policies of the Gulf donors. The establishment of several governmental and non-governmental agencies in the Gulf for merely humanitarian objective proved that Gulf donors are important humanitarian donors not only at the regional but also at the international level. A clear example of this is the establishment of Red Crescent in various Gulf States such as in the UAE in 1983, and the Shaikh Zayed Charitable and Humanitarian Foundation in 1992, the International Organization for Relief, Welfare and Development in Saudi Arabia was established in 1978. In the last twenty-five years, many humanitarian semi-governmental and non-governmental aid agencies were established in the Gulf, with Dubai becoming a hub for humanitarian activities in the region.

Gulf humanitarian aid became more visible since the beginning of the new millennium, particularly with the rise of those Gulf donors as active and influential players at the regional level. During the past twenty years, Gulf donors have been amongst the leading at the international level; according to UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Saudi Arabia ranked fourth largest humanitarian donor in 2018 and 9th in 2020; while the UAE third largest humanitarian donor relative to its Gross National Income in 2016. In 2013, the UAE became the world largest humanitarian donor after it has provided \$5.89 billion according to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The activism of these donors, as well as Kuwait and Qatar, demonstrates their responsibilities towards countries in need.

However, despite this generosity, Gulf donors have been criticised for their provision of humanitarian aid to specific countries, mainly in the Middle East. Both UAE and Saudi Arabia have been the largest provider of humanitarian aid to Yemen. According to OCHA, Saudi Arabia provided 71% of its humanitarian aid to Yemen in 2020, 93% in 2019 and 87% to Yemen in 2018. The increase of this humanitarian aid began by 2015, which coincided with the on-going conflict in Yemen. The UAE is no exception, where figures reflect, to a great extent, similar to that of Saudi Arabia; in 2018 it has provided 96% to Yemen and 80% in 2019. However, Kuwait and Qatar provided less aid; in 2019 Kuwait provided 66% of its assistance to Yemen and 70% in 2018, while Qatar provided only 6.4% of its aid to Yemen and 8.3% in 2016. Although the latter two donors are smaller than Saudi Arabia and UAE, yet a significant amount of their aid went to Yemen. It is essential, however, to note that the political role of Qatar and Kuwait in Yemen is much less than those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The former provided more aid to Syria and the Palestinian Territory, particularly for the case of Qatar. A significant amount of humanitarian aid by these donors have also gone to different Arab countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Sudan and Egypt. However, the provision to non-Arab countries is limited, but it mainly goes to Afghanistan, Turkey, Somalia and Indonesia.

## Explaining the allocation and orientation of Gulf aid

The allocation and orientation of Gulf aid can be explained by two main points. First, some of those donors believe that Arab solidarity has been dictating their aid since the 1970s, whether it is humanitarian, political or developmental aid. Being part of the region, Gulf donors feel obliged to give Arab countries a priority in aid due to on-going political and economic instabilities. During the last ten years alone, particularly since the so-called Arab Uprisings, Gulf donors maintained a good level of aid provision to Middle Eastern countries. Still, it was mainly non-humanitarian aid with the exception of Syria and Yemen. Nonetheless, humanitarian aid is intrinsically intertwined with political aid. Aid recipients who are considered politically important for Gulf donors tend to receive more aid than those of less importance. The amount of aid to Yemen reflects the political role of Saudi Arabia and the UAE since 2015.

Second, Gulf donors' humanitarian aid towards non-Arab countries can also be interpreted within the 'South-South Cooperation' framework. All Gulf donors are considered part of this framework, and therefore they feel that it is important to contribute to the development of countries in the Global South. In some cases where aid recipients are of great importance to the donor, such as Pakistan, the amount of humanitarian aid during disasters appear to be very high. During the several floods and earthquakes that struck Pakistan, Gulf donors have been amongst the largest to provide aid. The UAE established the "Pakistan Assistance Program" with a budget of \$300 million. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia granted \$220 million in 2010 when Pakistan struck with an unprecedented flood - surpassing the pledges of all European donors taken together (\$209 million).

In contrast to the previous two donors, Qatar and Kuwait provide a significant amount of money to specific non-Arab countries, such as Turkey, Afghanistan, Chad and some other African countries. For example, Turkey received a substantial amount of humanitarian aid from Qatar and Kuwait in comparison to other Gulf donors. It is also important to note that there is a tendency and sometimes convergence of Kuwait and Qatar aid recipients, while we see exactly the same with the cases of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The divergence of aid

distribution from Gulf donors reflects political differences, as well as the priorities of each donor. In other words, there is a fragmentation between Gulf donors.

One of the main characteristics that can also explain why the volume and the geographical distribution of Gulf aid tend to be directed towards particular states is bilateralism. There is no doubt that the majority of the Gulf aid, whether it is humanitarian or developmental, is mainly bilateral. Between one and six per cent of Gulf aid is channelled through multilateral organisations. Bilateral aid puts more pressure on aid recipients to conform with some of the Gulf donors' political or economic conditions. For example, Saudi Arabia allocated 1% of total Official Development Assistance (ODA) as core contributions to multilateral organisations. Saudi ODA also includes humanitarian aid. Another example of the low contribution to multilateral aid organisation is the UAE: in 2015, multilateral ODA accounted for 1% of the country's total ODA, provided primarily through the United Nations (75%). Qatar provided even much lower; in 2012, it gave 0.55 per cent of government aid and assistance to international organisations and bodies. Consequently, the small contribution to international multilateral aid organisation shows that Gulf donors' preference to channel aid bilaterally is due to some political consideration, solidarity and support to 'Global South'. However, political gains and influence appear to be predominant in recent years.

## Implications

With the recent implications of Covid-19, humanitarian aid from the Gulf appears to show a slight decline. Statistics demonstrate that there is a decline in the amount of humanitarian assistance from the Gulf. Based on OCHA reported aid activities, all Gulf four prominent aid donors provided much less humanitarian aid than the past four years. The total amount of Saudi Arabia humanitarian aid provided 2020 is \$504,585,815; while in 2019 it provided more than double with \$1,371,520,273. The UAE figures are even much less; in 2020, it has given \$326,243,426 while in 2019 \$611,990,800, and in 2018 the amount reached over \$2 billion. Similar figures can be seen for the Kuwaiti and Qatari cases. With the continuing implications of Covid-19, decline of oil prices and the role of some of the Gulf donors in regional politics of the Middle East, the amount of humanitarian aid in the coming years will decrease. Accordingly, Gulf donors' humanitarian aid strategies should be reconsidered. Although the use of humanitarian assistance for political objectives is not exclusive to the Gulf donors, it is important however, to separate this type of aid from the developmental or diplomatic aid. Seeking influence through foreign aid, whether it is humanitarian or not, cannot be seen as a sustainable tool for the Gulf states in the coming years. Therefore, reconsideration of aid objectives and gains could help Gulf donors maintain their role in the Middle East. Moreover, despite similarities between the Gulf donors in terms of characteristics of humanitarian aid, there is a lack of cooperation and coordination between them. Any future coordination between Gulf donors could help them overcome some of the regional and international challenges in humanitarian aid giving. Political differences and regional interests, however, appear to harm the economies and financial powers of Gulf donors, where all seek to compete to exert power and influence.

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