Practitioners and Faith Based Organizations and Global Development Work
A Discussion with Hady Amr, Director, the Brookings Institution Doha Center, March 23, 2007

What path has brought you to your current job, and how has it involved working with faith-based organizations and international development?

This is a long story—and a personal one. As a child growing up both in Arlington, Virginia and in Saudi Arabia (among other places), the day jobs of my parents, who worked in education (my mother opened the first government-sponsored multi-language kindergartens in eastern Saudi Arabia) and in social sciences (my dad ran a company that did the baseline studies that guided the creation of the Saudi EPA) inspired me to work to help transform societies for the better. My parents also started, in the 1970s, the first Arabic-language weekend school in the DC area, with space donated by Georgetown. Neither of these public service efforts were faith inspired, though my mother, in particular, is a religious person.

As a child growing up, I recall well that my role model was Martin Luther King. He combined faith and social change into a powerful common force. Even when I was very young, I always believed that it was possible for him and for others to succeed because of this particular combination of faith and social change.

While I am religious (I am Muslim; I fast for Ramadan, I have been to Mecca and yes, my faith inspires my own work. And I also have Jewish relatives, Sunni and Shia Muslim relatives and a deeply spiritual Catholic fiancée), I am not a man “of the cloth” of any religion. But I have always believed in the power of this path, although I have never felt myself qualified to lead in that way. So what happened is that I took two approaches in my professional life. One was to work in development and to help empower NGOs in the Arab World, the part of the world outside the USA that I know best. The second has been to help empower immigrant communities inside the political process in the USA. Because of my background, a lot of that work has been with Muslim Americans.

9-11 changed things. Muslim American voices were needed, and I began speaking more in the public square as an American Muslim.

Today, I am based, for most of my time, in Doha, Qatar, launching one of two first Brookings Institution centers outside of the USA. The Center is focused on the “socio-economic and geopolitical issues facing the Muslim World, including relations with the USA.” I am doing this because I believe it’s good for America to build links with the Muslim World, and also good for the Muslim world. And it is what feels right to me.

As you look at the Berkley Luce FBO project and April 16 conference, what are the issues you would most like to see addressed?

Let me start with the broad picture. I have a very long standing interest in the question of what role faith should play in the public square and I hope that the Berkley Center project can reflect on that broad question, as well as what may be more specific issues related to the present...
operating climate for FBOs. The policy issues are large and important and I believe strongly that faith needs to play an active role in public life.

Re-reflecting on the past, from Jamal a-Din al-Afghani to Martin Luther King, my reading is that faith and social advancement have always been mixed together. We need to acknowledge that and study it in more detail. The lenses of the 1970s, when a lot of the development framework took shape, had as one of its strong facets and legacies that it induced or encouraged us to leave faith aside. It is time to be open to faith as well as to the other important dimensions and disciplines.

What seems to me most interesting is to come to a much stronger understanding of the role that faith plays in social movements, and in inspiring individuals in their actions. It would also be vital to understand better the part that faith plays in the way leaders communicate their beliefs to other individuals. This may be manifest through their work with other individuals in private settings, and it may emerge in a very public domain like political campaigns. This is really about social entrepreneurship.

The literature and research on development has largely ignored this important dimension (unless it has changed recently).

*What kinds of questions might this suggest for discussion and research?*

There are a host of topics that could emerge if we ask the basic question of the difference that faith can make in the way an organization works. How does a faith-based organization work differently from one with a secular orientation? And if they do not, in most essential ways, work differently on the ground, in their work for social justice, what would that suggest? That the faith element is not allowed to emerge? Or just that we do not recognize it? How do organizations in practice take their inspiration from a faith tradition? And how far and under what circumstances is a broader faith inspiration, drawn from several traditions, in evidence? Can we speak of organizations inspired by religious values in general?

These issues, which lie behind the scenes, may well be the most interesting ones. We need to ask if FBOs are indeed a legitimate category? A question which interests me is how far they are acting in an ecumenical way (ecumenical in a broad sense)? Are they calling upon people to act because of specific Christian, Jewish, or Muslim precepts or is it something broader? The extent to which they are doing the latter is an interesting question.

And the question has another implication and question, again a very broad one: can and should such an ecumenical spirit be built more into institutions?

*How does this apply in a US setting?*

The United States at its best when people do not feel a need or a pressure to subvert their faith but act through their faith for the common good. This has always been the case, from the founding of the United States. So it will be interesting to examine the extent to which faith-based organizations are appealing to broader aims.

It is rather remarkable, given this long and deep history, how little faith is reflected in basic structures of government. Look at the basic organization of the White House or National Security advisor: they have not had an advisor on Christian, Muslim affairs; and the US is paying the price. There is a place for advice on Africa, as a place, for drugs and terrorism, as topics. But
no one is looking at religious issues or on different religions. And this also applies in universities and most think tanks. When I was at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, there was nothing taught about religion; I remember one course that touched on identity, and one on psychology, highlighting that people might be motivated, on occasion, by non-rational things. But that was pretty much it.

And because religion does inspire social change and social action, our lack of understanding of religion from the highest levels of government leads to a failure to understand the world.

Faith-based organizations are part of a force for social change that can be obscured if the focus is just on concrete development or social service work. Faith plays roles in so many issues, from basic identity to politics. The civil rights movement, after all, has many explicitly Christian roots, just to take one example. We should not miss out on seeing those elements in processes.

**What special roles do you see for faith-based organizations in development work?**

There are two broad answers to this. One is that as more people in the world seem to be turning away from the 19th century ideal of religion being a thing of the past, as faith is an increasing part of people’s lives, so too must we address the organizations that are part of the faith world.

Second, the scriptures of Islam and Christianity and Judaism (the religions that I know) all inspire charity, fairness and social development. Unleashing one’s faith in development can tap into a powerful part of the human spirit.

**What has been your experience with FBO issues and interactions in your global work? Have you seen instances of problems? Of particular success?**

In Lebanon, in Palestine and in Israel, faith-based organizations have a powerful role to play in social transformation. There are faith-based social networks and organizations doing powerful development and charitable work. A lot of it is traditional schools, orphanages and hospitals; however, a small portion, but an increasing portion is environmental. These are Muslim, Christian and Jewish organizations.

We also need to acknowledge that faith blends with anger to form terror in the Middle East in Muslim, Jewish and Christian settings. A question we need to ask ourselves is: can faith-based development work be a powerful anecdote to faith-based anger and terror. Can we humans channel the faith in different directions?

Religious organizations also are active here in the USA. We can’t forget that. There are great organizations that are evangelical that are increasingly advocating for a place at the policy table.

**You have a rare if not unique perspective on US politics, the Muslim world, and intersections among them. As you reflect on the topic of our first conference (US based FBO work in development) how does it look from where you sit? What are perceptions in the Doha world? Beyond?**

Muslim Americans—whether they number 3 million or 7 million—are going through a rapid internet-speed transformation. Young Muslim Americans are more educated, wealthier and thus, I would guess, more tech-savvy than the average American. This means that in the coming
10-20 years there will be a rapid expansion of Muslims in the political scene in the USA at every level.

The Muslim world is also changing rapidly in terms of global culture. Arabs, South Asians no longer want to listen to Britney Spears primarily—although they do. They want local brands that measure up to global standards. Virgin Megastores across the Middle East confirm this in terms of Music, and also comic book sales.

These are the two key factors to keep in mind as we move forward. By 20-20 I expect to see a global Muslim political culture and social network that will put global brands and global ideas on the market place.

How do you see the role of US politics in shaping US FBOs in the next five years? Are the political forces likely to lead to major policy and institutional change?

I’m a Democrat. Capital D. I’m active. I’ve supported every Democratic presidential candidate since I turned 18, actively. The Democrats are in power on the Hill and may be soon in the White House. The Democrats are no longer anti-faith socialists as they may have been in years gone by (though African American Democrats never were). A Democratic return to power, I believe, will lead to a rather different set of approaches where faith is concerned.

How do you view the link between the issue of governance broadly and corruption more specifically and faith based organizations on the ground?

In Lebanese and Palestinian society, the faith-based organizations are seen as the least corrupt. I haven’t seen a study on this, but it seems to be the case. Hamas and Hizballah are often cited by their populations as being non-corrupt. This needs more analysis. Is this the case? Why?

As we look to the October conference in Doha, what do you see as major issues and who is thinking most creatively about the issues of non-US based FBOs?

Evangelical Americans are actually a great source of engagement with the Muslim World FBOs. I would like to make some introductions in that regard.

And the Muslim brotherhood organizations across the Muslim World should be engaged too. This is in everyone’s interest.

FBOs depend both on government and on philanthropy, and there large and small. Can you comment on how philanthropy is moving in the global development world? How does the US compare with Europe, for example?

I can’t say much on this. I don’t have the data. What I can say is that faith is a powerful force. We all need to engage it and create space for it to be let into the process.

It makes sense to learn more about this dimension of philanthropy, in the US but also in the Arab world. Here, there are plenty of high-net worth people who are deeply religious—both Muslim and Christian.

Which emerging issues could really benefit from religious/secular partnership? (i.e the "new" trafficking, Darfur, debt relief etc.)
The “hot-button” issues that divide the Muslim World and the West could use religious engagement: Iraq, Darfur, Israel-Palestine.

There are issues of common ground that should be built upon too: the environment, abortion, AIDS.

More broadly, the ground in areas like environment, sex trafficking and abject poverty, have as much relevance in looking at the Christian Muslim divide as they do in the area that has attracted so much attention within the US (bridging evangelical/”liberal” religious views). It is even worth looking for common ground in areas like women’s empowerment and literacy.

What about water and microfinance?

Water? Absolutely. In Islam in particular water plays a central role in religion. You cannot pray unless you wash. The ritual roles have practical implications. So it is well worth looking at. And water raises many social justice issues. I read just today that an American citizen uses 100 times as much water as an Ethiopian.

Microfinance is also an interesting avenue to explore. Yes, indeed, the world’s largest microcredit programs are in Muslim countries, but it is not a particular focus of Islamic finance yet. And Islamic finance is growing, rapidly. Citibank and HSBC have large Islamic banking. We should reflect on what this means for work on poverty and development. Will there be more interest in these links from Islamic leaders? In fact, the principles underlying Islamic finance are very similar to Christian injunctions. Muslims took them more literally, and took them further. So, there are interesting questions around how far are financial instruments can be important as part of effort to fight poverty. Microfinance has not been one of the methods that is part of development work in Middle East. Could it be empowered? Can it be empowered by religious engagement?

There could also be an interesting dialogue around socially responsible investing. It means more than not just investing in industries that are viewed as moral. A principle is that you are only to invest in businesses where you have a personal understanding.

And concluding thoughts?

What is powerful in focusing on the role of faith in policy discourse in US, first and foremost, is to recognize the power of faith and thus to engage and create opportunities for engagement among religious organizations from different societies. Second, we need to work to allow faith to work for the common good. Those are overarching principles. Faith is a, no the, key component of social change, so it needs to be understood.

I am excited to take part in this effort.