

HUMANITARIAN AID IN YEMEN THROUGH THE EYES OF A KUWAITI ROLE MODEL FOR WOMEN

INTERVIEW WITH MAALI ALASOUSI, YEMEN COUNTRY
DIRECTOR, DIRECT AID ASSOCIATION.

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In this interview, the award-winning Kuwaiti humanitarian and women's rights activist Maali Alasousi discusses the path that led her to Yemen. As the only woman from a GCC country to head the office of a humanitarian organization in a high-risk area, she addresses the challenges she faced and difficulties for women in development. Marked by the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, when she volunteered in the Red Crescent Society as a teenager, Alasousi dedicated her life to helping others and serves as a role model for Arab women. She does not shy away from uncomfortable topics, including politics, religion, and accusations of Islamic charities financing terrorism. She outlines her inspiration to establish a local NGO in Yemen, Tamkeen for Development Organization, and her move to the Kuwaiti international charity Direct Aid. The article provides background on the civil war in Yemen and considers how COVID-19 exacerbates an already tragic humanitarian condition.

Keywords: Islam, humanitarianism, women's empowerment, Kuwait, Yemen

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Background



Figure 1: Photo of Maali Alasousi

While I was a Fulbright fellow at American University of Kuwait in 2016–2017, I had the opportunity to interview Maali Alasousi. The famous Kuwaiti humanitarian moved to Yemen in 2009 to dedicate her life to helping others, in particular working to empower women and youth. I was researching Kuwaiti humanitarianism and Islamic charity and had visited a number of governmental and nongovernmental institutions, including Direct Aid Association. All of the directors in charge of international work with whom I met were men, yet I was repeatedly told that women were the most generous donors to Kuwait's charities. I inquired during one of those meetings about Kuwaiti women who worked in charity organizations and was connected to the women's office of that charity—located in a separate part of its headquarters building. Once it became known that an American professor was interested in talking to Kuwaiti women active in charity work, I was soon invited to meet with several other groups of women representing different organizations.

My interview with Maali Alasousi was facilitated through that network. As she lives in Yemen, and infrequently returns to Kuwait, her office requested my interview questions in advance. For the first hour of our meeting on May 15, 2017, Alasousi told me her story in English,

unprompted, and I followed up with additional questions after her uninterrupted narrative. She is used to public speaking and to serving as a role model for Kuwaitis and other women. Alasousi won a number of accolades, including being named among “The 100 Most Powerful Arab Women” in 2015 by ArabianBusiness.com.¹ She was also a co-recipient of the 2019 Annual Conference Award from the Gulf International Forum.²

Maali Alasousi is the only woman from a GCC country to head the office of a humanitarian organization in a high-risk area. Just after our interview, she flew to Dubai where she won the United Arab Emirates’ Arab Hope Makers award of Dh1 million (approximately 273,000 USD). The award promotes and celebrates humanitarian efforts, launched in 2017 by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai. In a 2019 news report summarizing Alasousi’s work as one of the first award recipients, she was described as such:

She has devoted herself to volunteering in war-torn Yemen after seeing the poverty that has struck the country.

Her work is centered around empowering vulnerable women and children. She leads over 30 campaigns that help more than 250,000 people with the support of 1,400 volunteers, out of whom 70 per cent are women. So far, she has put together 637 youth scholarships and 51 water supply projects for 450,000 people.

Al Asousi has faced several challenges in her volunteer work as a woman, including multiple arrests and threats from militant groups who accused her of “corrupting girls” for educating them.

“Women have more access in vulnerable communities, giving them a bigger influence in helping others. Women are the mothers of future generations. They have to be educated enough to raise better generations able to combat radicalism,” she said. (Nasir, 2019)

¹ For other news articles about her work, see Bobley (2016) and CNN (2015), a report wishing her a happy 40th birthday.

² To hear Maali Alasousi tell a shorter version of her story (in English), see Gulf International Forum (2019), a video clip of her receiving this award. For another interview (in Arabic with subtitles), see Weoritu (2017).

This interview presents Alasousi's unique story in her own words, with some editing for length and clarity. She addresses the challenges she faces in Yemen and difficulties for women in the humanitarian sector. She does not shy away from uncomfortable topics, including politics and accusations faced by Kuwaiti charities of financing terrorism. At the start of our meeting she noted how there was much talk in Kuwait (in 2017) about the humanitarian needs of Yemen—even as Kuwait participated in the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen's Civil War. Alasousi's interest in humanitarianism started when she was a child. She begins her story with her mother, an active volunteer who avoided publicity for her work, who served as her first role model. She copied her mother and began to help people in school and neighbors in need. Alasousi's desire to volunteer was profoundly impacted by the 1990–1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, when she was only 15 years old, which she discusses here. She later studied business in the United States, earning a degree in 2002 in Tourism Planning and Management from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. She subsequently continued her education with various international certificates in resource mobilization for civil society organizations and sustainability reporting when she decided to dedicate her life to helping others.

In the interview she explains what led her to found a local NGO in Yemen in 2007, called Tamkeen for Development Organization (T4D).³ She joined forces with Direct Aid in 2015, managing their Yemen office. Formerly known as Africa Muslims Agency, Direct Aid is the largest Kuwaiti NGO, working in 30 African countries, in addition to Yemen, with more than 6,000 employees worldwide (Direct Aid, n.d.-c). This prominent Islamic charity was founded in 1981 by the renowned Kuwaiti medical doctor Abdul Rahman Al-Sumait (d. 2013), who lived much of his life in Africa and also served as a mentor to Alasousi. When she joined the NGO in 2015, which she describes as “an international organization that works with regional partners and social entrepreneurs in civil society,” Alasousi was the only female employee. She ends by talking about how volunteering not only changes the lives of others, but also changes one's own life. As this interview was conducted in 2017,

³ T4D won an award for “Best Independent Social Initiative” in 2011, when Alasousi was also nominated “Female Leader of the Year” by Tawasul Best Award for Civil Society Engagement (“Maali Alasousi,” n.d.). This was followed by recognition in 2013 in the UAE for “Best Civil Society Service Award,” leading to Alasousi being named in 2014 as one of 36 female entrepreneurs making a difference in the Arab World in a special edition entitled “Arab Women Rising” published by University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business (Syeed & Zafar, 2014). This write-up was widely publicized, including in the *Huffington Post* (Zafar, 2017). A 2012 video promoted Alasousi's biography and work at Tamkeen (Voice for Success, 2012).

we conclude this article with an update on the war in Yemen and translate a recent interview clip featuring an April 2020 plea from Alasousi on *Kuwaiti TV*. This was part of a Direct Aid fundraising campaign for Yemen as COVID-19 further exacerbates an already tragic humanitarian condition.

Maali Alasousi: The Making of a Young Volunteer

I started to volunteer when I was a kid; my family usually encouraged us to volunteer. We helped people, for example in school, we started to help neighbors in need. I would go with my mom usually because she was active in this field. [Volunteer work] is not announced—it is hidden. [My mom] didn't want anybody to know. And so we started to copy this from our parents. But then the [Iraqi] invasion [of Kuwait] occurred in 1990. [While in exile in Bahrain] I was trained with my mom [for two to three months] to enter with the Red Cross and Red Crescent 48 hours after the liberation. We were trained in CPR and first aid and how to put out fires. Then we entered [Kuwait] with the Desert Storm troops.

As I was 14 going on 15 years, I was underage so they did not allow me to enter. I was really upset because they trained everybody. I was the only one they said no to. I was crying and screaming: "Everybody is going except me!" And they said: "OK we can let you come in, but you have to have a guardian." Luckily my mom took the same training and so I entered with her.

We entered from the desert side with the tanks and with the troops, so there were no streets. It was something for me to see real troops for the first time—yes we see them on TV, but now you are part of this act. I was totally shocked seeing all the [oil] wells—you could even feel the heat [of the burning wells] on your skin, on your cheeks. I can't forget this moment—you feel the heat on your body even if the [wells] are far away—and it was totally dark. I thought the next day we would see the sun, but we couldn't because Kuwait was under smoke for about seven months. That is why we started to have a lot of diseases and allergies.

When we entered Kuwait we arrived at Mubarak Hospital. The first thing I saw was bodies. [We were told] to carry people who were injured and people who were DEAD. We were not trained to see dead or injured bodies. Oh my God, imagine being 14–15 years old carrying a body and you are not used to seeing a gun or a tank and all of a sudden you see a dead body.

So we started to help. We were panicking—I was not really scared—yes, I was totally shocked from seeing people, some of them tortured before they killed them. But I needed to help. There was no

turning back—it was one way. It was my decision—my mom was encouraging me—and I had to do it.

So I started to say, in my heart, I don't want any country to face the same situation, and I will keep helping people no matter where. This is how I started to volunteer. I continued volunteering until I was 18 years old. Then I got a scholarship from the Kuwaiti government to continue my studies because I had a high GPA in high school. I went to the United States—and I kept volunteering. I started to work in a homeless shelter for women with children in the winter.

When I came back [to Kuwait] from my graduation, I started to be more focused in my volunteering. Before, it was only volunteering here and there, with the handicapped, with people in need, with the homeless ... it wasn't focused, but I felt happy every time I volunteered in different fields. Then when I came back to Kuwait, I started to focus [my volunteering] more on the economic and how to help people sustain themselves and not be in need.

Why did I choose this field? Because when I wanted to start my own company, I faced a lot of constraints and “noes”. Yes, [the government] wanted to encourage people to start their own businesses, but when you want to start, you came face to face with a lot of barriers when it comes to laws. So, it took me so long to establish my own company. I went through too many obstacles, and I didn't want other people to face the same thing. I started to become a mentor to women and youth especially. I concentrated in helping certain cases—specifically widowed and divorced women—to make an income and home-based business. The government helps them, but we don't want only help from the government giving them monthly salaries and just feeding them. I wanted them to be more active in society in case something happens, so I started to help a lot of people.

This is how I established the first club for women business professionals, BPW [Business and Professional Women Chapter in Kuwait, in 2009]. Me and one of the ladies—her name is Malika from India. Before she came to Kuwait she established a chapter in India, which has consultative status with the United Nations, BPW. When she moved, we came together as we had the same ideas, so we established the club and started to help a lot of people. I was concentrating on that.

Early Work in Yemen

Besides that, I worked in the government and I had my own media and consultation company.⁴ One of the multimillionaire men wanted to do an evaluation in Yemen [and approached me with a contract]. This guy wanted to help women with a sustainable project. He did not want to just give money and leave, and he did not want to give to charity. I refused this contract in the beginning because it was summertime, which I spend with my family—I'm always busy all year round. I promised to spend this time with my mom. I gave him a quote with a high number so he would refuse, not me saying I can't [do this work]. Unfortunately, he accepted [Alasousi said laughing], so I had to go to Yemen.

When I [first] entered Yemen, it was because of business—to do a consultation. It had nothing to do with charity. I also agreed because the project he assigned me to was to help women sustain themselves. I liked the idea because I was doing the same in Kuwait, but in a different way. When I started the project, I was totally shocked. I thought the situation in Yemen was better. I started to see a woman selling her body for only 1 USD to feed her kids. This was not because she wanted to but because she has no knowledge, no education, nothing. A smart girl with a 4.0 GPA, 100% in high school, but she can't go [to school] because she doesn't have 30 USD for transportation.

You see kids getting blind, dying, because of no money, no hospitals, nothing. You see 12 people living in 3 x 3 or 4 x 4 [meter] rooms. I told them: "OK, I believe that all of you live in this room. Just show me." You know how the baklava is in one plate? They sleep this way—very organized. And the rest they sleep across.

I entered this house. Imagine that the toilet is the kitchen. They have the stove—it's not a stove, only fire with gas and two burners cooking—inside the bathroom. Kids are sick. And I thought: "I'm doing the evaluation to help the women, not to help the people. Yes, it will help them later on but not as individuals."

So I told the guy: "Well your project can't occur in Yemen," and I closed the case without going back to Yemen. I advised them to help women by just giving them money because it needs a lot of input, energy, and training for them to understand the project—how to sustain themselves. And I left.

After a couple of weeks I was organizing files and saw all the pictures and stories. I said "*ya'ani haram*" [this is a shame]. I felt too guilty that God gave me education, money, knowledge, free time, and all

⁴ Alasousi worked in business administration for the Kuwaiti government.

that—and I don't do anything? God didn't show me this, just to take a picture or write a story—it was to take action. This strong sound inside my head and heart drove me too hard, and I couldn't concentrate on my government work or my private work. Plus I donated the money [received from the large consulting contract] to the cases I visited because I felt too guilty to take the money.

I couldn't concentrate in my life. I said: "I have to do something." There was something inside of me telling me: "You volunteer and make a change in Kuwait and other countries, but [in Yemen] this is real, they are dying and they are in need. Yes, people need me here in Kuwait, but [in Yemen] they will die if I don't go, they will not get an education if I don't go. They don't know the way."

Moving to Yemen

I started with 40 families—in education. I took girls from different villages to study at university. We concentrated on medicine, engineering, physics, chemistry, English—anything related to science or language or something they can do. Nothing was related to the study of religion, or *da'wa* (proselytizing), or Qur'an, because there are a lot of organizations doing that—but not a lot of organizations concentrating on development. If you really want to make a change in society, you must invest in a woman and let her lead her family, her society. I believed in this.

A couple of months before I went to Yemen I got a scholarship from MEPI, the Middle East Partnership Initiative, to study how to mobilize and sustain societies and organizations.⁵ I used a lot of the knowledge of business from my studies, and also how to give to society, and this training helped me to know how organizations worked, how to sustain and to mobilize civil society.

I established [my goals] with friends and families—and the man who gave me the consultation, he helped a lot in donating to cases. Word of mouth became too huge—it grew so fast! I went back and forth, back and forth [between Yemen and Kuwait] from 2007 until 2009.

Then what happened was in 2009 I said: "No, I have to physically move to Yemen." This decision for a woman, not married, and from the GCC with this beautiful life – and I had everything. Here the situation in Kuwait is things come to you, you don't go to them. If you want laundry, if you want a driver, if you want food, if you want the salon, anything, you call and pay and that's it. Sometimes it's

⁵ MEPI was a 2006 initiative of President George W. Bush, mepi.state.gov/.

exaggerated, but it's a beautiful life—seriously. And leaving government work and the private sector—where you make huge money—and going for something that you will manage and you don't know if you will sustain yourself, or your team, or if people will listen to you. Or if you will be able to actually let other people know about the case of Yemen. This was 10 years ago. But I took [this decision] because there was something inside of me. All the things I wrote, the strategy, the study I did in a couple of years—all were telling me this is the right path.

I couldn't find a lot of donors at the beginning. It was only friends and relatives because people don't know anything about Yemen. They think yes, it's poor, but not that poor. Since I worked for three to four months in the villages, I didn't really have time to show people through media or social media what's going on. I'm concentrating more on helping people than taking photos and making videos to tell others.

I established a nonprofit organization locally because this is the only way I could contact international organizations to help me. I don't believe that money is the problem, but it is the technical support, the capacity building, advocacy awareness—all that is important in those societies, not the money you donate. Because you will not sustain or make a difference in society. Yes, you help them in the war, you help them with relief, or in famine, but usually you feed people—you have to teach them how to feed themselves. You have to teach them how to live, to give them an education—the tools, so they can sustain themselves. This is how I believe that society can be developed.

So, I started to visit a lot of mentors in Kuwait and to contact organizations: Oxfam, GTI [Global Teachers Institute], MEPI, the Germans, British, organizations from Japan. I started to ask them for help on technical issues. When I sent them the cases, and it had already been studied, they started to give me the tools because they know I'm serious about the situation. I always said: "I don't want money, I just need technical support." So, they started to help me, and I met a lot of organizations, especially foreign organizations, to get technical support.

When I came to Kuwait to ask the local organizations for money, I was shocked that many of the projects were about only drilling wells, or building a mosque, or da'wa, or orphans. I asked, "Where is the development in that?" Yes, you develop only the human, but not society. So, I started to visit a lot of mentors from Kuwait. Dr. Abdul Rahman Al-Sumait (May God Have Mercy Upon Him)⁶ who established this organization [Direct Aid, n.d.-b] was one of my mentors. I started to visit

⁶ Dr. Al-Sumait died in 2013.

the Nouri Organization [Sheikh Abdullah Al Nouri Charity Society], IICO [Islamic International Charitable Organization], a lot of organizations, to meet with specific people.⁷

As I started these visits, I didn't know that this field was purely men! The donors are women. There is something wrong with this structure. Women are donating huge sums of money but they are not decision-makers. They have a separate place in the organizations—usually you have a women's sector that interacts with only women. And the men's sector interacts with only men. Yes, in forums and decision-making they come together, but I don't see among any of the CEOs a woman. I didn't see any of the decision-makers, in the council [board] of any organization a woman's seat. If you see who is donating, 50%—if not more—are women.

I started to question why there is a “type” in all organizations. I visited the UAE, Qatar, all GCC countries and regional organizations. There is a strange type of which you have to be either extremely religious or wearing ‘*abaya*’.⁸ To me, being religious is nice, but do I have to be extremely religious to get into those organizations? Because I dress differently, I look different, my mentality is different. I don't talk about only the Qur'an and Hadith [sayings of the Prophet Mohammad]. Yes, I use them to encourage people, but in the end you are human and your nature is to help. You don't have to have a book to tell you that. All religions—you don't see any religion that will not advise you to help someone. So, when I entered this field, I was totally in culture shock. Why does everybody look the same? Why does everybody think the same? Why are all the projects the same?

When it comes to the needs of society, it is completely different. The money that is collected is not used wisely to develop other countries. I started to implement projects in a different way. I started to get technical support from those mentors.

Relationship with Dr. Al-Sumait, Founder of Direct Aid

When I met Dr. Abdul Rahman Al-Sumait, I found that his vision was totally different. People think he was working for *da'wa* and spreading only Islam. He always helped *different* religions and even atheists. He doesn't just go and tell them to become Muslims. He thinks differently, and I like his thinking because he's out-of-the-box.

⁷ For an examination of IICO, see Petersen (2015). For additional background on Kuwaiti foreign aid, see Leichtman (2017).

⁸ An ‘abaya’ is a long robe-like dress or cloak, usually black, typically worn by Gulf women over clothing.

Plus he moved to Africa and lived there for a really long time. I wanted [a mentor] who had the same situation, because I decided to move to Yemen. When I went and told him that, already I decided to move but I hesitated to physically resign from the government, close my company, and use all my money. Yes, I used a lot of income, because no one will help you in research. Because of the difference in the value of currency [the exchange rate] from Kuwaiti Dinars to Yemen [Riyals], I started to be more flexible in moving, in hiring people to help me in research—Yemeni locals.

When I went, I was totally hesitating: “Shall I cross this line and be the first woman from the GCC to move to Yemen?” And he [Dr. Al-Sumait] was laughing and said: “Why would you go to Yemen? I know a lot of people—men—who went to Yemen and couldn’t continue because of the tribal structure, because of the religious people, because of the fighting, because of revenge between one another—and a woman moving?!...” He was really laughing but I saw in his eyes that there was hope for me to do something.

I asked him the first time I met him: “How many years did you work in Africa, or in all your life, helping other people?” He said 47 or 48 years. I said to him: “I don’t have this time. I want you to help me by giving me advice to shorten the distance for me to make an impact. I don’t want to start from zero.” He was shocked, and I think he took me seriously because I know what I want. I started to talk: “Can I implement this project? I need the statistics, I need numbers...” He did not actually have anything written, but he had it in his brain.

He started to give me his conclusion of this humanitarian work. So, I learned face-to-face with the best mentor in the Middle East. I told him that—the last time I saw him before he passed away. He said something really strange to me—and he was sick at that time. He just left the ICU and worked two days in the office. I think he was a workaholic—he loved helping humans—a *human-aholic*. When I met him, that last time, he gave me really wise, huge, advice, which I could not understand.

I left questioning: “Why is he telling me that?” But you know what he did for me? It is like when you have a puzzle but not every piece is in the right place. What he did for me was to organize the pieces. And it worked.

The last time he saw me I said goodbye. When I was at the door to close the office, he said: “You know, girl, go. God bless you. God created me to help Africans and God created you to help Yemenis.” I wondered: “Why is he telling me all this?” I left the office, shut the door, and said: “OK, thank you.” Then he fell into a coma and passed away a few months later.

Joining Forces with Direct Aid

I started to organize all these ideas together: the international organization, laws and regulations, the local, regional, and religious. I wanted to make a difference, but in a different way. I didn't want to be extremist and I focused on helping humans no matter their religion, [skin] color—I want people to really get a better life.

This is how I started—from a local organization. The war occurred in Yemen four years ago [in 2013]. They started to attack a lot of local organizations and closed them. The initiative I started, Tamkeen, continued until 2015. Then the war in 2015 occurred between the Gulf [countries], and the Arabs, and the Yemenis themselves—the Civil War.

Direct Aid started to come to me in 2012 to take a lot of consultations. Even the foreign ministers, when they wanted to ask about anything in Yemen, they usually asked me or invited me to their meetings. I knew that Direct Aid had an office there, but I was not part of it. In 2015 they didn't know what to do with the office. They were afraid that—usually the first thing they worry about is their stuff. Also, they didn't want to implement anything that could cause problems for civilians. For example, if you get everybody together to distribute food, people could attack them by airplane or tanks. They were concerned. Plus, Direct Aid is an international organization, but at the same time it is based in Kuwait, and Kuwait is participating with Saudi Arabia, in this case in [the war in] Yemen.

I wanted to enter Yemen at that time, and I was not part of Direct Aid. We came together in a meeting and I told them: “You know what, just give me the office and I'll manage it.” But I wanted to be a volunteer manager. I did not want to be an employee, so I could make my own decisions, like where to work, what to do. Plus I have good experience—nine years working face-to-face with tribal heads, with religious people—I know how to talk to them. I started to wear *'abaya*, *niqab* [face veil], I wore gloves.⁹ I talked like them in their dialect, so they think I live in the GCC but I'm not Kuwaiti. A lot of people don't know that I'm Kuwaiti. They think I'm Yemeni but I lived in the GCC or was born in the GCC.

I proposed that I wanted to manage the office. Previously, [Direct Aid's] founder was my mentor so I knew that their values and ethics went along with my values and ethics of helping everybody

⁹ Alasousi told me she did not wear the veil when she was at university in the United States. She later started wearing the veil when she returned to Kuwait—and wears the *'abaya* and *niqab* when in Yemen.

equally no matter their background. As long as we take care of two things: staff safety and the civilians.

I encountered a lot of obstacles. I found difficulty with all the parties to the conflict, but I have good communication and I know how to negotiate with everybody. Plus they respect me SO much because I'm a woman and I'm in the field with them—not leaving the country with this very bad situation.

Yes, I find problems. People start to attack me in the news, writing articles that I am with this side, against this side—a lot of investigations are going. On the ground when I move, they follow, but I know how to negotiate with them. I started to use all the tools in the field when it comes to helping people.

I made a partnership with the local organization, with the Yemenis. Foreigners come and they decide what Yemenis want. So [it is important to] involve the people, the decision-makers, anybody who has experience, volunteers, and we started to tailor different projects. We entered areas that even international organizations don't enter because of the conflict. I find it much easier for me to get in because I speak Arabic, I'm from GCC, I'm a woman, and I know how to negotiate. Sometimes they want to scare me, and I say: "You know what, I will not leave. I will NEVER leave. If you want, deport me." Every time I say: "OK deport me," I know they cannot because Sana'a airport is closed. "If you think that I'm spying or doing something bad to your country, just be with me on a daily basis, and participate with me. And if there is something—write a report."

Tuhayta is a very dangerous area in Hudaydah Governorate. Most of the international organizations withdrew because it became like the red line between the two parties, those are attacking and those are attacking and the people are in the middle. I entered there and they said, "no, no, no, you cannot, you cannot." People don't have food, and they started to die. I entered and took a lot of videos and photos and I said: "This is your responsibility, both parties." We have to as a humanitarian field. We cannot just make propaganda that we are there. No, we have to make a real difference in those fields.

Nineteen months in a conflict zone is very hard. It's the hardest time I spent in Yemen. No food, no security, no water, no electricity. There was nothing. No health[care]. One time I got sick and I have the money but there is no medicine. I always say: "Al-Hamdulillah [Thanks Be to God], yes, I'm having fever and vomiting, but let me imagine that poor people are dying because they cannot stand the pain. And I'm lucky [Alasousi was given a painkiller]. Yes, I have pain, but their situation is worse."

Sometimes, you want to take a shower, but you have to heat the water.... When I got married [in 2010], my husband is typically Kuwaiti and having this luxurious life. To live below the poverty line, I said: “You have to, you have to live their life.” He said: “No, if God will punish, he will punish me and you because we are punishing ourselves when we can take an airplane and live in our country.”

That was four years ago [2014], but now he’s used to it. Sometimes when I’m tired and I don’t want to go to the field, he says: “*Yallah, yallah* [come on], we have to go.” So, he became the supporter, when at the beginning he was totally shocked. This is how life changed.

People start to believe in you. I don’t consider myself managing an office in a conflict zone. I believe I’m a leader, because, even if I’m here two months, the office is working, the project is working. Even when the civil war occurred five years ago [2013], the whole team is working. Sometimes I find it difficult, but you can manage wherever if you believe in your vision—that helping people is my mission in life.

Whatever I learned, I started to mentor others—by guidelines. How to work, how to sustain an organization. We see a lot of youth initiatives in Kuwait in the past five years [since 2013].¹⁰ I started to train a lot of them—special training called Tamkeen Empowered Civil Society. This is how to take an initiative to become sustainable later on through establishing local NGOs or to work under the umbrella of an existing NGO.

On Accountability and Transparency in Humanitarian Work

Over the past seven years [since 2011], the laws have become much better. They started to allow registration for initiatives under the Ministry of Social Affairs. You can have an account, you can collect money, internal laws [in Kuwait] monitor the money so when someone accuses Kuwait or any country [of financing terrorism], the government is watching where the money goes and what is the impact. Even the donors became educated because of all the propaganda against the local organizations: “Where is our money? What did you do with our money?” If they give for education, they want their money in education. If they donate for water, they want their money to go to water [projects]. They started to follow the reports and to become very aware.

¹⁰ Kuwait established a new Ministry of State for Youth Affairs in response to the 2011 youth-led “Arab Spring” protests. Volunteering thus became a state-sanctioned activity that provided purpose, prevented radicalization and unrest, and made moral Kuwaiti citizens.

Things are changing and getting better. If we don't monitor the money, then people will misuse it. Before, we faced a lot of people collecting money for *da'wa* or other things and they used it against [the causes for which] people actually donated. They started to make a bad reputation for Islam, a bad reputation for GCC countries, a bad reputation for Middle Eastern countries—that everybody is a terrorist because of those organizations. They found there are foundations or organizations established with two faces: one face to collect for good projects and the other to implement a different project—we don't know where is the money for part of their project. We will not accept it because this is not why we donate or help people as a Muslim or a woman or a human. We don't want people to kill each other, we don't want people to do bad things with the money.

We donate, or give our time—you know donations include either money or volunteering physically, to help. Those two things you give willingly—you don't want anything in return. If people give because they don't have time and they use your money and your reputation—this is not an organization's reputation, it becomes YOUR organization. There are rare cases now [of misusing funds] because the laws are more strict and [organizations] are monitored. The whole world is facing a problem—it is not only the Muslim organizations who are collecting money and doing other things. In the past 10 years I worked in different regions, in the Middle East, in Africa—I found also international organizations who take money, and they take kids, sell organs, [traffic] kids for prostitution, take them to other countries (or in the same country) to become weapons in this world. Nobody talks about it. All of us have to be careful when it comes to donations. I also advise foreigners—not only Arabs or Muslims—when they donate for a case, they have to follow up. Where is their donation going? They have to have reports.

On Changes in Humanitarian Work in Yemen Since 2015

The difference is between when I started as a personal initiative and developed as a local organization then I moved to an international organization. With the personal initiative, there is a need inside of you and there is a case, but the case wasn't very accurate. It becomes accurate when I started to have strategies and research. In a local organization I could not fulfill all of the needs because not everybody will donate to local organizations. Sometimes it is hard to get donations from international organizations or from regional organizations like here in

Kuwait because I'm based in Yemen. I was not a Kuwaiti organization— [Tamkeen] was a Kuwaiti-Yemeni organization licensed in Yemen. When I moved to Direct Aid their system is international with a lot of monitors and organized work. They have a vision for five to ten years from now and a huge team working, about 6,000 plus [employees] I believe.

[ML: And one woman.]

I invaded this world, but I see now two women [at Direct Aid Headquarters], actually, within a year. Although the person who helped Dr. Abdul Rahman Al-Sumait, the founder, and encouraged him to do the whole thing was his wife. She was the supporter for all his missions. Now, we [women] are not only donating, we are decision-makers.

The difference between the work I did before the war, let's say four to five years ago, was entirely development projects. Ten percent goes to clothes, food, seasonal projects, or relief.¹¹ Now, 40–50% goes to relief and 50% goes to development. We don't want that. If you buy food for 1–2 million dollars a year, for example, it is better if you build five schools with the same amount. Or have thousands of scholarships for girls in Yemen, which is preferable to giving only food or helping them with SMS or microfinance projects.

Plus, the amount of money has become five to ten times more. [Direct Aid] is based in Kuwait, but it is an international organization. Like most of the organizations in Kuwait, they don't have offices based in all the countries they work in. We have both local offices plus local partners [NGOs, government or private sector]. This is the difference between Direct Aid as an international organization and other local organizations. The strategy is very focused. They are developing a lot of tools and methodology because we care about the impact more than collecting money. Even if you check all over Kuwait and ask which is the strongest organization in collecting money, they will tell you Direct Aid. Their last campaign last month collected 2,500,000 KD [Kuwaiti Dinars, more than 8 million USD] in less than 24 hours.... Our work is very transparent to all parties [in Yemen] and we don't give to one side against the other side. I think that is how Direct Aid still exists in Yemen.

On the Origins of Direct Aid's Work in Yemen

[Direct Aid] got the license [to work in Yemen] in December 2012. They started operations and established an office in January 2013. So, it is a

¹¹ Seasonal projects include aid during Islamic holidays, such as food packages during Ramadan and meat distribution during Eid al-Adha, the festival of the sacrifice.

newly born office in Yemen, established after Africa for a reason—because a lot of Africans pass through Yemen to go to other countries or settle in Yemen. When they did research, they found that Yemen is one of the countries affected by refugees from Africa.

Before I became part of their team, [Direct Aid] concentrated ONLY on water projects. When I headed the office in 2015, we opened different sectors: education, health, relief, seasonal, and still 50% of our work is water. Other projects are in education and helping people to establish their own projects—business, health awareness, anti-Lyme [disease], cataract campaigns. We opened different sectors because I implemented those projects before I became part of Direct Aid. When the war occurred, they said: “Only relief,” and I told them: “No, no, no—I’ll go and study the whole situation and then I will have my own plan, propose it to you, and if you agree then allocate a budget for that.” They agreed. It was seriously difficult because of the war. But Alhamdulillah [Thanks Be to God] they implemented by 2015 only six projects and in 2016 when I headed the office, we completed 47 projects. It is a huge shift for the office.

The Yemen case is different [from Direct Aid’s work in Africa]. They understand and respect the Yemen situation and I’m so happy that they are still operating in Yemen because with all the problems and constraints and obstacles occurring on the ground, a lot of international organizations closed their offices and moved either to Aden or closed totally until the country settled. There are some in Djibouti [working in Yemen]. There are a few offices with headquarters still in Sana’a, and we are one of them.

On Staying Long-Term in Yemen

Of course [*laughing*] [I will stay long-term in Yemen]. I don’t think I will be settled anytime soon in Kuwait, but it’s really difficult with having family and also settling in a conflict zone. We’re hoping—and I believe the situation is getting better.

Before the conflict, when the airport was open in Sana’a, I didn’t have any problems. I came every month, I gave my consultations to a lot of GCC countries, to the Middle East. I did not have any problems except the duration of travel, which was really heavy on me. With my base in Yemen and my work in most of the governorates, I give consultations to everybody ... [Kuwait Red Crescent Society] contacted me personally to know more about where [the biggest need] is. Even the [Kuwaiti] Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacts me all the time about, is it true, for example, that this area is affected with cholera? Do we have

safe passage from this area to that area? Sometimes they tell me, “we cannot implement [a certain project] in this area. Can you cover this area or implement something on our behalf?”¹² ... Being in Yemen is very important. People from different organizations, local and regional organizations, they started to contact me [and asked]: “Can we work in Yemen?” I said: “Yes, it’s the right time to help other people.” Because a lot of people started to withdraw their money, so when they see me physically there it gives the message telling everybody it is okay to be in Yemen.

Yes it is hard. Not everybody will accept to put themselves in jeopardy. But I believe my message in life is different than others. If I’m paid, I will not do it. NO WAY, because if this is a job I would definitely quit [*laughing*]. As a volunteer, I believe in my vision and mission for the Middle East—not only for Yemen—to change the conception about women making a difference in the Middle East. Yemen is not a GCC country—it is supposed to be, but making a difference and being a model, these are the things I am doing right now. It is not only about a job and implementing a project and having a tele-video with a drama or making a happy video so that we change a life. No, it is about giving other people this idea.

On Challenges Women Face Working in Development

We don’t want to talk about only the GCC countries or the Middle East. How many foreign women are living abroad who do the same? Few. It is a difficult path. It is not about your background. People who are working in this field, they have a mission and vision in life to implement. What I always advise women is that you take the tools and implement them in your region, in your area at the beginning, your country, your governorate, your state. Take this case to make a difference because it is like a chain, like a marathon, it is a stick [baton]—you give to me, I give to you—and we are all working to make this world a beautiful place.

There are a lot of obstacles. You have to have education on how to negotiate, you have to know about humanitarian law, you have to know the Geneva [Convention]. You have to be educated in the field before you decide to move, not just jump and move to a country or conflict zone. This is not an easy mission.

¹² Direct Aid announced on March 7, 2020, that the NGO is partnering with the General Authority of Endowments in Kuwait on a strategic water project in Yemen (Direct Aid, n.d.-b).

Maybe not even living physically but just educating other people, the locals, how to do it—this is how you will make a difference. Maybe you can go back and forth. Yes, I believe physically you have to be there, to make a difference you have to cooperate with them on a daily basis. It is not about, yes, you go, but you live in a fancy hotel and you take some pictures in the villages of the poor, and we cry and we take a video and we come back and write and that's it. And we live our life. This is not living with them on a daily basis, living the harsh life that they live—that makes a difference. Yes, God gave us a different energy, let's say I can bear this life but other people cannot.

I advise a lot of people to donate their time more than their money. Money is important because some people cannot [give of their time], but it is like we continue [to complement] each other. You give money, I give time, my knowledge. Every knowledge is important, media is important, English is important, engineers are important, doctors are important. Even kids are important now. Everybody is important in this world to make a difference. You need a lot of stages to take this decision, to volunteer for your country, your place, your region. We have a lot of volunteers who go and help, like in Turkey, in Jordan, in Lebanon, but don't physically live there. They go—they start to build buildings for the refugees, they help them with education, shelter, they go back and forth. This is really important.

But moving is difficult. I advise everybody to volunteer, because volunteering is not changing the life of others, it is changing your life. It is making YOU more happy, teaching you a lot of things about being patient, appreciating things, appreciating the creations of God. Even when I moved to Yemen, every time I come to Kuwait I say: "Thank God we have a street, thank God we have people collecting the garbage, thank God we have a curb, thank God we have plants, thank God we sleep safe and wake up not afraid of a bomb. Or thank God when we get sick we have a hospital, thank God we have medicine, thank God we have people listening to us, thank God we can see people we love. In Palestine people they love are across the wall. People now in Syria or even [domestic workers in Kuwait], they are here and their loved ones are in another country. Volunteering is not changing only the life of others; it is changing us more than others.

We used to [have volunteers going to Yemen] but not now. A lot of people used to come, donate, help. I had a lot of doctors, Kuwaiti women doctors came and implemented surgeries. A lot of women came to help me from different regions: Qatar, Bahrain, Emirates, but not anymore. We don't have an airport; the situation is difficult. But they are still donating now because they cannot come physically. I would love for

them to come because seeing and living the life is different than when only I go and send them videos and photos. I'm used to it.

Update on the Yemen Civil War and COVID-19 (Written by Marwa Bakabas)

Direct Aid posted on Instagram on April 20, 2020 an interview clip with Maali Alasousi on Kuwaiti television talking about humanitarian concerns in Yemen, including the arrival of coronavirus, and requesting donations (Direct Aid, 2020). We include a summary of that here, translated from the Arabic by Marwa Bakabas.

Maali Alasousi: The topic of relief and humanitarian security in Yemen before Corona [COVID-19] was difficult. The arrival of items, access to support [aid materials/relief], access to medication—a lot of projects are more different than usual because we are in a war zone. This area, of course, has problems that are different from other countries. There is the spread of uncommon diseases. We have cholera, we have malaria, we have bacteria, we have the ill—unfortunately [diseases] that have been eradicated from other countries, there are a lot in Yemen. There is also the accumulation of social problems, economic and health problems, and the deterioration of state matters.

Right now—the situation before [the coronavirus pandemic] was a tragedy, now, if we look at these countries, especially the places of war or the places that are poor such as Africa, it is as though they were delivered a collective death sentence. The truth is, there is no medicine, there are no machines in the hospitals. Even if you have money, there is no certainty you will survive. The health sector has collapsed.

The audio clip concluded with Alasousi telling the television host that, thank God, Kuwait was prepared for quarantine and able to organize isolation units, but poor countries do not have this capacity.

Today, Yemen continues to face challenges as a result of the ongoing civil war, now in its sixth year, leaving the country in economic, political, and social turmoil. In 2019, the United Nations reported that 20 million Yemenis were food insecure, 10 million suffered from extreme hunger, 24 million require some form of humanitarian assistance, 17.8 million lack access to safe water and sanitation, and 19.7 million lack

access to adequate healthcare services (UN News, 2019, linking to OCHA, 2018). Yemenis have also been experiencing heightened physical and emotional stress for an extended period of time. This situation has worsened with blockades of ports and borders hindering vital supplies entering the country, such as food and medicine (see Laud & Robinson, 2020). These blockades are a result of a geopolitical proxy war between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, believed to be backed by Iran. Yemen's historic north-south divide intensified the politicization of borders, now controlled by multiple actors and different factions.¹³ Yemen's long-time marginalization by the international community is another factor contributing to the country's vulnerability.

All of these systems of oppression have resulted in Yemen's food insecurity, disease outbreaks, poverty, and now its failed response to the novel coronavirus global pandemic. Having suffered from the worst cholera outbreak in modern history, in addition to chronic malnutrition, many Yemenis are already living on the brink of famine. According to media outlets, COVID-19 began to slowly spread throughout the country where destabilized health facilities had been destroyed by mass-casualty attacks, leaving medical centers and hospitals barely operational. With limited access to facilities that can diagnose or medically treat disease outbreaks, Yemeni civilians are dying daily. Many of those deaths are suspected to be unconfirmed cases of COVID-19 (see Stone, 2020). Political parties have threatened, injured, abducted, detained and killed medical personnel, and as a result many medical professionals have fled Yemen (see Nasser, 2020). As the buildup of fatalities are statistically documented in Aden (in the south of Yemen), Houthis have covered up the number of suspected cases in the northern capital of Sana'a, where those sick with the virus are stigmatized (see Al-Rawhani, 2020).

The global pandemic has exposed inequalities worldwide. In Yemen, where gross international humanitarian violations have been committed, the pandemic has been only one of the country's several crippling health concerns (see Nasser, 2020). Vulnerable states, such as Yemen and other developing countries, are at an additional disadvantage due to lack of access to basic services. This leads to a multitude of challenges for Yemen, where the complexity of existing humanitarian struggles as well as the politics of COVID-19 and other aid assistance to the country must be considered. Following the 2018 assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the United States has been more

¹³ Groups in Yemen include the government—led by President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi (from exile), the Houthis, the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC), the Saudi-led coalition, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and the Salafis.

critically evaluating its role in the devastating war in Yemen. In March 2020, in the early stages of the pandemic, the Trump Administration cut aid to Yemen—including healthcare—citing interference of Houthi rebels (See LaForgia, 2020; Kasinof, 2020). Yemen faces the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today, which has not received the international attention it deserves or the aid Yemenis desperately need. The efforts of Maali Alasousi and NGOs such as Direct Aid will remain crucial as the country continues in a state of urgency with disease, poverty, and now COVID-19.

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