

Interview with Yousef Al Merag, Director of Disaster Management and Emergency, Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS),¹ April 19, 2017

Interview conducted and edited by Mara A. Leichtman², Associate Professor of Anthropology, Michigan State University, facilitated by Iman M. Haidar, Coordinator, Operations Center, Disaster Management and Emergency, KRCS, and translated by Ghazi Al-Dhafeeri, Arabic Translation Program, American University of Kuwait

Changing Landscape of Assistance to Conflict-Affected States: Emerging and Traditional Donors and Opportunities for Collaboration Policy Brief # 9

Policy brief series edited by Agnieszka Paczynska, School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University/Stimson Center

June 2017

“Kuwait Red Crescent Society is a voluntary humanitarian society that provides assistance to the most vulnerable people affected by social conflicts, wars or natural disasters without discrimination against any human being regardless of nationality, gender, color, race, religion or political and intellectual beliefs.

KRCS is a voluntary society that enjoys an independent status and has a separate legal entity while working as a complementary organization to the official authorities in Kuwait in the humanitarian field...The KRCS provides assistance and humanitarian aid to all countries and needy people.”³

“In December 1965, eighteen philanthropists in the State of Kuwait...held a historical meeting...[in which] they approved the articles of association for the incorporation of KRCS. Then they submitted an application to the Government for its promulgation, which took place on the 10th of January 1966, when KRCS was launched officially. The incorporation of the Society is an extension of the journey of goodness and philanthropy of the fathers and grandfathers, and based on the values and principles of the Kuwaiti society, its passion to stand next to the vulnerable, its desire to help the needy and its keenness to extend the hand of help to all the humanity. The Government of Kuwait’s signing of Geneva’s four agreements for 1949 facilitated KRCS’s joining of the International Association of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, known afterwards as the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in 1991.”⁴



Yousef Al Merag
Photo: KRCS

1. Please briefly describe the history of KRCS, which celebrated its 50th anniversary last year. How has KRCS grown and how have the organization’s goals and priorities changed over time? Describe the philosophy behind the work of KRCS.

Yousef Al Merag: Kuwait Red Crescent Society was established in 1966 by “men of the state.” These were mostly businessmen who helped families in need inside Kuwait, then they began to send assistance to nearby Arab countries, including Palestine. The concept of helping people in need evolved, and they founded a headquarters and established a management board. They registered their work via the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, and KRCS follows that ministry as a General Benefit Association, yet we are an independent body. KRCS is also a member of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, but with independent goals and neutrality.

KRCS started sending aid since its foundation. In the beginning we provided local assistance and then began to send relief aid outside Kuwait. This was based on requests by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other organizations such as HALO and Red Cross societies. The reason behind the recent increase in assistance sent by KRCS is that the number of disasters has increased. Certain disasters occur annually, however, most disasters are caused by war and crises. This is why we send more help outside Kuwait, first to assist with Arab disasters, as well as disasters in Asia, Africa, and even in more remote countries.

KRCS's work philosophy follows the seven principles of the Geneva Conventions, like the other member organizations.⁵ It helps the Kuwaiti government outside the country's borders, and we are neutral in regard to religion, gender and race. We help humanity itself – wherever there is a human in need, our teams help him or her. KRCS is also the only organization of its kind in Kuwait. We are neutral in our work while helping foreign countries.

2. How has Kuwait's experience with conflict during the Iraqi invasion of 1990-1991 influenced the philosophy of KRCS and its approach to conflict elsewhere? How was KRCS able to continue to operate in Kuwait during this difficult time?

Yousef Al Merag: Many Kuwaiti citizens fled the country during the Iraqi invasion in 1990. The citizens remaining in the country tried to help in hospitals and saved some injured individuals. Some of them distributed food and resources inside Kuwait, and others helped by giving out money. KRCS was not able to work inside the country at that time, however it monitored these activities from Bahrain. When the organization was able to reenter Kuwait, it began to help families and moved injured citizens. KRCS was also working along the Kuwaiti borders and helped people there. During the invasion, the Society was not able to operate because the Iraqi Army controlled even the KRCS headquarters building. Before the invasion we used to send help in the form of money, however, after the invasion we started to send trained and well-equipped teams with supplies to hand to the people in need. We always made sure that we cooperated with other organizations, for example other Red Crescent and Red Cross organizations.

3. Please describe the process involved in responding to a country's request for Kuwait's assistance.

Yousef Al Merag: We always get a call from the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement that informs us that there is a country in need or a country that has a disaster. They give us a report of what they need in that specific country, and through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs our ambassadors also inform us if there is a country in need. We coordinate with them.

Sometimes the local Red Cross or Red Crescent office in the country in need might send a call for help, and sometimes if the Red Cross or Red Crescent is weak in that country, the government of that country might reach out to our government, requesting that we send them assistance. This is approximately the way we provide assistance from Kuwait. Sometimes we buy the necessary supplies from countries that neighbor the country in need and send these resources to that country.

4. How does KRCS conceptualize the relationship between security, humanitarian relief and sustainable development?

Yousef Al Merag: We always make sure that our volunteers are sent to safe areas, so we know that they are not at risk of getting hurt during an armed or unarmed conflict. We ask other international organizations to help us in the case of an armed conflict. And if there are areas where other teams are working, we make sure that we help them and get help from them, and we always have an understanding of the other teams' priorities. We ask these organizations about the security and the condition of the area that needs help. What is important in the end is that the aid reaches the people in need, not which organization helped them first.

5. How does KRCS mediate between individual donor interests (for example zakat payments), corporate social responsibility donations, and Kuwait's national priorities for assistance and humanitarian aid?

Yousef Al Merag: We often receive resources from the Kuwaiti government directly, and they request that we deliver the aid and supervise the process of buying necessities for our operations. Sometimes we start a fundraising campaign and ask our members (Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis) to donate money for the affected countries. At times we generate our own income from renting buildings and so forth. With this income we offer our assistance to the countries in need.

Right now we are working with the government of Saudi Arabia to rent buildings and send the earnings to KRCS.⁶ We received a fatwa (an Islamic legal decree) from Zakat House that allows us to use zakat money for KRCS.⁷ This allows people to donate their zakat to us, which is a good thing because most people like to donate their money and this helps us a lot. We also recently discovered that a percentage of corporate earnings must now be distributed to the community.⁸ We requested that these companies donate their resources to us. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor has now listed KRCS as one of the recipients of these funds. The Ministry does not allow any association to start a fundraising campaign, so we are glad that we are permitted to do so. We officially had our fatwa in 2016, which increased our donations that year, in addition to more companies starting to send us resources. Companies that have resources with an expiration date are more likely to donate them to us because we are officially listed as one of the places permitted to receive donations.

We examine these donations and then we send them out. We also distinguish between what we can distribute outside of Kuwait and what we can give locally to assist poor families here (Kuwaiti or non-Kuwaiti). We do not look at official documents such as visas because this is the job of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and not our responsibility. We care about the human that needs help in general.

6. Kuwait was named an “international humanitarian center” by the United Nations in 2014. Has this honor had an impact on the work of KRCS in any way?

Yousef Al Merag: Kuwait was named a Center for Humanitarianism and our Emir His Highness Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah received an award for his humanitarian work. This made us very proud and is a medal on the chest of each and every Kuwaiti. This resulted in us increasing our work and made us more creative. It led to us coming up with new ideas to reduce the number of disasters in the world. Through that, we created this Operations Center of KRCS to bring an end to the disasters around the globe, and through this center we send relief to the damaged countries. Our work has increased, and the number of countries that we can now help has also increased. We send our volunteers to more than one location – right now we are working on helping five countries simultaneously. This creates more work for us, and these countries do not always have to be disaster countries – we also send our teams in cases of drought or famine. These countries need our help, and with that aid we also reduce the workload of other organizations assisting them, and their governments. This recognition has absolutely made us work harder and more efficiently. We publicly announced the opening of this Operations Center to help other countries with their relief work, not just Kuwait; other countries are welcome to use our center to stop disasters.⁹

7. What are the main areas/countries of focus for KRCS today? What type of work do you carry out there?

Yousef Al Merag: Right now we are sending help to many countries, but I will mention some of the primary countries in the Middle East and Africa. The problem that has lasted for six years now is that of the Syrian refugees. Unfortunately, this is a one of a kind situation and we have not seen anything similar to this before. This is considered one of the biggest refugee crises now. The refugees are everywhere (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, etc.) and we are trying to cover as much ground as possible and to send help. Iraq is also suffering with this issue – in Mosul there are many refugees. In Yemen as well. A lot of lives have been wasted because of war. In Libya also – we are sending them aid because the situation remains unstable inside of Libya. Somalia’s famine and drought is also on our priority list. We purchased water tanks to help the villages that lack a water source. Algeria also has some problems and we are sending them aid as well. There are more countries we assist, of course, but these are the main ones. We send medication and doctors who are performing surgical operations for those in need.



KRCS

Photo: Mara A. Leichtman

We are building clinics, hospitals and mosques, we are also helping pregnant women, and we are making sure that children are getting food and water. We give special care to the elderly and disabled. One challenge is that some children need milk, and milk might not be safe for consumption by the time it reaches the required destination. The distribution of milk is also a hassle, as we have to explain to the people how to use this milk – they are used to the natural way of giving milk to children (breastfeeding).

We ask other organizations to assist us with this. We are always cooperating with organizations in the distribution process – we are making sure that efforts do not go to one place only, we decide in collaboration with others which areas are in need and who can distribute supplies to them. Our principle is that we help everyone regardless of religion. We are glad that people are thinking in a humanitarian way instead of

looking at differences. We are working in Tanzania and also Sudan. Sudan is unfortunately now divided into two, Sudan and South Sudan. There is more than one location that asks for help there (the south, Darfur, etc.). We are helping all of them. In Somalia we started digging wells. It is better for us and for them that they will have their own water source, because the tanks we buy will not last forever. In Djibouti we are surprised to find not only Yemeni refugees but also Syrian refugees, and we help them all. Djibouti is a poor country, but it is still helping the refugees. As you know, we cannot enter Yemen, so we send the aid shipments to Yemen through Djibouti. In Fiji we also send help, and Myanmar also, alongside many other African countries.

8. Does the approach of KRCS differ in Middle Eastern countries geographically and culturally closer to Kuwait from approaches in other countries in Africa, Asia, or elsewhere in the world? If so, how?

Yousef Al Merag: It is a natural thing that helping countries differs based on geographical reasons. Japan, for example, is rather far away from us, and in that case, we need to focus as much as we can on the timing. Sometimes we do not have the time or cannot purchase aid supplies inside Kuwait, so we ask our teams located closer to the affected country to purchase and send the aid because it will arrive much quicker. Sometimes we prefer not to buy supplies from the affected country, because if there is a disaster, the prices of food, water, and medications will increase. So we buy these from neighboring countries. Location is extremely important; through our Operations Center we can see the important points on the map, such as airports and ports. So we can determine the fastest way possible to reach the affected country. Our work is not exclusive to one or two continents. We are reaching remote countries now, such as Serbia, Afghanistan, and those in Latin America. We have a map that displays the 85 countries we have helped thus far. Some countries need help constantly, such as Bangladesh, which has an annual flooding disaster. So we know already that next year around the same date, this same problem will occur again.

9. In what areas does KRCS collaborate with other donors in Kuwait or in other countries?

Yousef Al Merag: The Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) has a lot of big projects for developing countries. These are funded by governments. A government in need will ask our government for help doing projects. We built villages in the Philippines, built a seawater treatment plant to provide water for hospitals and families in Indonesia during the Tsunami in Bandar Aceh, and built a hospital in Lebanon. In Kashmir we built a big hospital. We also built five schools in Iraq, in Baghdad, Basra, and Kurdistan. Other organizations are also working in Iraq because it is a large country. These projects are to help the people, however when it comes to development, KFAED is more specialized in this field. We have a contract with a Jordanian hospital. We rented the hospital to treat Syrian refugees for free with the help of the Jordanian Red Crescent.

10. Have the different approaches to assistance of international organizations posed a challenge for collaboration during times of crisis?

Yousef Al Merag: We are the ones who provide support. We cooperate with the UN to resolve the problems in Syria, and through them we send our help. They could not do this themselves, and this was also with the help of the Syrian Red Crescent.

In Yemen, an area of armed conflict, we work with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to help get aid inside the country through the UAE. We try to be careful in handling cases in areas that have armed conflicts, right now in Mosul, Iraq. We have the problem of ISIS. When we reached Mosul, we could not enter the remaining areas that have an ongoing war, and we worked with organizations inside Iraq to distribute our assistance inside Mosul.

Within the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), I believe there are 190 national societies, and we are working within and following the same principles and mandates. For example, in the Philippines, they are dividing up the work, and Kuwait is assigned one area, so we would help that specific area. We have to divide up our work to reach as many affected areas as possible. We always have to respect the efforts of other organizations. We are collaborating with other partners, and there are no problems with this collaboration. If a problem arises, this is mostly in regard to location, timeline, overloaded warehouses, etc. We always try to reach the most remote areas and to help the people. We want to reduce the suffering of the people.

11. What are the future goals of KRCS and what are the challenges faced in their achievement?

Yousef Al Merag: I have been working for 25 years in KRCS; I face today the same problems that I have always faced, which is the routine checking on the aid that we send. This gets delayed at borders, because most couriers have a routine checking process. They do not distinguish between trade and donations. We must send our assistance as quickly as possible, and they do not realize that there is an expiration date on supplies. When these get delayed in customs, they become unusable and must be discarded. We want to help the country and we are surprised that we have to pay customs fees to send our aid to the country. This does not make sense to me. We have promulgated a law to stop this routine, however nobody has applied it. For example, I wanted to send an ambulance to Pakistan, but it got delayed for an entire month. The vehicle could not enter Pakistan unless we used our influence and connections (wasta) with the government. Our work also gets delayed because of visa problems – most visas take at least 2 weeks to be issued and this delay can have a significant effect. For example, if a disaster caused 100 casualties, by the time the visas are issued there will be 400 casualties. Through our Operations Center we try to speed things up with the amount of information that we have available, and we also contact embassies to expedite this process. Some of them cooperate with us and some do not. Some countries get us visas the same day, which is very good. We do not have diplomatic passports, which is something that we wish for. Right now, we are having a disagreement about life insurance. The ICRC started to provide us with insurance, and we would like all of our teams to have insurance, because their work is life-threatening.

12. Mr. Al-Merag, please describe your own personal background. What motivates you to work for KRCS in the field of humanitarianism in general, and in disaster management and emergency relief in particular?

Yousef Al Merag: I had remained in Kuwait during the Gulf War and this encouraged my work in emergency disaster relief. Before I joined KRCS 25 years ago, I used to work in Kuwait Oil Company. After my daily work, I would go to volunteer with KRCS, but when they needed me to travel, my employer would not authorize my leave. After a while, my job and my work in KRCS started to clash. I took early retirement, although I was still young at that time. I found more possibilities at KRCS, as we help people all over the world and we reach remote areas. Helping people makes me happy. For example when you reach someone stranded in a mountain with no food and you see their faces when you bring them food, that brings joy to my heart.

¹ Yousef Al-Merag is Director of Disaster Management and Emergency at Kuwait Red Crescent Society and Head of the division of Restoring Family Links. He participated in the establishment of the KRCS Operations Center. He is head of the Rapid Intervention team within the Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Organization. Mr. Al-Merag has participated in and headed numerous KRCS disaster relief teams, for example for Iraqi refugees (2015-2017), the Philippines typhoon (2014), the Syrian crisis (2011), the Pakistan earthquake (2005), and the tsunami in Indonesia (2003). He participated extensively in courses and international conferences in first aid, emergency medical services and evacuation, logistics, and also the coordination and cooperation of emergency relief between international and national organizations.

² Mara A. Leichtman is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Michigan State University and was a visiting Fulbright Scholar at American University of Kuwait (2016-2017). Her research highlights the interconnections among religion, migration, politics, and economic development through examining Muslim institutions and the communities they serve. Her current research project examines Islamic humanitarianism in the Gulf directed to global economic development, in particular in Africa.

Dr. Leichtman is the author of *Shi'i Cosmopolitanisms in Africa: Lebanese Migration and Religion Conversion in Senegal* (Indiana University Press, 2015); co-editor of a special issue of *City and Society on Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Movement, Identity, and Contemporary Reconfigurations* (2012); and co-editor of *New Perspectives on Islam in Senegal: Conversion, Migration, Wealth, Power and Femininity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Her articles appeared in *Anthropological Quarterly*, *Contemporary Islam*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, and *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*. She has been a visiting fellow at the Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies at George Mason University, Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin, Germany, and the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World in Leiden, the Netherlands. She is a member of the International Editorial Advisory Committee for the journal *Islamic Africa* and served as Book Review Editor for *Contemporary Islam*. She was elected to the board of the Society for the Anthropology of Religion (2016-2018) and also served as Secretary of the Middle East Section (2008-2011) of the American Anthropological Association.

³ Kuwait Red Crescent Society: <http://krcs.org.kw/about-krcs/introduction/who-we-are/>

⁴ Kuwait Red Crescent Society: <http://krcs.org.kw/about-krcs/introduction/how-we-started/>

⁵ Kuwait Red Crescent Society operates under the framework of Geneva's four agreements, international laws and treaties which form overall the international humanitarian law. The fundamental principles of the movement are as follows:

Humanity: Exerting effort and time for prevention and mitigation of human pains, protecting life and health, guaranteeing the respect of human dignity and fostering constant understanding, cooperation and peace between the peoples of the world.

Impartiality: Adherence to the principle of impartiality and non-discrimination between nationalities, genders, religions or political beliefs.

Neutrality: Abstention from participating in any hostile acts or in arguments related to political, religious, racial and ideological issues.

Independence: The national societies act as support bodies to the public authorities, and are subject to the applicable laws in the country, while maintaining their full independence in order to be able to work according to the fundamental principles of the Movement.

Voluntary service: The service in the Movement is voluntary and does not aim at making any profit.

Unity: There is no existence of more than one national society for the Red Cross and Red Crescent in each country. Its services should be available to everyone and cover all parts of the country.

Universality: The international movement is a global movement in which all societies enjoy the same rights and comply with cooperating between themselves.

Taken from <http://krcs.org.kw/about-krcs/objectives/krcs-fundamental-principles/>

⁶ These buildings are considered waqf, an Islamic endowment, and the income generated from waqf properties can be used to fund charity work.

⁷ Zakat House was established in Kuwait in 1982 as an independent government organization for the collection and distribution of zakat, the obligatory annual almsgiving of 2.5% of wealth. Zakat House allocates approximately 20-25% of zakat to fund projects outside Kuwait, whereas the majority assists the poor inside Kuwait.

⁸ Kuwait has a corporate social responsibility tax of 1% of company profits that is paid to Zakat House to be used to assist the poor within Kuwait or to the Treasury to be used for public services such as road improvements and other infrastructural projects. For Islamic corporations who must pay zakat, this 1% would count toward the total 2.5%. They would have more flexibility regarding where to pay the remaining percentage of their obligatory zakat. An official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed me that Kuwait has raised 25 million Kuwaiti Dinars annually (approximately USD 82.5 million) since the establishment of this corporate social responsibility tax.

⁹ More information about KRCS's Operations Center, which uses state of the art technology to monitor data about disaster areas 24/7, can be found here: <http://krcs.org.kw/departments/disaster-management-relief-2/operations-center/>

Changing Landscape of Assistance to Conflict-Affected States: Emerging and Traditional Donors and Opportunities for Collaboration Policy Briefs are part of a multiyear collaborative project, Emerging Powers in Post-Conflict and Transitional Settings: the New Politics of Reconstruction, directed by Dr. Agnieszka Paczynska (George Mason University/Stimson Center) and funded by the United States Institute of Peace.