

# Islamic NGOs in Chad

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The image of an European development worker sitting under a tree in an African village conversing with members of the local population is a familiar scene. Much less familiar is the scene of a Saudi aid worker in a similar situation. On an afternoon in April 2004 a team of the Makka al-Mukarrama Foundation (Foundation of the Holy City of Makkah) visited the village of Koumi in southern Chad. The Foundation's director addressed the assembled men and expressed his satisfaction that a large number of the population had turned to Islam. As a reward, the Foundation was willing to finance the building of a mosque and a madrasa. The men from Koumi and the surrounding villages expressed their gratitude most eloquently, while the women and children followed the event from a distance. After the afternoon prayer the team departed in their 4x4s.

The Makka al-Mukarrama Foundation is one of the eleven transnational Islamic NGOs—which include one Libyan, three Sudanese, one Kuwaiti, and six Saudi organizations—that have been working in Chad over the last two decades. While transnational Islam is often written about with a focus on migration networks or questions of belonging based on being Muslim in Europe,<sup>1</sup> these Arab NGOs provide a good example of alternative ways in which transnational Islam is being shaped. In combining material aid with proselytizing activities, their work is embedded in ideas about transnational solidarity and the importance of enhancing the ummah, the global community of the faithful. They

**Transnational Islamic NGOs have recently become targets in the War on Terror for their alleged role in supporting terrorism by channelling funds to terrorist groups. Yet for a long time these organizations have been working on the ground in Africa and elsewhere combining charity with proselytizing activities, as illustrated by the case of Arab Islamic NGOs in Chad.**

which is predominantly Christian and animist, the missionary activities are first and foremost directed towards the non-Muslim population. Organizations such as Makka al-Mukarrama, the Kuwaiti Agence des Musulmanes d'Afrique (AMA), and al-Muntada al-Islamiyya (Islamic Gathering) have centres for recent converts. One of the strategies involves sending preachers to the villages. Those

village men who show an interest in becoming Muslim are brought to their centres where they receive room and board for one to nine months while they take a course on Islam. After the course they return to their villages and start spreading the message themselves. Another strategy is to approach local power holders as it is assumed that if they convert their family and partisans will follow suit. Part of the incentive process can include the offering of presents or money, the promise of an airline ticket to Makkah, or a community project.

In Chad, Arab Islamic NGOs may benefit from the fact that since the Northerners seized power in the 1980s, the Muslims have come to dominate the political, social, and economic situation and state authorities are likely to receive them favourably. The fact that Islam is associated with power and success means that there is a category of people who are open to their Islamizing message. On the other hand, in a situation in which religion is highly politicized and where a sharp polarization exists between the Muslim North and the Christian South, their intervention is a sensitive issue and may add to the tensions between the different groups, particularly in the south. Rivalry between Christian and Islamic NGOs is particularly acute in this region. The Chadian Muslim establishment which predominantly belongs to the Tidjaniyya Sufi order is not always happy with the Arab NGOs; while the latter are welcomed as helping to further the Muslim case, their interventions are also partly perceived as a threat to Sufi authority. Rivalry is usually not overt or confrontational, and some collaboration between the Muslim Council and the Arab NGOs exists.

Transnational Islamic NGOs have become increasingly visible in Chad as they build large, clearly marked, educational centres and mosques, and raise their banners whenever they organize activities. This visibility, however, must not be taken at face value. In the capital N'Djamena, smoothly running centres do exist but in the countryside many mosques are never open and integrated centres often suffer from a lack of staff and financing. Conversions tend to be rather superficial since the reinforcing mechanisms needed to make these conversions last are not in place. By themselves, the activities of these NGOs have a limited impact. The real importance of Arab Islamic NGOs relates to the fact that they are part of broader processes of Islamization and Arabization. Through their visibility and financial and other opportunities they provide, these NGOs enlist supporters who profit from them and "ride the wave." Their ultimately political importance relates to the fact that they represent, and are part of, a larger phenomenon of Islamization and Arabization that, depending on one's point of reference, is either dangerous or desirable.



PHOTO BY MAYKE KAAG, 2004

**A team of the Makka al-Mukarrama Foundation visits the village of Koumi in southern Chad, April 2004.**

generally disseminate a Salafist "brand" of Islam and in so doing, link local believers to other parts of the Muslim world. These organizations can, therefore, be considered both an expression of, and a vehicle for, transnational Islam.

As far as material aid is concerned, most organizations invest in the care of orphans by either sponsoring orphanages or through programmes for orphans who live with their relatives. They build mosques, sponsor schools and teachers, and intervene in health care activities such as organizing health caravans or running hospitals. Their missionary activities are directed towards Muslims who, in the eyes of these organizations, have only a very limited knowledge of Islam. This implies a kind of re-Islamization with an accent on "proper" dress and behaviour, and on knowledge of the Quran and the Arabic language. In the south of Chad,

**Note**

1. R. Grillo, "Islam and Transnationalism," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30, no. 5 (2004): 861-878.

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