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Assessing faith-based identity in humanitarian governance: A case study of Islamic Relief in Yemen

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ABSTRACT

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are increasingly influential in contemporary humanitarian governance. However, limited research has examined how faith-based identities operate within politically fragmented Muslim-majority conflict settings. This study investigates how faith-based identity influences humanitarian governance in Yemen using the case of Islamic Relief. Using a qualitative case study approach, this research analyzes organizational reports, humanitarian publications, institutional documents, academic literature, and human rights reports related to Yemen between 2015 and 2026. This study applies the concepts of humanitarian governance, comparative advantage, and competitive advantage to examine how faith-based identity shapes legitimacy, humanitarian access, donor relations, and operational practices. The findings demonstrate that Islamic Relief's Islamic identity simultaneously functions as an advantage and a constraint. While it strengthened religious legitimacy, community trust, and access to transnational Muslim donor networks, a shared Muslim identity alone did not guarantee humanitarian access or political legitimacy. Instead, Islamic Relief's relationships with Western donors, United Nations agencies, and international humanitarian networks generated suspicion among Houthi authorities, contributing to restrictions on and interference with humanitarian operations. This study argues that faith-based legitimacy is context-dependent and politically negotiated, rather than inherently advantageous, within fragmented humanitarian environments.

Keywords: faith-based organizations; FBOs; Islamic Relief; Yemen; humanitarian governance

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1. INTRODUCTION

Yemen remains one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, shaped by prolonged armed conflict, economic collapse, displacement, and institutional fragmentation. More than 19.5 million Yemenis require urgent humanitarian assistance, while nearly 17.1 million people face food insecurity and widespread vulnerability caused by ongoing conflict, economic decline, climate shocks, and limited access to essential services (Human Rights Watch, 2026; OCHA, 2026a; OCHA, 2026b; Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2026a). Humanitarian operations in Yemen have become increasingly difficult since the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2014. Today, a significant proportion of the population lives in Houthi-controlled territories, where humanitarian organizations face operational constraints, logistical disruptions, and political sensitivities in negotiating access and delivering aid (Al-Shamahi, 2021).

Within this complex environment, faith-based organizations (FBOs) have emerged as significant actors in humanitarian governance. The existing literature frequently argues that FBOs possess comparative advantages in religious societies because they are often perceived as culturally proximate, morally legitimate, and more trusted by local communities. However, much of this research has focused predominantly on Christian FBOs and relatively stable humanitarian contexts. Less attention has been paid to Muslim faith-based organizations operating in Muslim-majority conflict environments characterized by fragmented authority, contested legitimacy, and political suspicion. Consequently, the relationship between faith identity and humanitarian governance remains insufficiently understood in settings where religion may simultaneously facilitate humanitarian access while generating operational and political constraints.

The case of Islamic Relief is particularly important in this regard. Islamic Relief is among the leading international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) operating in Yemen, with over two decades of humanitarian engagement in the country (OCHA, 2026a). As a faith-based organization rooted in Islamic values, Islamic Relief operates in a highly conservative socio-religious environment where religion continues to shape public and political life. Yemen is widely regarded as one of the world's most religiously conservative countries, where Islam serves as the official religion and Sharia law is the primary source of legislation (U.S. Department of State, 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2024). This conservatism has intensified amid Houthi control and continuing discrimination against minority religious communities, including Baha'i, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu groups (U.S. Department of State, 2020; Hanania, 2021). Moreover, organizations perceived to promote non-Islamic values may encounter hostility or restrictions. Authorities previously attempted to expel one of the most prominent INGOs after allegations involving Bible distribution activities in Aden (U.S. Department of State, 2020). International organizations operating in Yemen are therefore expected to navigate local religious norms and political authority structures carefully (Humanists International, 2024).

These dynamics make Yemen a particularly relevant setting for examining the practical operation of faith-based identity. Islamic identity may strengthen local legitimacy, social acceptance, and community trust. However, international affiliations and external funding networks may simultaneously create suspicion among local authorities and armed actors, particularly in politically fragmented territories. Therefore, a shared religious identity does not automatically guarantee humanitarian legitimacy or unrestricted operational access.

Accordingly, this study asks the following question: How and to what extent does faith-based identity influence humanitarian governance in Yemen? Using Islamic Relief as a case study, this study examines how religious identity shapes organizational legitimacy, stakeholder relations, humanitarian access, and aid delivery practices in complex humanitarian settings.

This study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it shifts attention toward a Muslim faith-based organization operating within a Muslim-majority yet politically fragmented conflict environment, a topic that has received limited attention in humanitarian governance studies. Second, this study conceptualizes faith-based identity not simply as a source of humanitarian advantage, but as a factor that can simultaneously enable and constrain humanitarian operations depending on the surrounding political and institutional context. Third, this study applies the concepts of comparative and competitive

advantage, which are more commonly associated with organizational and business studies, to analyze how faith-based identity shapes humanitarian governance, legitimacy, and access negotiations in conflict settings. This approach seeks to provide a more context-sensitive and theoretically grounded understanding of faith-based humanitarian governance in contemporary crises.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Faith-Based Organizations and Humanitarian Governance

The term faith-based organization (FBO) does not yet possess a universally accepted definition. Nevertheless, FBOs are generally distinguished from secular non-governmental organizations by their religious foundations, values, and motivations, which shape their organizational identity, decision-making processes, and patterns of community engagement (McLeigh, 2011). An FBO may therefore be understood as a non-governmental organization rooted in a particular religious tradition, whose activities and institutional ethos are informed by faith-based values (Tagai et al., 2018; Hounmenou, 2023). While some FBOs integrate religious outreach into their humanitarian activities, others provide assistance purely as an expression of faith without pursuing proselytization (Munthe, 2016; Hounmenou, 2023).

Within the broader NGO landscape, FBOs constitute one category among various organizational forms, including government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), quasi-NGOs (QUANGOs), donor-organized NGOs (DONGOs), business NGOs (BINGOs), and environmental NGOs (ENGOS) (Murphy, 2010). They are also referred to in the literature as Religious NGOs (RNGOs), Religious International NGOs (RINGOs), or Religious Organizations (RO). Historically, FBOs have played an important role in the international humanitarian system. During the post-war period from the 1940s to the 1960s, a substantial proportion of humanitarian assistance was delivered through religious organizations, such as Lutheran World Relief and World Vision (McLeigh, 2011).

FBOs have increasingly become influential actors in the development and humanitarian sectors, particularly following neoliberal reforms that reduced state involvement in welfare provision (DeHaven et al., 2004; Bradley, 2009; Olarinmoye, 2012; Oliphant, 2016). International institutions such as USAID and the World Bank subsequently expanded their engagement with FBOs, contributing to what Haustein (2021) describes as the “rediscovery” of religion within the development discourse. In many developing countries, particularly in the Global South, FBOs continue to make substantial contributions to healthcare, poverty reduction, emergency response, and community-based humanitarian initiatives (Olarinmoye, 2012; Tomalin et al., 2019). Moreover, FBOs are increasingly recognized not only as humanitarian actors but also as actors capable of facilitating humanitarian diplomacy, negotiating access, and building relations with governments, NGOs, and local communities in conflict settings (Ferris, 2011; Minear & Smith, 2007; as cited in Munthe, 2016).

Despite their growing prominence, FBOs have generated significant conceptual and practical debates. Existing research emphasizes ongoing debates on how to define FBOs, the tendency to overgeneralize their strengths, and the complicated relationship between secular and religious approaches to humanitarianism (Haustein, 2021). Bradley (2009) further argues that FBOs differ significantly in their organizational structure, donor dependency, and relationships with local communities, meaning that their effectiveness cannot be assumed uniformly across contexts.

In this study, the concept of humanitarian governance is used as the primary analytical framework. Humanitarian governance should not be understood as merely the delivery of humanitarian aid or assistance. Rather, it refers to the broader system of actors, institutions, norms, authority relations, and governance practices that shape the organization, negotiation, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian action within crisis settings. Barnett (2013) defines humanitarian governance as the increasingly organized and internationalized effort to save lives, reduce suffering, and improve the welfare of vulnerable populations through collective forms of governance involving states, NGOs, international organizations, faith-based organizations, and other transnational actors.

Importantly, humanitarian governance extends beyond the distribution of material aid. It includes the institutional and political processes through which humanitarian actors negotiate access, establish

legitimacy, coordinate with authorities, mobilize resources, and exercise forms of authority in the name of humanitarianism. Barnett (2013) further emphasizes that humanitarian governance involves not only cooperation among actors, but also relations of power, rule, and legitimacy within humanitarian spaces. Similarly, Fassin (2007, as cited in Barnett, 2013) conceptualizes humanitarian governance as “the administration of human collectivities in the name of a higher moral principle that sees the preservation of life and the alleviation of suffering as the highest value of action.”

This distinction is important because the terms humanitarian aid, humanitarian assistance, and humanitarian action are often used interchangeably, despite referring to different dimensions of humanitarianism. Humanitarian aid or assistance generally refers to the material provision of relief, such as food, shelter, healthcare, and emergency services. Humanitarian action refers to organized activities intended to prevent and alleviate human suffering. In contrast, humanitarian governance concerns the governance structures, authority relations, institutional arrangements, and political negotiations that shape humanitarian action.

The concept of humanitarian governance is particularly relevant for analyzing FBOs’ roles in conflict settings. Existing research increasingly recognizes that humanitarian governance is no longer dominated solely by states and international organizations but also involves non-state actors such as NGOs, private actors, and faith-based organizations. FBOs have become important components of global governance because they participate not only in delivering humanitarian assistance but also in shaping legitimacy, mobilizing transnational networks, negotiating humanitarian access, and influencing humanitarian norms and practices (Barnett, 2013).

In politically fragmented environments such as Yemen, humanitarian governance is deeply intertwined with local authority structures, religious legitimacy, and negotiations with de facto actors. Consequently, FBOs may possess unique governance capacities that extend beyond the delivery of technical aid. Their religious identity may strengthen social trust, facilitate access to conservative communities, and enable them to engage with local religious actors. Simultaneously, this identity may generate political suspicion, concerns regarding neutrality, or tensions with international donors and local authorities. Therefore, examining FBOs through the lens of humanitarian governance allows this study to move beyond narrow discussions of aid effectiveness and analyze how faith identity shapes legitimacy, authority, operational access, and institutional relations within humanitarian crises.

2.2. Comparative and Competitive Advantages of Faith-Based Organizations in Humanitarian Governance

The concepts of comparative and competitive advantages are traditionally associated with business and organizational studies. However, these concepts are increasingly relevant to nonprofit and humanitarian sectors, as organizations compete for legitimacy, operational access, donor funding, partnerships, and public trust (Kent et al., 2013; Arasa & Kioko, 2014). In this study, these concepts are not used merely as business metaphors but as analytical tools for understanding how faith-based identity may shape organizational positioning within humanitarian governance.

Comparative advantage refers to the distinctive resources, capacities, or characteristics that enable an organization to perform certain functions more effectively than other actors operating within the same environment. In the context of faith-based organizations, comparative advantage may emerge through religious legitimacy, cultural proximity, moral credibility, local trust networks, volunteer mobilization capacity, and long-standing relationships with religious communities (Alawiyah, 2013; Brinkerhoff et al., 2011). These advantages are often embedded within the organizational identity and accumulated through long-term social and institutional engagement.

In this study, comparative advantage is observed empirically through Islamic Relief’s ability to obtain local acceptance, maintain community trust, negotiate humanitarian access, mobilize faith-based networks, and operate within conservative socio-religious environments. These elements are particularly relevant in Yemen, where religion continues to shape the political legitimacy and social relations.

In contrast, competitive advantage refers to an organization’s ability to sustain operational effectiveness, legitimacy, donor confidence, and institutional positioning relative to other humanitarian

actors within a competitive humanitarian environment (Arasa & Kioko, 2014). Unlike comparative advantage, which focuses on inherent or accumulated organizational characteristics, competitive advantage concerns how organizations strategically utilize resources to maintain relevance and operational continuity.

In humanitarian governance, competition does not necessarily imply profit-oriented rivalry. Rather, humanitarian organizations compete for donor funding, humanitarian access, legitimacy, partnerships, and influence within increasingly crowded humanitarian systems (Kent et al., 2013). In the case of FBOs, competitive advantages may emerge when faith-based legitimacy strengthens donor confidence, facilitates partnerships, improves operational flexibility, or enables organizations to sustain long-term engagement in difficult environments (Topaloglu et al., 2018).

Previous studies suggest that FBOs often possess relatively stable funding structures owing to support from religious communities and philanthropy networks (McLeigh, 2011; Alawiyah, 2013). Simultaneously, FBOs may face challenges related to transparency, professionalism, inclusivity, and donor expectations (Brinkerhoff et al., 2011). Consequently, faith-based identity may function as both a strategic organizational asset and a potential operational constraint. To preserve legitimacy and sustain support, FBOs must continuously negotiate and clarify their organizational values, public images, and relationships with stakeholders (Malmelin & Malmelin, 2015).

By applying comparative and competitive advantage frameworks to humanitarian governance, this study analyzes how Islamic Relief's faith-based identity shapes its legitimacy, operational access, stakeholder relations, and institutional positioning within Yemen's fragmented humanitarian environment. Rather than viewing religion solely as a moral or cultural characteristic, this study conceptualizes faith identity as an organizational resource that may simultaneously enable and constrain humanitarian governance processes.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the ways in which faith-based identity shapes humanitarian governance in Yemen. A qualitative methodology is considered appropriate because the research focuses on meanings, legitimacy, organizational practices, and perceptions surrounding faith-based identity rather than statistical generalization (Kielmann et al., 2011; Yin, 2011). This study emphasizes the interpretive and analytical understanding of humanitarian governance within a complex conflict environment.

The research is designed as an embedded case study focusing on Islamic Relief in Yemen. The case was selected for three reasons. First, Islamic Relief represents one of the largest Muslim faith-based humanitarian organizations operating in Yemen, with long-term engagement in the country. Second, Yemen provides a highly relevant context because of its prolonged conflict, fragmented political authority, and deeply conservative socio-religious environment. Third, the case allows for an analysis of how Islamic faith-based identity influences organizational legitimacy, humanitarian access, stakeholder relations, and governance practices within a politically contested Muslim-majority setting.

Data collection primarily relied on qualitative analyses of documents. The study examined several dozen primary and secondary documents published between 2015 and 2026, corresponding to the escalation of the Yemeni conflict following the Houthi takeover of Sana'a. Primary sources included Islamic Relief annual reports, humanitarian response reports, press releases, organizational statements, and publications from United Nations agencies, such as the OCHA and other humanitarian institutions. Secondary sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy papers, institutional analyses, and credible international news reports related to humanitarian governance, faith-based organizations, and the Yemen conflict.

Documents were selected based on four criteria: relevance to humanitarian governance and Islamic Relief, source credibility, accessibility, and recency. Priority was given to institutional, academic, and humanitarian sources published after 2015, although earlier literature was incorporated where relevant.

Qualitative thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and relationships across the collected materials. Documents were coded manually using several analytical categories derived from

the theoretical framework, including humanitarian governance, comparative advantage, competitive advantage, religious identity, legitimacy, humanitarian access, donor relations and political constraints. Particular attention was given to examining how Islamic Relief's faith-based identity functions both as an enabling factor and as a source of operational and political constraints.

To strengthen the analysis, this study used triangulation across organizational reports, United Nations documents, academic literature, humanitarian reports and independent media coverage. This process helped identify inconsistencies, differences, and potential biases across sources, particularly given the politically sensitive nature of humanitarian operations in Yemen.

This study has several limitations. This research relies predominantly on document analysis and does not include direct interviews with Islamic Relief staff, Yemeni communities, or local authorities. Consequently, interpretations of perceptions and legitimacy are based on documented evidence rather than direct field testimonies. In addition, restricted access to conflict zones and political sensitivities surrounding humanitarian operations in Yemen limited opportunities for direct empirical data collection. Nevertheless, the use of multiple institutional, academic, and humanitarian sources provides a sufficiently robust basis for analyzing how faith-based identity shapes humanitarian governance in conflict settings in Yemen.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Islamic Relief as a Faith-Based Actor in Humanitarian Governance

Islamic Relief is one of the most prominent Muslim faith-based organizations (FBOs) operating in contemporary humanitarian governance. Founded in the United Kingdom in 1984 by Dr. Hany El Banna, Islamic Relief was established based on Islamic ethical principles emphasizing compassion, justice, stewardship, and social responsibility (Arqub, 2010). Its Islamic identity does not merely function as a symbolic characteristic but also shapes its organizational values, fundraising mechanisms, partnerships, and humanitarian practices.

The increasing recognition of FBOs in international humanitarian governance reflects a broader shift in the global development discourse. Over the past several decades, faith actors have become increasingly involved in international humanitarian and development agendas, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Tomalin et al., 2019). International institutions and multilateral frameworks have also expanded their engagement with FBOs because of their perceived ability to build trust at the community level and mobilize transnational support networks (Bond Faith in Development Working Group, 2026). Islamic Relief maintains relationships with major international institutions, including consultative engagement with the United Nations system and cooperation with global humanitarian agencies (Haynes, 2014).

However, the findings demonstrate that faith-based identity within humanitarian governance functions as neither a purely positive nor a purely negative resource. Instead, its effects are highly context dependent and politically mediated. Islamic Relief's Islamic identity may strengthen its legitimacy among Muslim communities and facilitate access to religious donor networks, but it may also generate political suspicion within global security discourses. Following the events of September 11, 2001, Islamic FBOs increasingly encountered Islamophobic narratives linking Islamic humanitarian organizations with extremism and terrorism (Khafagy, 2020). Islamic Relief has been repeatedly accused of extremist affiliations despite operating as an independent humanitarian organization without formal political alignment (Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2019). These findings illustrate that religious identity can simultaneously generate both legitimacy and vulnerability within humanitarian governance structures.

4.2. Faith-Based Identity and Humanitarian Governance in Yemen

Islamic Relief has operated in Yemen since 1998 and significantly expanded its humanitarian activities following the escalation of the conflict in 2015 (Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2026c). Over time, the organization has developed large-scale humanitarian operations across multiple governorates, involving food assistance, nutrition programs, healthcare, WASH initiatives, livelihood support, orphan

sponsorship, and community resilience projects ([Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2026d](#)). However, the significance of the Yemen case extends beyond the scale of humanitarian assistance. More importantly, it reveals the complex relationship between faith-based identity, legitimacy, and humanitarian governance in politically fragmented conflict settings.

Existing research frequently assumes that faith-based organizations possess comparative advantages in religious societies because a shared religious identity may facilitate social trust, legitimacy, and local acceptance. In principle, Islamic Relief's Islamic identity should strengthen its legitimacy in Yemen's overwhelmingly Muslim society. Yemen is widely recognized as one of the most religiously conservative countries in the Middle East, where Islam functions as the official religion and Sharia law is the primary source of legislation ([U.S. Department of State, 2020](#)). Reports from the U.S. The Department of State and international human rights organizations further indicate increasing restrictions against minority religious groups and organizations perceived as promoting non-Islamic values, particularly in areas under Houthi control ([U.S. Department of State, 2020](#); [Humanists International, 2024](#)). These conditions theoretically create an environment in which Muslim faith-based organizations may enjoy stronger cultural proximity and social legitimacy than secular humanitarian actors.

Islamic Relief also possesses several characteristics commonly associated with comparative advantages in humanitarian governance. Through its Islamic identity, the organization successfully mobilized transnational Muslim donor networks, including zakat-based fundraising and partnerships with institutions such as Qatar Charity, the Islamic Development Bank, and other Middle Eastern donors ([Kidwai, 2015](#)). Islamic Relief has maintained partnerships with major international humanitarian actors, such as the World Food Programme (WFP), DFID, IOM, and multiple UN agencies, strengthening its operational reach and institutional credibility ([Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2020](#)). Its organizational capacity has been further reinforced through innovations in biometric aid systems, climate-smart agriculture, solar-powered infrastructure, and integrated livelihood resilience programs ([Relief International, 2014](#); [Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2026b](#)).

Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate that a shared Muslim identity alone does not automatically translate into humanitarian access or political legitimacy. Humanitarian governance in Yemen is shaped not only by religious identity but also by ideological differences, geopolitical perceptions, and contested authority structures. Although both Islamic Relief and the Houthis operate within Islamic contexts, they represent fundamentally different understandings of religion, governance and political legitimacy.

The Houthis, also known as Ansar Allah, emerged from the Zaydi Shi'a revivalist movement and gradually transformed into a powerful armed and political actor controlling large parts of northern Yemen, including Sanaa ([Al-Jazeera, 2024](#)). Their governance model integrates religious identity with anti-Western political narratives and resistance ideologies. International institutions and governments, including the United States and several allied countries, have repeatedly accused the Houthis of human rights abuses, restrictions on humanitarian access, arbitrary detention, and interference in aid distribution ([Human Rights Watch, 2024](#); [Amnesty International, 2025](#)). Reports from the United Nations Panel of Experts on Yemen and the OCHA similarly document the growing politicization of humanitarian access in Houthi-controlled territories, including bureaucratic restrictions, aid diversion, and pressure on humanitarian organizations ([United Nations Security Council, 2024](#); [OCHA, 2026c](#)).

In this environment, Islamic Relief's position has become increasingly complicated. Although its Islamic identity theoretically provided cultural legitimacy, its institutional relationships with Western donors, UN agencies, and transnational humanitarian governance structures have generated suspicion among Houthi authorities. Rather than being perceived solely as a Muslim humanitarian actor, Islamic Relief is often viewed as part of a broader international humanitarian system associated with Western influence and external political agendas ([Welsh, 2021](#)).

This perception helps explain why Islamic identity alone does not guarantee operational security or unrestricted humanitarian access. In 2019, Houthi-affiliated actors reportedly seized Islamic Relief facilities in Dhamar, looted humanitarian supplies, manipulated beneficiary lists, and restricted aid distribution ([Al-Sahwah, 2019](#)). Similar patterns of interference were documented by the Human Rights Watch, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen,

which reported increasing restrictions on humanitarian operations, movement constraints on aid workers, and interference with aid delivery in Houthi-controlled territories (Human Rights Watch, 2024; OCHA, 2026c; United Nations Security Council, 2024).

Similar raids and confiscations targeting Islamic Relief and other international organizations continued in subsequent years, including attacks on offices in Sana'a and interference with humanitarian activities (YemenOnline, 2025; Yemen Monitor, 2025). These localized reports are further reinforced by broader regional and institutional reports documenting escalating restrictions on international humanitarian organizations operating in northern Yemen. According to cross-referenced reports from regional media and humanitarian monitoring sources, Houthi authorities increasingly carried out raids, detentions, office closures, and confiscation of organizational assets targeting organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières, Action Against Hunger, ACTED, Human Appeal, and Islamic Relief Worldwide (Al-Arabiya, 2025; Nasser, 2025). In addition, a Houthi-controlled court reportedly ordered the freezing of the International Islamic Relief Organization's bank accounts in areas under militia control, threatening salary payments and disrupting humanitarian operations to assist vulnerable civilians (Yemen Today, 2026; Al-Majhar, 2026). These developments align with the repeated concerns expressed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and international human rights organizations regarding the shrinking humanitarian space, increasing politicization of aid, and growing pressure on humanitarian governance mechanisms in Yemen (OCHA, 2026c; Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Therefore, the Yemen case demonstrates the limits of faith-based identity as a standalone governance resource. Religious identity may facilitate community trust and donor mobilization, but it does not override political suspicion, ideological contestation or struggles over sovereignty and authority. Islamic Relief's Islamic identity functioned simultaneously as a comparative advantage and political vulnerability. On the one hand, it strengthened transnational fundraising capacity, religious legitimacy, and social trust. However, its international affiliations and integration into global humanitarian governance structures generated suspicion among local armed actors, who perceived international humanitarianism through geopolitical and ideological lenses.

These findings contribute to humanitarian governance research by demonstrating that faith-based legitimacy is relational, contingent, and politically negotiated, rather than automatic or universally transferable. Shared religion alone does not necessarily produce humanitarian access, particularly in conflict settings, where governance authority, ideological narratives, and external political alignments shape perceptions of legitimacy. Instead, humanitarian governance operates through continuous negotiations between local authority structures, international institutions, donor systems, and community-level trust relations.

4.3. Comparative Advantage, Competitive Advantage, and the Limits of Faith-Based Identity

The findings also provide important insights into the relationship between comparative and competitive advantages in humanitarian governance. Islamic Relief's comparative advantage derives primarily from its faith-based identity, transnational Muslim donor networks, religious legitimacy, and ability to mobilize community trust (Kidwai, 2015; Alawiyah, 2013). These resources enabled the organization to expand its fundraising capacity, maintain long-term operations, and establish extensive humanitarian infrastructure across Yemen.

However, comparative advantage alone does not guarantee operational success or political acceptance. Instead, Islamic Relief has transformed these comparative advantages into broader competitive advantages through institutional partnerships, organizational professionalism, technological innovation, and operational adaptability. Its collaborations with organizations such as the World Food Programme (WFP), DFID, and IOM, and other international actors have strengthened its institutional credibility and operational capacity (Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2020).

Moreover, Islamic Relief's innovations in livelihood resilience, climate-smart agriculture, biometric aid systems, solar-powered technologies, vocational training, and integrated WASH-nutrition programming demonstrate how FBOs increasingly compete not only through religious legitimacy but also

through organizational effectiveness and technical capacity (Relief International, 2014; Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2026b). These innovations have strengthened Islamic Relief's competitive position within increasingly crowded humanitarian governance systems.

Simultaneously, the Yemen case reveals the limits of comparative advantage based on faith identity alone. Shared religion did not eliminate political suspicion or ensure unrestricted access to Houthi-controlled territories. This suggests that faith identity should not be understood as a fixed organizational advantage, but rather as a relational and context-dependent resource whose value changes according to local political configurations.

4.4. Implications for Humanitarian Governance

These findings have broader theoretical implications for the humanitarian governance literature. First, they demonstrated that faith-based identity should not be conceptualized in binary terms as either an advantage or a liability. Instead, its effects are contingent on the political context, governance structures, and perceptions of legitimacy among local actors.

Second, this study contributes to humanitarian governance research by showing that religious legitimacy alone is insufficient in fragmented conflict environments where humanitarian organizations are embedded within transnational governance systems and geopolitical struggles. In Yemen, legitimacy was shaped not only by shared religion but also by perceptions regarding external funding, political neutrality, and institutional affiliation.

Third, the findings expand comparative and competitive advantage frameworks beyond business-oriented analyses by demonstrating how organizational identity, legitimacy, and governance relations function as strategic resources within humanitarian environments. Comparative advantage in humanitarian governance is therefore not merely economic or technical but also social, political, and symbolic.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that humanitarian organizations operating in conflict settings should avoid assuming that a shared religious identity automatically guarantees local acceptance or operational access. Faith-based organizations must continuously negotiate legitimacy across multiple governance levels, including local communities, de facto authorities, international institutions and donor networks. Consequently, humanitarian governance strategies should prioritize context-sensitive engagement, transparency, and political awareness, alongside religious or cultural proximity.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examines how faith-based identity influences humanitarian governance in Yemen using the case of Islamic Relief. The findings demonstrate that faith-based identity functions as both an enabling and a constraining factor in humanitarian governance. On the one hand, Islamic Relief's Islamic identity strengthened its religious legitimacy, facilitated access to transnational Muslim donor networks, and enhanced community trust within Yemen's predominantly Muslim society. These factors provided important comparative advantages that supported the organization's operations.

However, the study also shows that a shared Muslim identity alone does not automatically translate into humanitarian access or political legitimacy. Humanitarian governance in Yemen is shaped not only by religion but also by contested authority, ideological differences, geopolitical perceptions, and struggles over sovereignty. Although Islamic Relief operates based on Islamic humanitarian principles, its institutional relationships with Western donors, United Nations agencies, and international humanitarian networks have generated suspicion among Houthi authorities. Repeated raids, restrictions, office seizures, and interference with humanitarian activities illustrate how humanitarian governance in Yemen has become increasingly politicized and securitized.

The findings further indicate that Islamic Relief's success cannot be explained solely by religious identity. The organization transformed its comparative advantages into broader competitive advantages through institutional partnerships, professional operations, technological innovation, and adaptive humanitarian programming. This suggests that effective humanitarian governance depends not only on

faith-based legitimacy but also on organizational capacity, institutional credibility, and the ability to navigate complex political environments.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the humanitarian governance literature by demonstrating that faith-based identity is relational, context-dependent, and politically negotiated rather than universally advantageous. This research also expands the application of comparative and competitive advantage frameworks within humanitarian governance by showing how legitimacy, donor relations, and organizational networks function as strategic resources in conflict settings.

The Yemen case demonstrates that faith-based organizations cannot rely solely on a shared religious identity to secure humanitarian legitimacy or access. Instead, humanitarian governance emerges through continuous negotiation between local authorities, international institutions, donor systems, and affected communities within highly fragmented political environments.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study because it did not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, experiments, or the collection of personal or sensitive data. The study relied exclusively on publicly available documents, institutional reports, humanitarian publications, academic literature, and open-source materials.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was not applicable because this study did not involve direct participation of human subjects, interviews, surveys, or primary data collection.

Authors' Contributions

The author solely conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, collected and analyzed the data, wrote the original manuscript, reviewed and edited the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares no potential conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study were obtained from publicly available sources, including organizational reports, humanitarian publications, institutional documents, academic literature, human rights reports, and open-source media materials cited in the reference list. No private or restricted datasets were generated or analyzed during the study.

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Notes on Contributors

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