

## Humanitarian policy of the Gulf States

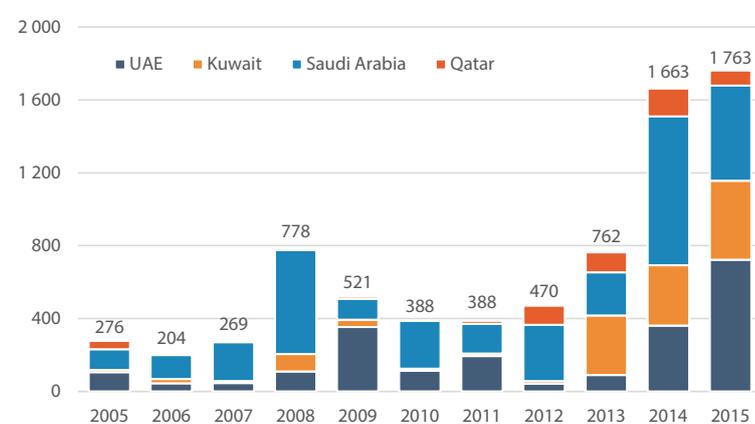
At a times of rising global terrorist threats and humanitarian crises affecting the region, the prosperous oil-producing monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – have come under sustained criticism for their policy towards asylum-seekers, their support to Syrian rebels, including jihadists, and their alleged laxity towards private financing of terrorism. Although the huge increase in their humanitarian spending has been interpreted by a number of commentators as a means to counter those criticisms, it seems also to be part of a longer-term foreign policy strategy.

### Aid on the rise

In recent years, Gulf States' contributions to global humanitarian government aid have been increasing strongly, in both absolute and relative terms: the GCC share of global humanitarian aid has risen from 4% of in 2005 to 9% in 2014 (83% continues to come from governments in Europe and North America). Four states – Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – contributed US\$1.6 billion of the US\$1.7 billion from the GCC in 2014 (with a similar pattern in 2015): more than double their 2013 contribution. In 2014, Saudi Arabia and the UAE [joined](#) the top 10 and top 20 largest donors respectively.

The recent rise, clearly accelerated by regional conflicts and the resulting displacement, follows an overall growth trend in Gulf States' humanitarian aid. It is an important aspect of general foreign policy since the 2000s, aiming to enhance the visibility and influence of GCC states at regional and international levels. For a long time, Gulf States have preferred bilateral aid, however since 2012 their contributions to multilateral funding have increased – albeit earmarked by country of destination. Observers note that extremely large, one-off inputs to UN system, making GCC aid more visible, make aid predictability difficult.

**International humanitarian assistance from Gulf States (main donors, in US\$ million)**



Data source: UN OCHA [Financial Tracking Service](#), 2016.

### Integration into global humanitarian system

Growing aid volumes have been accompanied by increased Gulf State involvement in the global humanitarian system, traditionally led by Western donors within the OECD Development Aid Committee (DAC). That has translated into a **more participative and proactive stance** in different donor coordination fora and the [hosting of various humanitarian events](#) in the Gulf, [including](#) the framework of [regional consultation](#) preparing the May 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS). In 2014, the UAE became the first non-OECD country to become a [participant](#) in the DAC, and an Arab-DAC dialogue on development has taken place in Kuwait since 2009. However the Gulf States remain reticent of key international engagements in the field of humanitarian aid: none of them has so far signed the [Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship \(GHD\)](#) (2003). The **opacity in reporting of funding**, partly due to lack of democratic accountability and related transparency standards, is perceived as hindering Gulf States' integration into the global humanitarian system. Some progress has however been made to streamline the reporting of official aid.



## The determinants of Gulf aid's geographical scope

The majority of funding goes to countries in the Middle East (56%) in Asia (15%) and Africa (12%). Of the 15 recipient countries receiving 90% of Gulf aid, only Pakistan, Bangladesh, Somalia and Afghanistan are outside the region, but all are Muslim countries.

As confirmed by public [statements](#), aid is to some extent motivated by traditions of charity rooted in Muslim ethics. The religious principle of *Umma* (community) explains the vast majority of funds going to Arab and Islamic solidarity in the Middle East and the Arab peninsula. Indeed Gulf States, like other Muslim countries have a long tradition of social welfare redistribution in different forms. In particular [zakat](#), the third pillar of Islam, makes it mandatory to help fellow Muslims, with 2.5% of one's annual income. In Gulf States *zakat* is collected through a formal tax system. The [High-level Panel on humanitarian financing](#) report prepared for the WHS encourages the use of Islamic social finance, in particular *zakat*, to meet humanitarian needs. Most Islamic scholars agree, however, that *zakat* should not be redistributed to non-Muslims. This is of course difficult to reconcile with classic humanitarian principles of needs-based, impartial and independent assistance. Nevertheless religious motivation as a driver of aid should not be overestimated. Several commentators stress that Gulf state aid is above all else strategic, and follows foreign policy. Survival of their monarchies, the common goal of otherwise competing Gulf States, requires [stability](#) in the region and increasingly [difficult](#) internal legitimation of the regimes. [Commentators](#) note that the aim of [stabilisation](#) often takes priority over the economic or social needs of the countries receiving help, also explaining its regional focus. Achieving [international recognition](#) is also part of the proactive strategy deployed in fields such as high-level sports competitions, cultural, academic and diplomatic events, and strategic foreign investments. All are aimed at enhancing the visibility and influence of Gulf States at regional and international levels.

## Durability of the boost in Gulf aid in an ambivalent context

If tackled pragmatically, the religious background of Gulf States' humanitarian aid will not hinder their further involvement in global humanitarian efforts: indeed 75% of the populations of the ten top recipients of humanitarian aid is Muslim. There is however the need, stressed by [regional stakeholders](#), to complement core humanitarian principles with those of religious traditions and to express them differently, using Islamic terminology in order to gain acceptance and facilitate access in certain contexts.

Paradoxically the most questionable elements, in a Western view, of Gulf States' policies may help to sustain and even raise GCC states' implication in humanitarian aid, in order to **revive its international image**.

The **links between Gulf monarchies and financing of terrorism** have been under international scrutiny since 11 September 2001. Various measures have since been put in place to ensure better oversight of the formal banking system, the alternative remittance system and charitable organisations. However the [risk still remains](#) of terrorist group being supported by independent [Gulf charities](#) and individuals.

The Gulf States (in particular Qatar, Saudi Arabia and [Kuwait](#)) are heavily involved in the Syrian civil war – a theatre for their [rivalry with Iran](#) – by financing various, often rival, groups, including [some](#) hard-line [jihadists](#), fighting the government of Bashar al-Assad. In February 2016, the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen even led the European Parliament to [vote](#) in favour of an **embargo on arms sales to Saudi Arabia** on the basis of serious violation of international humanitarian law. The Gulf States are also under [heavy criticism](#) for their policy towards the refugee crisis affecting the region. None of the Gulf States is a signatory to the [UN Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees](#), and therefore none recognises asylum status, with the legal protection and financial support it implies. At present, the absolute monarchies of the Gulf States are legitimated by a generous benefits system for their own, often minority, citizens, while being dependent on a mostly migrant [workforce](#) which often suffers harsh working and living conditions without any prospects of citizenship. There are [divergent estimates](#) of the number of Syrian migrants in Gulf States, but the available data confirm that the Gulf States have passed various measures destined to facilitate the entry and stay of Syrians since 2011 under the normal visa system. Voices [call](#) for the GCC to take a lead and foster regional cooperation in order to address the [plight of refugees](#) not only through humanitarian funding but also innovative longer-term solutions for war-migrant protection.

The question of the extent to which [decreasing oil revenues](#) will affect the generosity of Gulf States is also key. Evidence gathered up until now shows some, but [limited correlation](#) between oil prices and foreign aid. This confirms the importance of strategic and political drivers in Gulf foreign policy, with humanitarian aid one of its instruments, especially in times when other aspects come under [heavy criticism](#).