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Responding domestically: British Islamic faith-based organisations' crisis response in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Contributing to debates about faith-based humanitarian action and development as well as domestic programming, this article examines the domestic COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) responses of two British Islamic faith-based organisations (FBOs). It discusses how Islamic Relief UK and the Ramadan Tent Project responded to the unprecedented crisis caused by the pandemic by adapting their United Kingdom-based programming. The article is based on qualitative research conducted by members of the two organisations, including interviews, written inquiries, and analysis of internal documents. It highlights the diversity of Muslim crisis response and how the organisations built on their previous domestic emergency response, including during flooding in the 2000s and 2010s and the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire. Theoretically, this article makes an important contribution to debates on the roles of FBOs in emergency relief in domestic (rather than international) spaces, challenging (neo)colonial, racialised notions of humanitarian work as something that only takes place in the Global South.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019), development, domestic programming, faith-based organisations, humanitarian action, Muslims, United Kingdom (UK)

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic will go down as one of the most consequential events of the twenty-first century. Its fallout continues to this day, be it in terms of health consequences, and ongoing debates about how different actors, from the state to international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)/charities, responded to this disaster (Hale et al., 2021; Hawes et al., 2022; Bynner, McBride, and Weakley, 2022; Chen, Frey, and Presidente, 2023; Herby, Jonung, and Hanke, 2023). In the context of the United Kingdom, debates about Muslims during the early months of the pandemic were characterised by two popular narratives. In the first of these, Muslims were portrayed as victims, who are more likely to suffer severe complications and die when they catch the virus (Hussain, 2020). The second scapegoated Muslims as 'super spreaders' owing to cultural and religious factors (Rahim, 2020; see also White and Gaughan, 2020), reinforcing existing racist and Islamophobic stereotypes (Poole and Williamson, 2021). Contributing to debates about different responses to and the ongoing legacy of the pandemic, this article foregrounds a third, overlooked aspect, one which highlights the contribution of Muslims and Islamic faith-based organisations (FBOs) as first responders—with the pandemic revealing their strength in dealing with such unexpected crises. To some extent, narratives about Muslims on the frontlines of the fight against COVID-19 emerged in early debates on Muslims and coronavirus in spring and summer 2020 (Itani, 2020; Khan, 2020); however, these early analyses relied on anecdotal evidence rather than academic research.

We use the following questions as guides to bring this pressing issue to the fore:

- How did Muslim development/humanitarian organisations respond in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- To what extent did the organisational and external contexts facilitate or hinder this response?
- What does this tell us about emerging debates on domestic (rather than international) emergency response in general, and by Islamic FBOs in particular?

Focusing on these questions underlines the broader trajectory of faith-based contributions to disaster management that is frequently ignored in both academic and policymaking circles (Wilkinson, 2020). This is crucial, since, despite a small amount of institutional funding being available to them and a hostile media climate, Islamic FBOs were among the first to respond to the pandemic, effectively using pre-COVID-19 networks to deliver provisions to affected populations. This points to UK Muslims being a 'resilient community' (Zander et al., 2024). Our case studies provide a unique and in-depth perspective into how this resilience developed over the years and how it manifested during a major and complex emergency. This holds potentially important clues for how other minoritised and marginalised communities can navigate domestic crises in the future.

This article focuses on how Islamic Relief UK (IR UK) and the Ramadan Tent Project (RTP) have adapted their work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both organisations had some experience of responding to domestic crises, including the Grenfell Tower fire in London in 2017, which their COVID-19 response built on. Utilising their existing strength in various areas, they provided specific culturally- and faith-sensitive services.[1] The spotlight on IR UK and the RTP allows us to compare a formal and established organisation with a more informal, younger, and largely volunteer-based organisation. The findings of this study are based on qualitative research that relies on the insider status of the two authors within the organisations: both were working or volunteering for IR UK and the RTP during the early months of the crisis.

On an empirical level, our research contributes to debates on faith-based, and particularly Muslim, responses to the COVID-19 crisis (Kemp, 2023). We show that Muslims were not just victims and scapegoats during the pandemic, but that they also assumed an active role in delivering provisions in effective ways. Our work highlights the resilience, innovation, and agility of Islamic FBOs, which developed creative ways of responding to an unprecedented situation, despite the challenges. The two cases of British Islamic FBOs under review show that the stigmas attached to working with an 'Islamic label' can be successfully resisted. By concentrating on the delivery of services during the outbreak of the pandemic across the UK, they were able to demonstrate their contribution to society and their ability to counter negative stereotypes while simultaneously maintaining a 'glocal' component to their work—rooted both in the local context but also connected to transnational realities. 'Glocal' refers to the ways in which ideas and practices found abroad gain local resonance: in this article, we are interested in how global ideas of development and humanitarianism come into service at the local level (for a useful overview of approaches to the 'glocal' concept, see Roudometof, 2015). A comparison of two FBOs also allowed us to explore historical trends and the generational nuances emerging within this scene. Our research therefore contributes to the literature on Muslim collective action (which has received increased attention since the 1990s: Elshayyal, 2018) and on Islamic FBOs (which development and humanitarian researchers have been focusing on since the 2000s: Krafess, 2005; Saddiq, 2009).

Theoretically, this article makes an important contribution to debates on the roles of FBOs in emergency relief by encouraging researchers also to concentrate on the domestic (and not just the international) humanitarian work of Islamic FBOs, building on previous research by, for example, Pickering-Saqqa (2019, 2023) and Hanrieder and Galesne (2021). While existing work has tended to focus on long-term, development approaches, our article shows that the domestic activities of British FBOs extend beyond international emergency- and domestic development-oriented work, and that there is a trend to engage in emergencies and more long-term approaches both abroad and in the UK.

Methodologically, this article highlights the value of insider research on Islamic FBOs. We show how insider research by practitioners can centre the voices of members of Islamic FBOs and NGO staff, two groups that tend to be the objects of research, rather than active researchers (see, for example, Eggert and Sadriu, 2025), by allowing them/us to tell their/our own stories.

This article begins by sketching out existing debates on Muslim collective action in the UK and Islamic FBOs and their pre-COVID-19 activities. We then provide a general overview of the coronavirus response of Islamic FBOs since March 2020, to contextualise the work of IR UK and the RTP. Next, we present our methodological approach, before shedding light on the background and activities of IR UK and the RTP in two separate sections. In the final part of this paper, we discuss our empirical, theoretical, and methodological findings, highlight the relevance of our research to practitioners, policymakers, and activists, and make some policy/practice-focused recommendations.

2 | MUSLIM COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE UK BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19

2.1 | Muslim presence and collective action in the UK

It is necessary first to contextualise the Muslim presence in the UK to appreciate the evolution of different FBOs. Indeed, Muslim communities have been present on the shores of the UK from at least as far back as the sixteenth century (Ansari, 2004; Gilliat-Ray, 2010). It was the post-Second World War era, however, that saw a significant rise in the Muslim population, owing to increased migration from (former) British colonies and beyond (Ansari, 2004; Gilliat-Ray, 2010). Other significant waves include notably Muslim migrations from West Africa, Morocco, the Balkans, and, later, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan, not to mention the increasing number of converts (Zebiri, 2008).

These developments have also spurred scholarly fascination with Muslim collective action in the UK since the late 1980s. Over time, younger generations of Muslims began to identify in religious rather than ethnic terms and increasingly presented their activism accordingly (Lewis, 1994; Khan, 2000; Ansari, 2002), especially after the 'Rushdie Affair' (Modood, 1990). Early research focused on highlighting the challenges Muslim communities faced in terms of creating representative organisations (Shadid and van Koningsveld, 1996, p. 3), and failing to win state concessions (Kaye, 1993), while other work showed how ethnic and other differences prevented full political mobilisation (Scantlebury, 1995; Vertovec and Peach, 1997). Some still saw the ethnic concentration of Muslims as an important part of why parliamentary groups in the UK would make concessions in return for large voter bloc turnout; this concentration also allowed them to 'generate and sustain a separate institutional and economic infrastructure which embodies and perpetuates religious and cultural norms' (Lewis, 1994, p. 19). Meanwhile, Fetzer and Soper (2005, p. 49) have argued that public ideas around church and state 'have been critical factors for determining the states' policy response to the religious needs of Muslims'. They contend that in an environment where the state already works to support religion through funds for education and other activities, this creates the necessary condition for an otherwise ethnically-divided group with significant resource weakness (and economically more deprived) to thrive nonetheless (see Fetzer and Soper, 2005, pp. 51–52). For Elshayyal (2016, p. 531), writing a decade or so later, another trend can be noticed: 'if there is one thing that has been consistent about Muslim presence in Britain, it is that the Muslim communities themselves are remarkably eclectic and constantly evolving'.

In significant ways, the early 2000s were a watershed, with immense pressures arising due to increasing securitisation by the state; scholars warned that a new 'suspect community' was being created (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009; Sabir, 2017). Nevertheless, the community remained resilient as 'despite the immense pressures, tangible progress was made particularly by younger generations in British Muslim community organising' (Elshayyal, 2015, p. 174; see also Elshayyal, 2018). This included creative forms of expression such as anti-war activism and the growth of a Muslim press, and in general an increase in the intensity of community organising. Despite the lack of state funding, local networks were leveraged to augment community resilience and to develop new narratives of resistance that challenged prevailing stereotypes (Tara-Chand, 2015). Contrary to some stereotypes, increased religiosity, as manifested for instance by mosque-going, has been suggested to be positively correlated with active civic engagement (Oskooii and Dana, 2018). What is more, beyond stereotypes of insulated ethnic Muslim communities living in suburban ghettos, today there is mounting appreciation of how UK-based Muslim activism is taking on not just local challenges, but also increasingly transactional approaches as part of their practice of citizenship (Lewicki and O'Toole, 2017). Islamic FBOs in the UK often successfully counter negative stereotypes of their religion and faith community by, as another author has shown in her study of youth activism among Muslims in the UK, 'taking responsibility to change the discourse that informs their daily lives and identities as Muslims in Britain' (Saeed, 2019).

2.2 | Working abroad and at home: British Islamic faith-based development organisations

One particularly important group in the wider sphere of Muslim collective action is Islamic FBOs. An FBO is an organisation that 'derives inspiration from and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within a faith' (Clarke and Jennings, 2008, p. 6). Based on organisational functions, Clarke (2006, p. 840) has developed the following typology, comprising five different types of FBOs:

1. Faith-based representative organisations.
2. Faith-based charitable or development organisations.
3. Faith-based sociopolitical organisations.
4. Faith-based missionary organisations.
5. Faith-based radical, illegal, or terrorist organisations.

Our paper examines organisations that fall into the second category—with a focus on *Islamic* FBOs, which are inspired by principles rooted in Islam (Krafess, 2005) and/or refer to Islamic discourses, either by name or actions (Petersen, 2012a). This reference to Islamic values and discourses, however, should not obscure the fact that 'the organisational behaviour of Islamic FBOs is not predictable on the basis of religion alone' (Saddiq, 2009, p. 2). Rather, it depends on interpretations of religion by decision-makers within the organisation, as highlighted in work by

Saddiq (2009, p. 2) who illustrated how factors such as the cultural and educational background of an organisation's leaders impact religious interpretations and, as a consequence, organisational behaviour. Such nuance counters essentialist views of Muslims and Islam which tend to present them as a monolithic bloc rather than a diverse group of actors (Ansari, 2004). As with much activism couched in Islamic vernacular, British Islamic FBOs operate in a climate of increasing Islamophobia and securitisation (Sian, 2015; Sabir, 2017). This has had particularly severe ramifications for those British Islamic charitable FBOs working abroad (Tedham, 2012; Duh, 2014; Barzegar and El Karhili, 2017; Gordon and El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2018). That said, the operations of all Islamic FBOs in the UK are affected by this context to some extent, directly or indirectly (Elshayyal, 2018).

Several British Islamic humanitarian and development organisations were created in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, including Islamic Relief (1984), Muslim Aid (1985), Human Appeal (1991), Human Relief Foundation (1991), and Muslim Hands (1993), which can be traced back to global events such as, notably, the famines in East Africa (1980s) and the Bosnian War (1992–95). While this first generation of Islamic faith-based humanitarian and development organisations was founded in response to humanitarian crises abroad, domestic programming (which refers to programmes implemented in the UK rather than in countries in the Global South) has been increasingly added to their portfolio of activities since the early 2010s. This was inspired in part by the domestic work of Islamic Relief USA and the establishment of the National Zakat Foundation in the UK (Pickering-Saqqa, 2018, pp. 16–17).

The landscape of Islamic charitable FBOs changed fundamentally in the 2010s, with the emergence of a new generation of organisations operating across the UK. Unlike the first generation of Islamic humanitarian and development FBOs from the 1980s and 1990s, these new charitable actors focused their activities on the UK rather than on the Global South. This included entities such as the National Zakat Foundation (founded in 2011), the RTP (2013), and the Aziz Foundation (2015).

The co-existence of these ‘old’ and ‘new’ British FBOs points to a tension between a focus on charitable work abroad versus the same, or very similar work, at home. This tension is a broader challenge facing the sector, which often views ‘development’ and ‘humanitarian response’ as something that occurs in the formerly colonised countries of the Global South only, and frames the same work in the Global North not as either, pointing to the (neo)colonial and racialised dimension of many contemporary development/humanitarian approaches (Schöneberg, 2016; Pickering-Saqqa, 2019). Our article therefore builds conceptually on the work of authors such as Pickering-Saqqa (2019, 2023) and Hanrieder and Galesne (2021). While the latter stressed some of the difficulties of moving from a focus abroad to approaches aiming to bring about change at home, highlighting the inherent political nature of such a shift (Hanrieder and Galesne, 2021), the former pointed to the benefits of domestic programmes stating that they ‘create space for new ways of thinking and debates about what development is, where it happens, who is included in it and how it is funded’ (Pickering-Saqqa, 2023, p. 93). Our work aims to advance these debates by providing empirical evidence specifically on domestic *crisis response* in the UK (rather than more long-term, development-focused work), which remains relatively under-researched at the time of writing.[2]

2.3 | British Muslim responses to COVID-19

The spread of COVID-19 from early 2020 hit the UK hard. A first lockdown was declared in the spring of that year, and local and national civil society initiatives quickly materialised to alleviate the impact of coronavirus and the lockdown. Muslims responses in the first months of the pandemic took the form of both individual and collective action. Wider parts of the British public became aware of the individual involvement of Muslims in the COVID-19 response when news of the first casualties among National Health Service (NHS) staff emerged: a majority of them were Muslims who had been fighting the virus on the frontlines. By 1 April 2020, a total of four British doctors were reported to have died owing to COVID-19. Alfa Sa'adu, Amged el-Hawrani, Adil El Tayar, and Habib Zaidi were all Muslim men with a ‘BAME’[3] background (Khan, 2020). According to the *The Muslim News* (2020), around 60 per cent of the 166 health workers who had died of COVID-19 up to mid-June 2020 were from a BAME background (figures released by the British Medical Association at the same time were even higher: Tonkin, 2020). Furthermore, slightly less than 20 per cent of the total number of COVID-19-related casualties among healthcare workers were Muslims.

In addition to such individual forms of involvement, the Muslim response to COVID-19 (from the early days of the pandemic) also comprised collective action by Muslim-led volunteer and mutual aid groups. As mosques and Islamic centres, like other spaces of worship in the country, closed their doors to communal prayer, they 'opened them up to provide space and storage for the emergency services and local response groups' (Itani, 2020). As early as mid-April 2020, the Muslim Charities Forum (MCF) counted just in excess of 120 Muslim-led volunteer and mutual aid groups (Itani, 2020). By September 2020, a report issued by the same body identified close to 195 Muslim charities that had contributed to the overall British COVID-19 response (MCF, 2020, p. 3). In its report, the MCF (2020, p. 6) grouped these charities into seven types of organisations:

1. International NGOs (such as Islamic Relief).
2. Nationally- and locally-operating NGOs (such as the National Zakat Foundation).
3. Mosques.
4. Cultural/faith-sensitive organisations (such as the Eden Burial Fund).
5. Voluntary groups (such as the British Islamic Medical Association and the Muslim Youth Helpline).
6. Umbrella organisations (such as the MCF and the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)[4]).
7. Private Muslim family foundations (such as the Aziz Foundation and the COSARAF Foundation).

Much of the early Muslim COVID-19 response, like that of the wider charity sector, focused on basic physiological- and safety-related needs. This included, for example, hardship funds, the distribution of food and other essentials, and the support of NHS and other key workers. Mental health support, befriending initiatives to address social isolation, and advice services were prioritised less among Islamic charitable FBOs, as in the wider charity sector.[5]

Moreover, umbrella organisations such as the MCB and the MCF concentrated on knowledge-sharing and capacity-building among the Islamic FBOs involved in the COVID-19 response, by coordinating with secular volunteer and community-focused organisations, publishing guides, sharing webinars, and issuing joint calls for funding (MCF, 2020, p. 4). In the Islamic charity sector, which consists of a large number of small and medium-sized charities (Mohammed and Bianchi, 2023) with often significant cultural and contextual knowledge as well as networks, but, at times, limited technical capacity and know-how of how to operate within, and align oneself with, broader structures (MCF, 2020), this support was urgently needed. Many of the smaller Islamic charitable FBOs responding to COVID-19 relied on community efforts in terms of volunteer time and donations. According to the MCF (2020, p. 28), in 2020, 'only 16% of Muslim-led local charities have so far received institutional funding for their COVID-19 response'.

Having provided some necessary background on the Islamic FBO environment, we now turn to the methodological considerations and practicalities guiding this article.

3 | METHODOLOGY

We contribute to debates about the role of Muslims in the UK's coronavirus response via a small-n qualitative comparison, focusing on two British Islamic FBOs: IR UK and the RTP. Our research design is based on a most similar/most different approach: our cases share highly similar features but also differ in consequential ways. They serve to make generalisations about a broader phenomenon, transcending the cases themselves, while pragmatism (namely, our access to these organisations) also dictates the methodological choices made here (Seawright and Gerring, 2008).

We compare IR UK and the RTP to allow for a comparative analysis of the COVID-19 response of the biggest and most established Islamic FBO in the UK, IR UK (among the first generation of British Islamic FBOs founded in the 1980s and 1990s), and that of a small, relatively young, and mostly volunteer-based organisation, the RTP (founded during the second wave of British Islamic FBOs in the 2010s). Both inhabit the burgeoning Muslim civil society philanthropy and aid regimens that have sprung up over the past few decades and which challenge previously secular and/or culturally Christian-dominated social change and emergency relief spaces (Clarke and Tittensor, 2014).

Despite testing political environments limiting Muslim actors' work (Petersen, 2012a), Islamic FBOs have been active all over the world and are now the subject of increasing academic interest in varied contexts (Sezgin and Dijkzeul, 2015; Weiss, 2020; Ali and Tayeb, 2021). Their activities range from development work (Petersen, 2012b) to social work in the community (Nadir, 2013; Banfi, 2015). IR UK is situated more within the 'development' and 'humanitarianism' space that is by design transnational, having gone from a community-based FBO to a large transnational NGO with strong institutional links to many intergovernmental organisations (Tedham, 2012). Its trajectory falls within what Borchgrevink (2020, p. 1052) calls 'NGOization', signifying 'not only changes in organizational structures or legal status, but also more profound changes in organizational discourses, and in the ways the organizations make claims to legitimacy'. The RTP, meanwhile, is engaged more in broad 'social action work' (although the organisation does not employ the term), which covers a wide assortment of activities mostly (but not exclusively) centred in the domestic sphere, ranging from education, training, welfare provision, and social cohesion projects, yet also going 'beyond the boundaries of Muslim communities to explicitly benefit society as a whole' (Schmid and Sheikhzadegan, 2022, p. 8). Comparing two organisations working on similar issues but which frame their work in different ways (one employing the terms 'development' and 'humanitarian work', the other not) helps us to advance existing debates on what is development and where it takes place (Schöneberg, 2016).

For an FBO to be considered 'Islamic', the key criterion, according to one minimal definition, favoured here, is that the 'underlying social thought has a connection to Islam' (Schmid and Sheikhzadegan, 2022, p. 11). This would apply to both IR UK and the RTP, even if, as we have seen, there is an analytical distinction regarding their scope of activities and the geographies within which they operate.

The data on which this article is based were mostly collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, written inquiries, and analysis of organisational documents and data in autumn and winter 2020. At IR UK, we conducted semi-structured interviews with five current and former staff members (including leading people in the programmes department and the wider organisational leadership, who were in charge of designing, coordinating, and implementing the organisation's COVID-19 response), with most lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews were done online or on the telephone, owing to coronavirus restrictions. The data generated were triangulated with open-source data available on the internet (including, notably, on IR UK's website) and with internal programme-related documents, such as meeting minutes and programme/funding overviews, to establish pre-COVID-19 funding priorities. Meanwhile, as a result of constraints on the time of RTP staff (which is not uncommon in small organisations), RTP-focused data were collected through written inquiries sent to the organisation's director rather than interviews, in addition to an analysis of relevant documents, including survey data, funding bids, and internal strategy reports (those pertaining to the organisation's theory of change, concerning stakeholder management and funding plans). The significantly smaller RTP sample size was due to the much smaller size of the organisation.

Our sampling strategy was based on a mixture of snowballing and purposive principles (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008), facilitated by our inside knowledge of the organisations as well as the relatively small teams. We took detailed notes during the interviews and made sense of the data via thematic analysis, looking for codes and themes within and across the two case studies (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey, 2012). We did not use a formal coding matrix, as we wanted to remain open to themes emerging from the data. Initial codes were informed by the literature review and concentrated on the organisations' activities prior to and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the data collection process, which took place over three months, we had regular meetings with one another to discuss the initial research findings and to ensure sufficient alignment of data collection across the two organisations (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). We continued with these meetings during data analysis, as they allowed us to contrast and compare findings from each of the case studies.

The main part of this paper includes separate case studies for each organisation, outlining their domestic response before and during COVID-19, and an overview of cross-case themes in the discussion section. Our identity as both Muslims and pracademics[6] was central to the research process. Our positionality as outsiders and insiders who were deeply familiar with the (practical and spiritual) context of the two organisations significantly helped with access, trust, and rapport, as well as with analysis of the data (Eggert and Sadriu, 2025). As we carried out this research as independent researchers, a formal ethics review was not conducted, but we followed existing advice for independent researchers and small charities in the UK (see, for example, Sainsbury, 2024). For the practitioners we interviewed, trust in us as colleagues and fellow Muslims was significantly more important than a formal research ethics process. This trust is founded in collegiality, for sure, owing both to the length of service and the friendships developed along the way. Yet, there was also a spiritual aspect to this, namely, the joint faith aspirations and motivations we shared (Eggert and Sadriu, 2025).

Much has been written about the relationships between researchers and practitioners in development research (see, for example, White, 2020; Fransman et al., 2021). Our work benefitted greatly from the fact that we were both insiders of the organisations we were examining. While academics have discussed for many years questions pertaining to who is an insider and an outsider (Collins, 1986), the extent to which these categories are helpful (Tewolde, 2024), and if insider research does indeed have advantages and disadvantages (Ademolu, 2024), the status allowed us—as Muslims and NGO members, two groups that often tend to be marginalised in debates on Islamic FBOs—to tell our own stories.

Conducting this research and writing this article were ways for us to reclaim some of the narratives on Muslim NGO practitioners and their organisations' responses to COVID-19. In the early months of the pandemic, we were both working or volunteering for IR UK and the RTP. Each of us oversaw research on the organisation for which we worked, permitting us to make the most of existing relationships. At the time of writing (between 2021 and 2025), we had academic and NGO affiliations. Our dual identity as both academics and practitioners provided us with deeper insights (as we acted as academics/researchers but were also insiders to the NGOs), and allowed us to translate between different terminologies, frameworks, and perspectives (Eggert and Sadriu, 2025).

As past/current team members of the organisations we were researching, we were mindful of the potential harm that could be caused by us writing about possible weaknesses in the approaches of the two NGOs. This was even more so given that we were writing about Islamic FBOs operating in an often tense environment shaped by Islamophobia, racism, heightened securitisation, and government monitoring (Thaut, Gross Stein, and Barnett, 2012; Metcalfe-Hough, Keatinge, and Pantuliano, 2015). In such a context, negative reporting is not just inconvenient but can also have serious repercussions for the respective organisations (Barzegar and El Karhili, 2017). The trust that the two organisations had in us, as colleagues and Muslims, and open discussions about the aim of the article, helped to ease any such concerns.

4 | ISLAMIC RELIEF UK

4.1 | Organisational profile

Islamic Relief,[7] one of the oldest British Muslim charities, is the only Muslim member of the UK's Disasters Emergency Committee, comprising 15 leading humanitarian organisations that seek to help coordinate work in a time of major disaster.[8] The Islamic Relief federation consists of a network of independent organisations across the world that coordinate their activities (to an extent) through the international headquarters, Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) in Birmingham, UK. Based in London, IR UK, a subunit of IRW, focuses on UK-based fundraising, policy work, and project implementation.[9] At its peak, in late 2019/early 2020, IR UK's programmes team was made up of a head of programmes, three programme officers (one working on domestic programmes and two in charge of international programmes), and an assistant.[10]

4.2 | IR UK's pre-COVID-19 domestic response

IR UK's domestic work mostly relies on the giving of grants to organisations that work directly with beneficiaries. It either provides funds to small organisations for core running costs or supports projects run by bigger, more established organisations.[11] In addition to this long-term-focused domestic work,[12] IR UK has also been involved in domestic emergency response.

The first domestic emergencies to which interviewees recalled IR UK responding were severe floods from 2007 onwards[13]: in Gloucestershire in summer 2007,[14] in Somerset in the winter of 2013–14,[15] and in Cumbria and Yorkshire in late 2015.[16] Realising that communities in the area were severely affected, IR UK staff and volunteers wanted to help.[17] While motivations were strong, much of IR UK's emergency response in these early days was rather basic and ad hoc, and not always very coordinated. Over time, however, the IR UK team recognised that it was necessary to develop a more coordinated and formalised approach.[18] As a result, from 2013–14, the head of programmes started discussions with the British Red Cross, with a view to embedding IR UK's domestic emergency response in existing national structures.[19] At the time, activities were focused on future responses to yet another flood, as 'that's what people could imagine to happen in the UK'.[20]

Yet, a different kind of emergency materialised: the Grenfell Tower fire during Ramadan in June 2017—one of the UK's worst emergencies since the Second World War. The fire, which started in the block of flats in West London in the early hours of 14 June 2017, spread rapidly, causing the deaths of 72 people, injuring more than 70 others, rendering in excess of 200 homeless, and traumatising many more (BBC, 2019b). Tier 1 of the emergency response[21] was activated right away, but beyond that, the official emergency response was lacking.[22] It was therefore mostly local communities that stepped in, including IR UK staff members who, at first spontaneously, joined the early relief response on the ground, utilising their decades-long crisis response experience gained abroad.[23] Later, the organisation was involved in handing out grants to those affected by the fire and worked as part of the Grenfell Muslim Response Unit (GMRU).[24] Close relations with the Al-Manaar mosque near the tower, and a deep understanding of the cultural and faith backgrounds of many of the residents, allowed IR UK (and other Muslim responders) to provide a faith-aware and culturally-sensitive emergency response.[25]

IR UK's experience of responding to the Grenfell Tower fire reinforced the need for more coordinated and systematic domestic emergency response systems within the organisation.[26] Consequently, it decided to set up RespondIR, a two-year training programme aimed at creating a cohort of volunteers who can be activated in the case of a domestic emergency in the UK.[27] IR UK launched the programme in 2018 with 30 volunteers who were trained once a month by the organisation and the British Red Cross.[28] RespondIR built upon IR UK's AimIR programme, a volunteer leadership programme, yet without a specific focus on emergency response.[29] Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, RespondIR volunteers were deployed to a 2019 fire in Barking, East London.[30] While members of the IR UK team acknowledged that their domestic crisis response was still in its infancy,[31] they contended that they had become a lot more focused over time,[32] and saw their main strength as the ability, as an Islamic FBO, to provide culturally- and faith-sensitive approaches to emergencies.[33]

4.3 | IR UK's COVID-19 domestic response

When the British public realised the severity of the COVID-19 situation in March 2020, IR UK had just completed a six-month organisational review.[34] It decided to delay temporarily implementation of the planned restructuring of the programmes department.[35] As the process was ongoing, a new strategy for IR UK's domestic work had not been developed yet,[36] and some of the organisation's domestic structures and systems (such as the Project Appraisal Group that advises on domestic funding) had been disabled.[37] The first lockdown began just before Ramadan,[38] a time when IR UK usually raises 40 per cent of its funding,[39] so the organisation was naturally concerned about the impact of the pandemic on its operations. Moreover, unlike previous floods and the Grenfell and Barking fires which had been localised, coronavirus was everywhere.[40] Nonetheless, given its previous responses to other domestic emergencies, the organisation felt more prepared for the pandemic.[41] Overall, IR UK's response to COVID-19 rested on four pillars:

- coordination of fundraising;
- distribution of grants;
- acting as an intermediary for in-kind giving; and
- deployment of RespondIR.

Compared with other faith communities in the UK, Muslim communities are known to be particularly generous charity-givers (Huffington Post, 2013). As the leading Islamic FBO in the country, IR UK is a recognised brand that many British Muslims trust.[42] It launched a funding appeal on 17 March 2020 and received a major donation early in the pandemic,[43] allowing for the financial support of several COVID-19 response projects. Fundraising during Ramadan shifted from mosques to online platforms; despite fears to the contrary, British Muslims continued to give, making IR UK's 2020 Ramadan appeal its most successful fundraising endeavour up to that point.[44]

Most of IR UK's programming work is based on the distribution of grants to implementing organisations, which remained the modus operandi during the pandemic.[45] Once the organisation announced its coronavirus fund, it received an extremely high number of applications from community organisations.[46] IR UK is under above-average scrutiny owing to its Islamic identity (see, for example, Benthall, 2007; Thaut, Gross Stein, and Barnett, 2012) and therefore has a particularly strict due-diligence process. Additional selection criteria included the quality of the proposal and offering, as well as geographical scope (such as activities in the North, South, and the Midlands).[47] The usual grant-making process was sped up in response to the emergency.[48]

Between April and October 2020, grants were distributed to nine recipients, including several long-term partners of IR UK[49]: six food banks, one mental health charity, one mosque, and one zakah[50]-distributing organisation.[51] What is interesting here is that while Muslim communities and Islamic FBOs are often portrayed as a monolith (Ansari, 2004), staff members' individual assessments of the relevance and effectiveness of the distribution of COVID-19 emergency grants reveal the diversity of perspectives in the UK's leading Islamic charity. For instance, there were divergent views among the team on who should receive grants and on what they should be spent. Given the unprecedented nature of the crisis that the UK was facing at the time, and the fact that the organisation's systems for domestic emergency response were not very developed then, this is probably not surprising and highlighted that, like all COVID-19 responders, IR UK was under pressure to develop new systems and approaches on the spot. To some extent, differing viewpoints may also be explained by interviewees' different areas of work within the organisation, such as media, programming, and general leadership, which often have slightly different priorities and approaches (including effective running of programmes versus external communications to funders). Regardless of these internal discussions, informal feedback from the community level showed that without the Muslim response to COVID-19, the pressure on formal services across the country would have been much greater.[52]

In addition to COVID-19-focused fundraising and grant-giving, IR UK also acted as an intermediary for in-kind giving. Through its network of local fundraisers and volunteers, the organisation has excellent links with communities across the country. Anecdotal evidence at the time indicated that the amount of people accessing food banks across the country had increased, while donations had slowed down, so IR UK reached out to businesses through its networks.[53] Some of the Muslim-owned businesses with which it collaborated donated vans full of non-perishable items that were distributed with the help of IR UK volunteers and mosque-based food banks.[54]

The fourth pillar of IR UK's COVID-19 emergency response was the deployment of its RespondIR volunteers. Initially, the organisation sent out volunteers to support vulnerable members of society; however, their role as direct frontline helpers was soon halted owing to concerns about health, safety, and safeguarding (of both the volunteers and those they were going to help).[55] Instead, the RespondIR team decided to work with companies that donated goods and help them distribute these products.[56] Looking back, IR UK staff members felt that this risk-averse approach was the right course of action and an indicator of the organisation's increasingly mature and professionalised domestic emergency response.[57] Deployment preparations for the RespondIR team mean that it now feels more prepared for future emergencies, as new policies, systems, and guidance are in place.[58]

One key question during IR UK's COVID-19 response was the extent to which its activities were coordinated with other, Muslim and secular, organisations. The MCF, an umbrella organisation for British Muslim charities working in the development and humanitarian sector, launched a joint appeal for solidarity, including IR UK.[59] One interviewee recalled how beneficial the volunteers forum was, discussing policies and good practices,[60] but there was also the perception that British Muslim charities still had a long way to go in terms of cross-organisational collaboration.[61] IR UK's place within existing (secular) domestic emergency response structures had been discussed within the organisation since its deployments during the floods in the 2010s.[62] It had tried in previous years to coordinate more closely with the British Red Cross, local resilience forums, and, from late 2019, with the National Emergencies Trust.[63] Key questions remained in 2020, though, such as the added value of IR UK's response; these were discussed again during the pandemic, and there was a feeling that more work in this area was required.[64]

All in all, the case of IR UK during the COVID-19 crisis illustrates the increasing formalisation of the domestic emergency relief work of an Islamic FBO with many years of international crisis response experience, building on previous efforts and long-standing community links. In the following section, we offer a contrasting overview of another key Islamic FBO in the UK, namely the RTP.

5 | RAMADAN TENT PROJECT

5.1 | Organisational profile

The RTP was founded in 2013 with the stated aim of strengthening community ties.[65] The motto ‘turning strangers into friends’ was created to encapsulate this agenda succinctly. With most of its activities focused on the month of Ramadan, the organisation has hosted more than 100,000 people at fast-breaking events open to the general public, faith leaders, civil society representatives, and government entities. Through its flagship Open Iftar (OI), the RTP has grown into a global community project that brings people together during Ramadan. As of 2021, the OI is the UK's largest annual community event during Ramadan, offering a curated evening of food and guest speakers who talk about social, political, cultural, and religious issues.[66] The organisation is almost entirely run by volunteers and has hosted events internationally too.[67] Besides organising OIs, at the time of writing, the RTP has also engaged with the homeless and maintained a research wing that looks into issues of social cohesion, mental health, and discrimination.

According to interviews with the founder of the RTP, Omar Salha, three connected aims lie behind the work of the organisation:

- connecting and convening people;
- building bridges between communities; and
- increasing awareness and understanding and debunking misconceptions that people have of one another.

All of this is encapsulated under the banner of bringing different communities together to understand each other better.[68] To achieve this, OIs have typically been arranged in local community spaces; in London, around student hubs in Bloomsbury; in Bradford, in the City Park, which functions as the primary public space; in Manchester, on the University of Manchester campus; and in Birmingham, in the gardens of St Chad's Cathedral. The RTP also experimented with other landmark London spaces in 2019, including the British Museum, Southwark Cathedral, Trafalgar Square, and Wembley Stadium. The high-profile nature of these events attracted a diverse audience, including political figures and well-known members of the community. The RTP also collaborated with public institutions like Tate Modern during the Eid celebrations in 2018.

Given its straddling of the social sphere (the guests), as well as government (which provides the physical space for RTP events) and business (which the organisation relies on for sponsorship), the RTP is acutely aware of the politicised environment in which it operates, mirroring the case of IR UK above, and the general securitised environment of Islamic FBOs (Johnsen, 2014). Part of this process has been a focus on data collection from surveys of guests and volunteers, driven by a belief that increased exposure to diverse communities can reduce prejudice among different groups in society. For example, internal survey data (from 2019 and 2020) demonstrate that OIs provided an outlet for people to learn more about Muslim practices: more than 40 per cent of respondents replied positively to the following question: ‘Has your knowledge of Muslim practices increased with #MyOpenIftar?’. Such data are seen as evidence within the RTP that positive perceptions of Muslims are associated with attendance at an OI, and are widely utilised in discussions with stakeholders when bidding for funding or resources. Acutely aware of the RTP's relatively small stature in the wider FBO space, however, there is explicit acknowledgement that the challenge of bringing communities together is too big to be met by one organisation alone. To this end, the leadership of the RTP has sought collaborations with other entities, such as the office of the Mayor of London, the Church of England, the House of Lords, and the Football Association, as well as with other charities, NGOs, and the corporate sector.

5.2 | The RTP's pre-COVID-19 domestic response

The RTP is a small organisation, which we argue accorded it a dynamism that allowed it to push into new spaces at a relatively faster pace. As it has grown in terms of its volunteer base, funding, and the number of stakeholders invested in its work, however, its ambitions have become more centred on delivering fewer but more focused services. At the time of writing, four staff members were supported by anywhere between 150 and 200 seasonal volunteers. But what to do with all these volunteers once Ramadan ended was a major concern for the leadership. And while the main focus has remained the organisation of yearly OIs, RTP volunteers also engaged in other activities between 2013 and 2018, including local food drives for the homeless. Such activities served notable functions according to senior leaders: excess food stocks could be used productively, and they were a way to integrate activities into existing local charitable endeavours (such as St Mungo's homeless shelters).[69] Volunteers who had been involved during an OI could also be incorporated into year-round activities, thus building cohesion and attachment to the RTP. The year 2018 also witnessed a local drive among volunteers and supporters to acquire clothes that could be given to homeless people during what was a particularly harsh winter. In 2017, the RTP was involved in emergency relief work for the first time: it was one of the first responders to the Grenfell Tower fire and played a central role in the GMRU, donating and delivering food parcels to affected families as well as helping to coordinate the distribution of aid.

5.3 | The RTP's COVID-19 domestic response

The emergency response of the RTP—mostly centred on mental health and psychosocial support, as well as assistance for frontline workers—during the outbreak of COVID-19 is a story of huge challenges, but also one of resilience and innovation. Indeed, the RTP was quick to act during the pandemic. The programming team arranged for all speakers who would have delivered talks in person to shift their activities online, so that all 30 days of Ramadan would be filled with online activities, arranging new dates and times. Shifting operations to the digital plain was made easier thanks to the relatively young and technology-savvy talent pool used to run previous OIs, who now experimented with new systems and sought continually to improve them. Volunteers had to be enlisted to host guests online, run Zoom calls, ensure stakeholder adverts were appropriately displayed, check that the call to prayer announcing the end of fasting for that day occurred, and that speakers began and ended their seminars promptly. Moreover, the volunteers contributed to feeding frontline workers and the elderly. Food distribution networks established during OI were leveraged to this effect.

As with other organisations dealing with the pandemic, a main challenge concerned the problem of steep declines in funding. Sponsorship during the month usually saw the RTP through the rest of the year, with large multinationals like Hellman's and Lidl having sponsored the RTP in the past—while also relying on on-site donations. New overheads in terms of having to shift operations online and managing hundreds of volunteers in a completely new environment were a major preoccupation of the organisation.[70] According to the organisation's leadership, the RTP lost more than GBP 150,000 in sponsorship funding due to the pandemic.[71]

To be sure, the RTP had been planning for OI 2020 for a number of months when it became increasingly clear that the COVID-19 pandemic would severely restrict its activities related to communal gatherings (*iftars*). The RTP also curated ‘virtual Ramadan packs’, which it sent out to 1,000 people who requested them online, up and down the UK. A further 1,500 people downloaded them online. The packs were supposed to bring some of the collaborative spirit of the OI to people's homes.

The organisation also aimed to continue its research-led approach; as part of this, it has performed an annual guest survey during Ramadan since 2017.[72] This is used to gather demographic data, increase awareness of the RTP, and for fundraising purposes. The pandemic presented a challenge as previously volunteers would elicit survey responses on-site, thus ensuring a good number of responses (328 in 2019); only 86 people responded in 2020. Various explanations for this can be offered. For one, online systems had to be prepared hastily to cope with the increased demand for virtual engagement during the pandemic, something which impacted research heavily, including an increase in the non-response bias (De Man et al., 2021). Venturing into the more speculative realm, it may also be argued that the lack of responsiveness is part of a broader trend of ‘apathy’ that overcomes people in emergency moments (for a pioneering study on apathy, see Latané and Darley, 1969; for a more recent take, see Hortensius and de Gelder, 2018).

As we have seen, the pandemic brought unprecedented media coverage, presenting opportunities as well as risks. As in previous years, as well as in 2020, the international media was very interested in showcasing the RTP's work. The organisation's leadership was acutely aware that it was under the spotlight as a Muslim FBO and especially cognisant of the negative stereotypes that existed in the media. Although the RTP itself had never faced hostile media reporting, it situated its work within the milieu of other organisations challenging negative images of Muslims (Tara-Chand, 2015; Saeed, 2019). In the words of Salha: ‘the pattern of inconsistent reporting and almost subjugation, if you will, of what British Muslims were was still continued under these difficult circumstances..[73] . . Having said that, we were able to, again, provide that positive spin and positive story to many millions across the country where we were actually offering a solution as opposed to pointing fingers’.[74]

This can be seen in the RTP's ability to continue delivering OIs, albeit virtually, on every day of Ramadan, while also continuing to engage many of the same stakeholders as it would have done had the pandemic not occurred. The most immediate challenge according to organisers was to bring the ‘Ramadan spirit’ to the online sphere.[75] This became particularly important, as reported in an early paper in *The Lancet Psychiatry*, as the pandemic increased fears of mental health breakdown among ordinarily healthy populations (Moreno et al., 2020). Moreover, at a time when trust was low in public officials, efforts to teach people about the dangers of the virus should have made targeted community messaging a key element (Enria et al., 2021).[76] In this sense, the RTP could have played a significant role in community engagement had there been better coordination with official bodies.

While the RTP's main work is focused on the UK, there was always one eye among organisers on connecting globally. The leadership was proud to say that it had organised the ‘first of its kind’ global virtual *iftar*, which went from ‘from London to the US: Australasia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, a 24-hour trip done virtually where we attracted 70,000 people with some of the most well-known speakers around the world. . . . [And] our main event featured on [the UK's] ITV News, and our focus was on looking to how we can improve and provide service to those millions self-isolating [who were] still able to recreate the Ramadan experience at home, but also be able to connect with people virtually at home’.[77]

6 | DISCUSSION: UNDERSTANDING THE DOMESTIC RESPONSES OF BRITISH MUSLIMS TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Not long after the spread of COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020, the question of faith actors' roles and responses to this unprecedented crisis was raised. Muslims were often portrayed as victims (Hussain, 2020) or scapegoats (Rahim, 2020). Our aim here is to foreground a third narrative, and reality, of Muslims responding to the emergency on the frontlines, supporting their local communities and broader British society. Relying on a small-n comparison of two different Islamic FBOs, namely IR UK and the RTP, we tackled the main research question of how Muslim development and humanitarian organisations responded in the early months of the pandemic. Specifically, we explored what the COVID-19 response of the two organisations looked like at that time, and to what extent organisational and external factors facilitated or hindered this action. Below, we summarise and discuss the main themes emerging from the empirical data that we generated.

6.1 | Telling the story of practising faith and belonging through immediate crisis response

Beyond the immediate empirical focus of the COVID-19 response of the two British FBOs under review, we were able to highlight the broader trajectory of faith-based contributions to disaster management, which is frequently ignored in both academic and policymaking circles (Wilkinson, 2020). This work is important, especially when conducted by religious practitioners who are themselves members of the organisations that they research, because Islamic FBOs and their members should be ‘allowed to speak on their own terms’ and move beyond hegemonic liberal and secular systems (Tittensor and Clarke, 2022). Including more self-written accounts will facilitate more nuanced discussions about Muslim collective action in the UK, contributing to and building on the scholarly and popular discussions that we have seen flourish over the past few decades (Tara-Chand, 2015; Pickering-Saqqa, 2019, 2023; Hanrieder and Galesne, 2021). While existing work regularly concentrates on questions of religiosity, relations with wider society, politics, and national security, often questioning the belonging of Muslims to British society (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009; Elshayyal, 2016; Sabir, 2017; Saeed, 2019), our study shows that IR UK and the RTP rose to the occasion during the pandemic. Acting as inherent parts of British society, as well as of their local communities, they responded to a need that they identified, building on their deep knowledge of British society and crisis response. More data are needed on how successful this was, but it is clear that through their actions, these Muslim FBOs demonstrated a clear commitment to helping others in extremely challenging circumstances. Islamic FBOs joined the ranks of volunteers and professionals across the country to provide the help that was needed as a matter of course. This does not mean that they were not acutely aware of the often Islamophobic and racist environment in which they operated; on the contrary, a cognisance of the environment encouraged a desire to showcase what they perceived as the ‘true’ face of Islam: devoted to serving others.

6.2 | Transcending divides between the ‘domestic’ and the ‘international’

A comparison of two UK-based FBOs also allowed us to explore the historical evolution of, and generational nuances emerging in, the Islamic development and humanitarian scene in the country and the ‘glocal’ nature (Roudometof, 2015) of their work, oscillating between domestic and international approaches. IR UK represents the oldest Islamic development and humanitarian FBO in the UK, established in the mid-1980s, whereas the RTP is part of the younger generation of Islamic FBOs that were founded in the 2010s.

The first generation of British Islamic development and humanitarian FBOs tended to work internationally, raising funds in the UK that were then spent on implementing projects abroad (Pickering-Saqqa, 2019). Once UK-based programming emerged, it mostly centred on long-term, development efforts rather than emergency relief. This has started to change slowly, with an increased focus on domestic activities; however, domestic *emergency relief* still makes up only a fraction of the domestic programming of IR UK and similar Islamic FBOs, although it has received more attention since the early 2010s. This article therefore builds on existing debates about domestic *development*-focused programming (Hanrieder and Galesne, 2021; Pickering-Saqqa, 2023), by placing a spotlight specifically on domestic *crisis response*. Our research shows that the coronavirus pandemic has reinforced the increased focus on domestic emergency relief within British FBOs. This evolution is similar to the effect of previous national crises on the Islamic development and humanitarian FBOs, such as IR UK, that responded to them. Yet, the pandemic has allowed mostly domestic-focused Islamic charities, such as the RTP, to reconnect with the transnational element of their work, by utilising the virtual realm to organise global events such as the OI. Overall, therefore, there is a trend towards a blurring of strict divides between 'domestic' and 'international' work (see also Hanrieder and Galesne, 2021; Pickering-Saqqa, 2023).

6.3 | Highlighting the diversity of Islamic development and humanitarian actors

This article has also addressed the notion of Islamic FBOs as monolithic entities (Ansari, 2004). Conceptualisations of Muslim actors as uniform agents are often part of the processes of othering and essentialisation, as experts on Islam, Muslims, and Muslim-majority societies have pointed out for decades (see, for example, Said, 1978). By concentrating our analysis on two different types of Islamic FBOs involved in the COVID-19 response, we contribute to the body of evidence that understands Islamic development and humanitarian agencies as diverse (Saddiq, 2009). We also have drawn attention to intra-organisational differences in terms of the views, preferences, and priorities of different members of the leadership team. These are important findings for those pushing for organisational and strategic change in development and humanitarian organisations, as they highlight the need for internal team- and external coalition-building when working for change.

In addition to showing that British FBOs have increasingly been concentrating on domestic (and not just international) emergency relief, we have also traced how they have done so. By focusing on delivering services during one of the most challenging post-Second World War eras of British history, IR UK and the RTP demonstrated, to differing degrees, their ability to adapt to new challenges dynamically, despite limited resources and the very low levels of institutional funding awarded to Islamic FBOs. Building on existing resources, contacts, and pre-pandemic learning, these organisations made the most of their networks across the UK to provide help where it was needed. Close relationships with Muslim-led businesses, charities, and houses of worship allowed IR UK and the RTP to provide faith-sensitive services, as well as to offer support aimed at wider parts of society. As a small charity, the RTP managed to adapt quickly, whereas IR UK responded more slowly, but had a wider reach—which highlights the value of having a diverse, active Islamic FBO scene in the UK.

6.4 | Methodological insights

From a methodological point of view, our article underlines the merit of insider research on the study of British Islamic development and humanitarian FBOs. Research on Muslims and Islamic activism in the UK is often dominated by non-Muslim researchers and academics rather than members of the organisations at the centre of the work, such as the two authors of this paper who were members of the organisations under review at the time of writing.

Our article illustrates how academic–practitioner collaborations can generate insights into the dynamics of Islamic FBOs and Muslim activism that centre the voices of those that are usually objects of research, by allowing them to lead on the work, building bridges between the different spaces that make up their (professional) identity, including academia and NGO research and practice (Eggert and Sadriu, 2025), and telling their stories 'on their own terms' (Tittensor and Clarke, 2022). While existing research often concentrates on relationships between Global South and Global North partners, based on an understanding of the Global South as composed of formerly colonised countries (White, 2020; Fransman et al., 2021), our work highlights that while it is important for development and humanitarian researchers to study phenomena affecting the Global South (such as *international* responses to emergencies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America), very similar, if not the same, issues often also exist within formerly colonising countries (see also Mahler, 2018). We hope therefore to see a continued rethinking of the current dominant use of the terms Global South and Global North in the development sector. Doing so would build on the research of others, who have pointed to the colonial and neo-imperial roots of large parts of current debates on the Global South, challenging simplistic understandings of the differences between the Global North and the Global South (Dados and Connell, 2012).

Consequently, we argue that, as important as it is to discuss research–practice collaborations in the realm of partnerships involving actors in the Global South, key insights can also be gained by focusing on research partnerships within Global North countries. While our work shows how trust and insider knowledge of the organisations at the heart of the inquiry can help to facilitate research on Islamic FBOs, future work could explore other aspects of research–practice collaborations, including the long-term impact of COVID-19 on such partnerships or the additional opportunities for and challenges to interfaith and multifaith work in this context. Furthermore, while more efforts by academics and NGOs to build equitable relationships between academic and practice-focused institutions would be welcome in this area, it is important not to lose sight of the structural dimension of these questions, which goes beyond individual partnerships (Fransman et al., 2021). This includes the broader setting in which such partnerships take place, and the fact that it is often inequalities due to systemic factors that determine the nature of academic–practice engagements (see, for example, Perry et al., 2022; Ghanem, 2024).

7 | GOING FORWARD: WHAT NEXT?

Like most members of British society, Islamic charities were largely unprepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite earlier emergencies, such as extreme flooding and major fires, there had been little to no planning for possible future events. While this is understandable to some point, this oversight provides a possible learning point for future activities of Islamic FBOs and other NGOs and government agencies in the UK. Our research shows that bigger Islamic FBOs, such as IR UK in particular, are more prepared now, as the spread of coronavirus forced them to develop quickly policies and practices suitable for a national crisis of the scope of the pandemic. Practitioners and policymakers in the UK would be well-advised to continue developing their policies and practices in the area of domestic emergency relief, so as to be even better prepared if another crisis materialises in the country in the future.

An important part of this preparation work is the development of relevant networks. A key issue that emerged especially in the interviews with IR UK staff is that of how far the organisation's domestic efforts are being embedded in existing structures—on both the local and national level. More work is required here by both Islamic FBOs and other faith-based and secular entities, including government agencies, to find ways to coordinate better the work of Islamic FBOs and the activities of other relevant actors in this area. When necessary, facilitation of capacity-sharing should be envisioned. Within the Islamic FBO scene, previous efforts to increase coordination (including during the pandemic) are to be welcomed and should be built upon to promote cross-organisational learning, coordination, and support.

Another crucial element in this context is funding. Work by the MCF (2020) highlighted the very low level of institutional funding going to Islamic FBOs during the pandemic. We recommend further research on this issue, which could look at the reasons for the low levels of institutional support provided to Islamic FBOs and identify possible strategies to help overcome the imbalance in terms of where institutional donors' money goes. This research could be led by Islamic FBOs, academic researchers, or institutional donors, to help enhance understanding of why, despite having been among the first responders to the COVID-19 pandemic, Islamic FBOs were not supported better by the government and other official bodies.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.[78] The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

[1] We use the terms 'faith sensitivity' and 'faith awareness' in the way that they are referred to by organisations such as the United Nations in the development and humanitarian sectors: 'This term (as opposed to "faith-based") ensures a focus on the faith, identity and dignity of people affected by conflict, disaster and displacement, rather than on the faith allegiance (or nonfaith allegiance) of humanitarian organizations and agencies. Working out how to be "faith-sensitive" – how to navigate the sometimes complex waters of faith and faith identity and decide what to do and not to do – requires the insights of all humanitarian actors, non-faith as well as faith-based' (UNHCR, 2018, p. 2).

[2] While the contribution of our article specifically pertains to debates on development and humanitarianism, because this is the framework that at least one of the organisations under review applies to itself, future research could also consider other relevant bodies of literature, such as the one concerning religion and social welfare (see, for example, Pavolini, Béland, and Jawad, 2017; Crabtree, 2022).

[3] We are aware of the conceptual weaknesses of the term 'BAME', meaning Black, Asian, and minority ethnic, but we use it here because of how widely it is used in British policy and practice circles.

[4] In November 2020, the MCB published a second report on Muslims and COVID-19 in the UK, with a focus on the impact of the virus on Muslim communities and the responses of mosques (MCB, 2020).

[5] See, for example, the list of funded organisations on the website of London Community Response: https://web.archive.org/web/20211128202346/www.londoncommunityresponsefund.org.uk/news/who-has-been-funded (last accessed 29 May 2025).

[6] Pracademics are professionals 'with dual identities, those of practitioner and academic' (Dickinson and Griffiths, 2023, p. 1). For a discussion of Muslim pracademics' roles and experiences in the development/humanitarian sector, see Eggert and Sadriu, 2025.

[7] For more information, see https://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/who-we-are/about-us/our-history/ (last accessed on 12 May 2025).

[8] For more information on Islamic Relief's role in the Disasters Emergency Committee, see https://www.dec.org.uk/charity/islamic-relief and https://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/who-we-are/about-us/disasters-emergency-committee/ (last accessed 12 May 2025).

[9] IR UK interviewee 2.

[10] IR UK interviewee 2.

[11] IR UK interviewee 2 and IR UK document on UK domestic projects 2018 and 2019.

[12] If the projects were implemented in the Global South, many would refer to them as 'development' work. Indeed, references to 'development' on IR UK's website can only be found on the pages referring to its work in 'developing countries' (https://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/our-work/our-approach/sustainable-development/); the term does not feature on the pages about domestic development programming (https://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/giving/areas-of-work/united-kingdom/), pointing to the prevalence of colonial and racialised logics of international development work (Sylvester, 1999; Mignolo, 2002). At the same time, IR UK consistently refers to its emergency relief work both in the UK and abroad as 'crisis response': see, for example, https://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/giving/areas-of-work/united-kingdom/uk-crisis-response/ (domestic work) and https://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/crisis-watch/ (international work).

[13] IR UK interviewees 1, 3, 4, and 5.

[14] For an account of the 2007 Gloucestershire floods, see https://thefloods.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/ (last accessed on 13 May 2025).

[15] For an account of the 2013–14 Somerset floods, see BBC (2014).

[16] For a mention of IR UK's response to the 2015 floods in Cumbria and Yorkshire, see https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-35199236(last accessed on 29 May 2025).

[17] IR UK interviewees 4 and 5.

[18] IR UK interviewees 1, 3, 4, and 5.

[19] IR UK interviewees 1, 3, 4, and 5.

[20] IR UK interviewee 5.

[21] Including the deployment of firefighters, ambulances, and the police.

[22] IR UK interviewees 3, 4, and 5.

[23] IR UK interviewees 1 and 5.

[24] For a detailed report on the response by voluntary organisations to the Grenfell Tower fire, including the work of the GMRU, see https://www.muslimaid.org/media-centre/news/grenfell-report/ (last accessed on 13 May 2025).

[25] Interviewees A and Z. See also https://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/a-year-on-from-grenfell-moving-forward-together/ (last accessed on 13 May 2025).

[26] IR UK interviewees 1, 3, 4, and 5.

[27] IR UK interviewee 1. See also https://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/get-involved/volunteering/volunteering-programmes/respondir/ (last accessed on 13 May 2025).

[28] IR UK interviewees 1 and 2.

[29] IR UK interviewee 5. See also https://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/get-involved/volunteering/volunteering-programmes/aimir/ (last accessed on 13 May 2025).

[30] IR UK interviewee 1. On the 2019 Barking fire, see BBC (2019a).

[31] IR UK interviewees 3, 4, and 5.

[32] IR UK interviewee 4.

[33] IR UK interviewee 1.

[34] IR UK interviewees 4 and 5.

[35] IR UK interviewees 1, 2, and 4.

[36] IR UK interviewee 2.

[37] IR UK interviewee 4.

[38] Ramadan began on 23 April 2020.

[39] IR UK interviewee 2.

[40] IR UK interviewee 2.

[41] IR UK interviewees 3, 4, and 5.

[42] IR UK interviewee 5.

[43] IR UK interviewees 1 and 2.

[44] IR UK interviewees 2 and 5. The 2020 Ramadan appeal included two emergency appeals: the coronavirus appeal at the beginning of the month, and a Yemen-focused emergency appeal at the end of the month (interviewee 2), which might also have contributed to the particularly high number of donations.

[45] IR UK interviewee 2.

[46] IR UK interviewee 3.

[47] IR UK interviewee 3.

[48] IR UK interviewees 1 and 3.

[49] IR UK interviewee 2; internal IR UK document on funded COVID-19-focused projects, dated 5 October 2020.

[50] ‘Zakat (zakaat, zakah), or almsgiving, is one of the five pillars of Islam. This means that Zakat is mandatory for Muslims, along with the other four sacred pillars of Islam. For every sane, adult Muslim who owns wealth over a certain amount – known as the Nisab – he or she must pay 2.5% of that wealth as Zakat. Eligible Muslims pay Zakat once a year,

and it is due as soon as one lunar (Islamic) year has passed since meeting or exceeding the Nisab (certain amount of wealth). The Zakat of every Muslim is then distributed to those who meet the criteria to receive it'. See https://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/giving/islamic-giving/zakat/ (last accessed on 13 May 2025).

[51] IR UK interviewees 1 and 2; internal IR UK document on funded Covid-focused projects, dated 5 October 2020.

[52] IR UK interviewee 5.

[53] IR UK interviewee 5.

[54] IR UK interviewee 5.

[55] IR UK interviewees 1 and 3.

[56] IR UK interviewees 1 and 5.

[57] IR UK interviewees 1, 4, and 5.

[58] IR UK interviewees 1 and 5.

[59] IR UK interviewees 1–5.

[60] IR UK interviewee 1.

[61] IR UK interviewees 2 and 4.

[62] IR UK interviewees 1, 3, 4, and 5.

[63] IR UK interviewees 3, 4.

[64] IR UK interviewees 1, 3–5.

[65] For more information, see https://www.ramadantentproject.com/about-us/ (last accessed on 29 May 2025).

[66] For more information, see https://www.ramadantentproject.com/open-iftar/ (last accessed on 29 May 2025).

[67] In 10 cities and on four continents (RTP written inquiry data 1).

[68] RTP written inquiry data 1.

[69] RTP written inquiry data 1.

[70] RTP written inquiry data 1.

[71] RTP written inquiry data 2.

[72] Data from internal survey results provided by the RTP.

[73] See, for example, Hussain, 2020; Rahim, 2020.

[74] RTP written inquiry data 2.

[75] RTP written inquiry data 1.

[76] There is an abundance of literature on the value of community messaging, including by faith groups, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and other global health crises. For more information on: the COVID-19 response, see https://jliflc.com/faith-covid-19-response/; the Ebola response, see https://jliflc.com/ebola/; and the HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) response, see https://jliflc.com/hiv-maternal-health-hub/ (last accessed on 15 May 2025).

[77] RTP written inquiry data 2.

[78] Pending approval from IR UK and the RTP.

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