Aid in Faith: When religious identity does not help to access the needy: A case from Somalia

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Introduction

There is rhetoric to the effect that Islamic NGOs are in a better position to access victims of a conflict or of natural disasters in a Muslim country. However, events in Somalia contradict that rhetoric by demonstrating that religious identity alone does not determine the opening of the humanitarian space in a conflict-prone area. What matters is the political dialogue that the organization is able to establish with the factions that control the territory, combined with the NGO's capacity to negotiate its presence in the field.

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The following article provides a narrative of the 2006 and 2011 drought emergency responses in Somalia, showing how both Christian and Muslim organizations experienced difficulties in accessing the Somali population in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. Two examples are cited, which suggest the need to frame religious identity within a political discourse, where all NGOs, as political actors, need to find their strategies to negotiate access and be allowed to operate.

Conceptualising humanitarian aid across religions and cultures

Humanitarian aid is motivated by a moral impulse to help other people in difficulty. As such, it is innate in human nature and has always existed. The European Union defines humanitarianism as the fundamental expression of the universal value of solidarity between people.[1] Solidarity and human piety are also historically linked to religious traditions and sentiments, and this is why religion always played a role in providing aid to vulnerable populations.

In modern times, humanitarian aid is typically provided in emergency situations to address the urgent basic needs of people at serious risk of losing their lives. Food, protection, water and medical assistance are traditionally provided in humanitarian aid to victims of natural disasters. Today however, after the end of the cold war and the emergence of the so-called "new wars,"[2] emergencies mostly have a political origin and are associated with conflicts at intra-state level. The notion of "complex political emergencies" was coined by the United Nations in 1991 to describe those situations characterized by complex crises that involve various actors. Military, state and civil actors may be involved simultaneously in a conflict that encompasses various geographical

dimensions, from the local to the national or regional; there is often an absence of any State apparatus able to exercise governance and protect civilians. Civilians are the most affected in these so-called "new wars" as the conflicts in the Balkans in the early nineteen-nineties, in Somalia and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda demonstrate.

New wars, new conflicts and new emergencies require new tools to provide humanitarian aid. How does one operate in such a complex scenario? In response to this question, the international community was first inspired by the humanitarian principles set by the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Society; these principles of Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality and Independence[3] were officially adopted in October 1965[4] and were elaborated on in 1994, through a Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief. That Code of Conduct is a voluntary code seeking to set standards of behaviour of organizations and personnel involved in humanitarian aid. It is composed of ten principles, drawn largely by the humanitarian principles of the Red Cross Movement; these stress the need to ensure the right of each individual to receive humanitarian assistance, regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinctions of any kind. According to the Code, aid must not be used to further any particular political or religious standpoint and should not become an instrument of government foreign policy. Aid must respect culture and customs, and seek participation of the beneficiary community in the management of relief aid to reduce vulnerability to disasters and meeting basic needs.[5] In the last twenty years, many other initiatives have followed to codify behaviours and standards of humanitarian assistance, to ensure quality and coordination,[6] but the Code of Conduct remained the "father code" together with the idea that aid provision must be a right of every individual in need, while being impartial, neutral and independent.[7]

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Muslim aid efforts are obviously part of the story of humanitarianism, although these received academic attention only recently.[8] Islamic humanitarianism emerged as a phenomenon in Africa in the middle of the nineteen-seventies for various reasons. Firstly, there were political opportunities offered by the development of the Islamist movements from 1979 onwards[9] that used Islamic organizations to penetrate the civil society, also through humanitarian aid. Secondly, there were humanitarian needs and opportunities for Muslim actors to provide aid in many African countries, impoverished by the oil crises and deprived of social welfare programmes because of the austerity imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund through the Structural Adjustment Programmes. Finally, in the nineteen-eighties, funds became available to enable Muslim actors to operate, as a result of the new potentialities offered by the reform on the use of Zakat and Sadaqa Funds; these reforms allowed organizations, in addition to States, to manage religious donations, in respect of the Muslim principles outlined by the Prophet.[10] Muslim aid actors organized in NGOs during the nineteen-eighties in Africa, and the Islamic NGOs experienced a phase of exponential growth between 1980 and 2000.[11] Islamic humanitarianism became visible to western aid actors from the mid nineteen-nineties, during the war in Bosnian Herzegovina. During the war, many organizations gathered under the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC),[12] provided assistance to refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs), also using the Fund for the Return of Bosnian Refugees. The Fund was established by the OIC to support agencies in addressing humanitarian needs of the victims of the ethnic cleansing; it also provided the Bosnian population with schools, hospitals and livelihood opportunities.[13] In 2008,

the OIC decided to institutionalize its activities in the humanitarian sector, creating an *ad-hoc* department within the OIC known as the Islamic Conference Humanitarian Affairs Department (ICHAD).[14]

The "rhetoric" of the faith-based organizations

Islamic humanitarianism and the role of Muslim organizations in providing aid and development services are gaining momentum after the need to expand humanitarian space to other actors that can complement the UN-led humanitarian system. There is ample room for cooperation, provided that the two systems are compatible, based on the same principles and conversant with the same operative language. In other words, there is the need for mutual knowledge and understanding and this need is being covered by a large amount of literature and research on Islamic humanitarianism, practices and values. Islamic NGOs have been invited to provide their input on the humanitarian system during online consultations held in 2015 in preparation for the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016. The online consultation titled Faith and Religion in Humanitarian Action highlights, among other issues, the need for faith-based organizations to become more actively included in international forums and coordination mechanisms. This would be in recognition of the valuable role that these organizations can play in humanitarian emergencies, especially in conflicts with strong and complex religious overtones. The report produced from those online consultations suggests that faith-based organizations can be better placed to understand the root causes of violence and to help by providing counselling and spiritual support. Also, faith-based organizations may have better access to affected people in situations of armed conflict, because of the networks of local religious infrastructures; also, they may be better at promoting peace and reconciliation among various conflicting religious groups.[15] These arguments are frequent in the rhetoric of almost all the faith-based organizations that are engaged in development as well as humanitarian works. While recognizing the importance of faith-based organizations and their strong and direct linkage to local communities, this paper questions the current rhetoric in the light of the increasing politicization of the religious identity, especially in countries characterized by the presence of conflicting religious groups, such as Somalia.

Islamic and Christian organizations in Somalia

After the fall of the Siad Barre Regime in 1991, Islamic aid organizations[16] proliferated in Somalia in response to humanitarian crises, and Islamic humanitarianism initiatives spread significantly. The Somali Islamist movement Al Islah, connected to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, devoted itself to expanding its membership base by being active in the sectors of humanitarian assistance and the social services.

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country to contribute to *Igathawa Tacliim*, the humanitarian effort, one of the movement's main strategic initiatives in the early nineteen-nineties. Other members of the movement contributed to Al Islah's *Igathawa Tacliim* either by founding local aid organizations, such as the Zam Zam Foundation and Al Tadamun Social Society, or by working for them as directors of schools and hospitals. These aid organizations did not actually belong to the movement but were associated with it because its members served as directors. In this way, the Islamist movement Al Islah managed to put in place a series of structures furthering its strategic and programming aims while the movement kept a low profile in local society and in the eyes of the international community.[17]

It is significant that the number of Christian organizations did not diminish because of the rise of Islamist radicalism in Somalia after 2006. Instead, new organizations arrived such as Finn Church Aid that, after starting in Northern Somalia and in Somaliland, later expanded into southern central zones.

The nineteen-nineties were also the years of a renewed presence of Christian aid organizations. The humanitarian needs facilitated the presence of Christian organizations such as Caritas Switzerland, Catholic Relief Service and Swedish Church Relief, which were active in food and clothing distribution. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency conducted school support programmes while Norwegian Church Aid was active in the border region of Gedo.[18] Other faith-based organizations chose to downplay their religious identity; for example, Water for Life, a lay organization founded by a well-known Italian priest and active in the riverine area around Merca, and Diakonia, the social service agency of the German Protestant church.

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Generally, the Christian aid organizations present in Somalia do not have a religious movement working alongside them overseeing questions connected with humanitarian access to the territory in conflict situations; this is unlike the numerous Islamic organizations. Each organization has developed its own access strategy, relying above all on a local support network built up over the years. Some of these strategies include constructing a kind of clan-based affiliation, which ensures protection for the members of the organization; others rely on local partners of a different religious confession; for example, Norwegian Church Aid in the Gedo region has developed partnerships with Islamic ONGs which execute their projects.[19]

In the last two decades and more, both Christian and Islamic organizations encountered increasing levels of difficulty when trying to operate in Somalia; this became a difficult environment where the space for humanitarian efforts continued to shrink because of the emergence of political economy of aid and conflict.[20]The need to expand that space for humanitarian work in Somalia calls for a deeper reflection on the potential role of faith-based organizations in gaining more access to areas controlled by radical Islamist movements.

The following two narratives on the 2006 and 2011 drought emergency responses and purposely offer elements of reflection on the relative importance of the faith-based identity to access the victims of a conflict or a natural disaster.

The drought emergency response "at risk" in 2006

In Somalia, livestock trade accounts for a big share of household income.[21] The good health and condition of goats, cattle and camels in Somalia depends on the recurrent rains that are distinguished according to the seasons: there are the short rains *Deyr*, from October to November, and the long rains from March to June (*Gu*). In

late 2005, both the *Deyr* and the *Gu* failed, leading to the drying up of water sources by March 2016; this resulted in a large number of livestock deaths and widespread crop failure, especially in the southern regions. In early 2006, livestock prices dropped considerably while food prices increased and the purchasing power of most families in the South was eroded significantly.[22] There were large movements of population and livestock within Somalia and across the border to Kenya and Ethiopia, in search of food, water and pasture. The United Nations estimated that more than two million people were in need of urgent aid,[23] and the humanitarian response was organized in line with the newly launched (2005) humanitarian reform.

The year 2006 was also a period of profound political changes in Somalia; early that year, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) emerged as a new political actor in Central Southern Somalia.[24]After being forced to take a political stand against the US-backed warlords Alliance for Restoration of Peace and Counter Terrorism, the Islamic Courts Union managed to overrun much of Mogadishu city in less than one month. By June 2006, the ICU had complete control over Mogadishu. Their declared aim was to bring an alternative means of governance to the factional politics based on clan loyalty, using the Sharia Law as an equalitarian tool for imposing rules and order.

When a severe drought hit the country, causing one of the most acute humanitarian emergencies experienced in the past ten years, most of Southern Somalia was dominated by the three main Islamist groups that together formed the ICU. Many Islamic aid organizations, in all probability ideologically linked to the underground Islamist movement Al Islah, mobilized resources to address the onset of that emergency and to provide immediate support to the victims with palm dates to eat and shelter.[25]

The Islamic Courts Union, however, regarded Al Islah as a potential political opponent and banned its organizations from operating in the areas under ICU's control. The ban affected all the organizations that at the time were part of the three networks of civil society organizations promoted by Al Islah: the Peace and Human Rights Network (PHRN), the Coalition of Grassroots Women's Organizations, and the Formal Private Education Network in Somalia (FPENS). A total of approximately 140 local organizations were affected.[26]

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This persecution of Al Islah and the fact that it was impossible for its own organizations to operate in the south of the country ruled by the Islamic Courts Union, gave rise to numerous diplomatic attempts on the part of the movement to modify its status of *persona non grata.* The aim was to regain the option to operate in Somalia with all its structures and organizations. Al Islah opted to publish a communiqué[27] containing a political message in support of the ICU, even though ICU military intervention aimed to override the Somali Transition Government, of which Al Islah was then an ally. Following this communiqué, the Islamic Courts Union received the representatives of the organizations of the civil society in Mogadishu to sanction a general collaboration. The meeting restored the organizations of civil society and NGOs affiliated to Al Islah. The outcome was that they were allowed to continue their activities in Somalia, including conferences, meetings and public debates in the cause of peace and stability.

Al Islah's communiqué was probably mere political manoeuvring. However, it made possible a dialogue with the Islamic Courts Union aimed at negotiating access for the humanitarian organizations linked to Al Islah on the territory controlled by the ICU.

Any narrative describing the 2006 drought emergency response in Somalia should record that religious identity did, in practice, hinder the

capacity of Islamic organizations to access the displaced population in Somalia. The split between the different factions of Islamist movements turned the faith-based identity into a political factor that needed to be resolved with political measures.

The famine emergency response in 2011

A situation similar to the 2006 drought occurred again in 2011, when another rainy season with rainfall below normal caused the health and condition of livestock to fail. As a result, marked prices of slaughtered livestock fell markedly, with milk production declining significantly for most households in Somalia. This crisis was exacerbated by a systematic failure of contingency planning by humanitarian agencies, to deal with the food shortage which had already begun in late 2010. In 2011, the drought caused Africa's worst food security crisis in Somalia since the 1991-1992 famine, to the extent that almost half of the entire Somali population was affected.[28] According to analysts, the impact of the drought was exacerbated by multiple factors that included conflict, the use of anti-terrorism legislation by the US government to prevent aid reaching Southern Somalia, an increase in global food prices, and other structural factors such as the limited access to the victims of the natural disaster located in areas controlled by the radical Islamist organization Al Shabab.[29] In fact, Al Shabab's power in Somalia started to decline in 2011 because of the jihadists' loss of support from Al Qaida.[30] As a result, the Islamist group made its positions in the country more rigid, denying access to the international aid community during one of the worst famines in Somalia in the last two decades.[31] The areas in need of humanitarian assistance included the Bay and Lower Shebelle regions, parts of the Middle Shebelle and Bakool regions, the internally displaced people (IDP) camps in the Afgoi Corridor and also the IDP camps in Mogadishu. By claiming that aid workers were spies of Western intelligence agencies,[32] Al Shabab banned most organizations from accessing the humanitarian crises. The list of organizations banned from carrying out humanitarian missions was very varied and included UN organizations and lay ONGs (Danish Refugee Council, Norwegian Refugee Council, Coopi), Christian aid agencies such as the Norwegian Church Aid and also local Islamic organizations such as Saacid.[33] In contrast, some operational agencies that operated largely outside of the UN-led cluster system such as Médecins sans Frontières, Somalia Red Crescent Society and the International Committee of the Red Cross continued to enjoy access in areas administered by Al Shabaab, albeit with certain restrictions, before and during the famine.[34] As noted by some analysts, while banning some organizations, Al Shabaab permitted others to work[35] and this was due to the negotiating capacities of some of the organizations that were successful in obtaining access to areas controlled by Al Shabaab.

> Regardless of whether they are Christian, lay or Muslim, all aid organizations need to negotiate access in conflict areas controlled by religious groups or by other kind of militia. Humanitarian actors should recognize that they need to engage in dialogue, even with extremist groups and that such dialogue needs to take place in an open and co-ordinated manner.

A study was conducted by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) on the role of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in coordinating Islamic aid during the 2011 famine in Somalia.[36] The study concluded that while the OIC played an important coordination role, it did not itself negotiate access to areas controlled by Al Shabaab in Somalia, leaving this task to the individual organizations within the OIC Coalition. The key factor in securing access was, according to the ODI, the network and reputation of individual Islamic organizations. This conclusion agrees with the thesis proposed by the current analysis: thus, humanitarian diplomacy rather than religious identity defines the boundaries of the humanitarian space.

In the complex political scenario prevailing in Somalia, faith identity alone, whether Christian or Islamic, did not have the power to facilitate access to humanitarian space. Rather, in 2011 the ban was the outcome of an obstructionist policy by Al Shabaab against all the actors who in one way or another had relations with the UN-backed Somali Transitional Federal Government,[37] whether Christian, lay or Muslim.

Conclusion

This review of the two emergency responses to the droughts in Somalia, in 2006 and in 2011, suggests that religious identity alone is not enough to guarantee humanitarian access to zones under the control of a specific religious group which in these two emergency responses was Islamist. Indeed, at times, religious identity can actually be a hindrance, as in the case of the Islamic aid organizations linked to the Al Islah movement. Instead, face-to-face diplomacy and political dialogue between individual agencies and conflicting parties are powerful tools for opening humanitarian access to aid agencies in conflict-induced emergencies.

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Notes

1. European Commission, European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid. January 2008.
2. Mary Kaldor, *New and old wars: Organized violence in a global era*. 3rd ed. (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).
3. There are three other important principles that complement the ones mentioned. These are voluntarity, unity and universality. These principles are related to the rules to be followed by the National Societies of the Red Cross and for this reason they were omitted in the narrative above.
4. See the website https://www.cri.it/storiaeprincipi.
5. See the Code of Conduct on https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-1067.pdf.
6. For the Humanitarian Charter and the Sphere Project, see www.sphereproject.org.
7. Gianni Rufini & Alpaslan Özerdem, "Humanitarianism and the principles of humanitarian action in post-cold war context," in S. Barakat (ed.), *After the Conflict: Reconstruction and Development in the aftermath of conflict* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.11.
8. See also Valeria Saggiomo, "From charity to governance: Islamic NGOs and education in Somalia," *The Open Area Studies Journal*, 4 (2011): pp. 53-61. Bentham Open ISSN 1874-9143/11; Valeria Saggiomo, "Islamic NGOs in Africa and their notion of development: The case of Somalia," in I. Taddia and T. Negash, *Religion and Capitalism in Africa, Storicamente,*2012, p. 8.
9. Reference is made to the creation in Iran of an overtly theocratic Islamic State under the Ayatollah Khomeini. See for reference Asef Bayat, "Un-civil society: the politics of the informal people," *Third World Quarterly*, 18, 1 (1997): pp. 53-72. Among the factors that produced the phenomenon of Islamic NGOs worldwide, Jonathan Benthall emphasises the opposition to the Israeli-American dominion of the Muslim world. From 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank, the Gaza strip, East Jerusalem, the Egyptian Sinai and the Syrian Golan Heights, this opposition found expression in numerous resistance movements and related Islamic associations. See for reference Benthall, "Humanitarism, Islam and September 11,"*HPG Briefing*, 2003.
10. See Holger Weiss, *Social welfare in Muslim societies in Africa* (Nordic Africa Institute, 2002) p. 22; Jonathan Benthall, *The Quran's call to alms: Zakat, the Muslim tradition of alms giving*, ISIM Newsletter, 1, (1998); Jonathan Benthall, "Financial worship: The Quranic injunction to almsgiving," in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 5, 1 (1999): pp. 27-42.
11. Mohamed Salih put growth at 640%. See Mohamed Salih, "Islamic NGOs in Africa: the promise and peril of Islamic voluntarism," in Alexander de Waal (ed.), *Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa* (Addis Abeba: Shama Books, 2004), pp. 146-181.
12. The OIC was set up in 1969 and is the largest intergovernmental organization after the United Nations focussing on post-crisis reconstruction and development-oriented activities and humanitarian activities.
13. Atta El Manan Bakhit, *The OIC Humanitarian Activities*. Discourse of the Ambassador Atta El Manan Bakhit presented at the OIC Institutional Forum on the occasion of the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Geneva, December 2008.
14. For an excellent description of the role of the OIC in

providing humanitarian assistance see Eva Svoboda et al. "Islamic Humanitarianism? The evolving role of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation in Somalia and beyond," *HPG working papers*, 2015.

15 Summary Report on the Live online consultation: Faith and Religion in Humanitarian Action. 4 June 2015, available online at https://phap.org/sites/phap.org/files/civicrm/persist/contribute/files/150604-Faith-and-religion-in-humanitarian-action-event-report.pdf.

16 Islamic NGOs are defined here as faith-based organizations engaged in humanitarian and development work, acting in the name of Islam. The Islamic religion is, in other words, the main motivation that drives the organization in fulfilling its mandate of helping the needy.

17 For further details, see Valeria Saggiomo, "The rise of Islamic resurgence in Somalia," in Marisa Fois and Alessandro Pes, *Politics and Minorities in Africa* (Aracne, 2012), pp. 245-270.

18 Allard Kenneth, *Somalia Operations: Lessons Learned* (Washington DC: National Defence University Press, 1995) p.106.

19 The author chaired the Somalia Aid Coordination Body (SACB) – Education Committee in 2005 and the Education in Emergency Cluster in 2006. Both the SACB and the Emergency Cluster were coordination groups gathering all development and humanitarian actors involved in operations in Somalia. The reported information derives from direct observation and work experience of the author in Kenya and Somalia.

20 Laura Hammond and Hannah Vaughan-Lee, "The humanitarian space in Somalia: a scarce commodity," *Humanitarian Policy Group,* 2012.

21 See figure from the UN-backed Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSAU Somalia).

22 For a good description of the crises and of the emergency response see Somalia: real time evaluation of the 2006 emergency response. *Final report* dated 11 December 2006. available online: https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/documents/rte_somalia_report_final_2006.pdf.

23 Somalia Consolidate Appeal 2006 (CAP – revised).

24 For a detailed description of the Islamic Courts phenomenon, see Roland Marchal, "Islamic political dynamics in the Somali Civil War," in Alex de Waal (ed.), *Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa (*Indiana University Press, 2004). Also Cedric Barnes and Harun Hassan, "The rise and fall of Mogadishu's Islamic Courts," *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 1, 2 (2007): pp. 151-160; Andre Le Sage, "Stateless justice in Somalia: Formal and informal rule of law initiatives," *Research Report for UNDP-Somalia*, Published by HD Centre, 2005.

25 For an excellent account of the evolution of Al Islah movement in Somalia, see Abdulrahman Moallin Abdullahi, *The Islah Movement in Somalia: A historical evolution of the Islamic Moderation (1950-2000)* (Montreal: Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, 2010).

26 "Civil Society Forum for Somalia meet with UIC officials," article published on *Xurmo* Newsletter 2006, PHRN Publication funded by Oxfam Novib.

27 "Islah Mov't Condemns Ethiopian Military Intervention in Somalia," *Ikhan Web*, 27 July, 2006. Available online: http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=3917

28 Hugo Slim, "IASC real-time evaluation of the humanitarian response to the Horn of Africa drought crises in Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia," *Reliefweb,* June 2012.Available online: int/sites/reliefweb. int/files/resources/RTE_HoA_ Synthesis Report_FINAL.pdf.

29 Andrew Seal and Rob Bailey, "The 2011 famine in Somalia. Lessons learnt from a failed response? *Conflict and Health,* 7, 22 (2013). Available online: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3829375/.

30 Kenneth Menkhaus, "Al Shabab's capabilities post-Westgate," *CTC Sentinel*, Special Issue, 7, 2 (2014).

31 BBC, "Somali Islamists maintain aid ban and deny famine," http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14246764, 22 July, 2011.

32 Katherine L. Zimmerman, "Al Shabaab and the challenges of providing humanitarian assistance in Somalia," *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research*, September 2011.

33 Ashley Jackson and Abdi Ainte, "Talking to the other side: Humanitarian negotiations with Al Shabaab in Somalia," *Humanitarian Policy Group*, 2013.

34 Seal and Bailey, (2013).

35 Jackson and Ainte, (2013).

36 Svoboda et al, "Islamic humanitarianism?"

37 Ken Menkhaus, "No access: Critical bottlenecks in the 2011 Somali famine," *Global Food Security,* 1, 1 (2012).