

Among the first charity organizations in the U.S. was the Indian Muslim Relief Committee which was established in 1982 under the sponsorship of the Islamic Society of North American (ISNA). With an average annual collection of \$1.5 million, the committee has funded a number of relief and education projects in India.

The Islamic African Relief Agency (IARA) was established in 1984 with a focus on Africa, but it has provided emergency assistance in other continents as well. Organization officials claim its grassroots approach has been more effective than the bureaucratic methods of its official partners, including United Nations agencies and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). They claim that its key to success is the use of Malian local school graduates, who live among the people they serve. As a result, the group says, its educational program has introduced contemporary medical knowledge, challenging traditional beliefs and practices. On average, the group distributes \$2.5 million in annual aid.

Mercy International was founded in 1986 with offices in Plymouth, Michigan and Covina, California. The group is registered with the U.S. Agency for International Development and has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. With annual funds averaging \$2.5 million, Mercy has assisted people in Afghanistan, Albania, Bangladesh, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Chechnya, Kosovo, Mozambique, Somalia, Kenya and Turkey.

Mercy began as an effort to raise funds for Afghan refugees, and this remained its primary focus until 1989, when the group began providing emergency assistance to refugees and the poor in Kashmir, Lebanon, Somalia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan. In addition, Mercy has taken part in other relief projects for victims of war, refugees, and victims of natural disasters.

The Holy Land Foundation (HLF) was established in 1989 in Dallas, Texas with a focus on providing aid to Palestinian refugees. HLF was perhaps the largest of the Muslim charity groups, collecting an average total of \$10 million per year. The group maintained regional offices in California, Illinois, Michigan and New Jersey. The organization was closed in 2003 upon allegations that it had ties to the Palestinian group Hamas.

Islamic Relief (IR) is an international relief and development organization comprised of a family of 15 Aid Agencies that aims to alleviate the suffering of the world's poorest people. It is an independent non-governmental organization (NGO) founded first in the UK in 1984. During the 90's Islamic Relief opened a big operation in the United States. Islamic Relief is a member of the UN's Economic and Social Council and a signatory to the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief. IR is also a member of BOND (British Overseas NGOs for Development) and is part of the global Make Poverty History coalition, which is campaigning to end extreme poverty.

Benevolence International Foundation (BIF) was established in 1987 in Worth, Illinois. The organization started to help people emerging from the ruins of Communism. BIF first provided short-term relief such as emergency food distribution, and then moved on to long-term projects, providing education and self-sufficiency to children, widows, refugees and the injured. The organization disperses an average of \$1.75 million in aid annually.

There are signs that the event and its aftermath may lead to substantial changes in the amount of attention that Muslims give to interfaith relations. First, through interactions with others, Muslims realized that the American public is sophisticated in their social thinking and that their interest in learning about the faith was matched by their collective efforts to learn about its adherents.

Institution-builders realized how little attention they had paid to interfaith relations. Non-Muslim groups which had had a history of inter-denominational dialogue were also shaken by the realization that they had not paid adequate attention to reaching out to Muslims. Indeed many of the contacts that followed September 11 were initiated by churches seeking to change that state of affairs. But faith-based groups represent only one side of the spectrum. Muslims have still been struggling to organize themselves locally. Many have not been readily available to address church communities and other religious and civic associations.

September 11 caught Muslim charities by surprise. A number of them jumped in to help in the relief effort. Helping Hand, which is based in New York, immediately formed an action plan. It identified affected families, assisted in funeral arrangements, and provided interpreters for victim relatives who did not speak English. HLF established a fund for the victims of the attacks. But three months after the September 11 attacks, in December 2001, the Bush administration announced blocking the assets of HLF, effectively shutting down the charity. A few days later the government also blocked the accounts of GRF and BIF. The two groups, as noted before, have been active in aid delivery in Afghanistan and Pakistan—where the U.S. staged and conducted a bombing campaign that began three weeks after the September 11 attacks.

Holy Land Foundation, the largest of American Muslim charities, acknowledged that some of the beneficiaries of its assistance programs may be relatives to those implicated in violence against Israel, but insisted that it would be inhumane to exclude hungry refugees from food and medical assistance on account of their suspected relatives. In the management of charitable giving, HLF had taken pride that it “meets and exceeds the standards for non-profit conduct set by the Philanthropic Advisory Service for the Council of Better Business Bureau.” The closure of the charities became part of the public debate over balancing security with civil liberties in the post 9/11 environment. To deflect charges of bias against Muslim charities, the government accompanied the closures of several charities with awarding Mercy a grant worth \$2 million to deliver school lunches for poor Albanian children. It was hardly a coincidence that this agreement with Mercy, along with the freezing of accounts of the other charities, all came in the second week of December 2001. At home, social aid societies serving ethnic Muslims had already been growing since the 1970s.

The entire Muslim community scrambled to improve its public image in the post 9/11 world. Today the focus on terrorism, the war in Iraq, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, have forced Islamic organizations to maintain a prominent presence in the media and in interfaith circles. They have been thrust into the spotlight and their role as liaisons between Muslims and the rest of the American community has become critical. Muslim individuals are finally recognizing the value of organizing and reaching out to the wider community. The tragedy of September 11th served as a kind of wake-up call for everyone.