

## Redefining `Asabiyyah for a Muslim Unity

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### Abstract

*Ethnocentrism, nationalism, tribalism, racism, all these have brought about a ghastly and gruesome effect to the unity of the Muslim nations. Right after the colonialist's return, it was not but ideological spirits like nationalism, secularism, capitalism, alike, which blew a deathblow to the interests of Islamic unity. On the other hand, it is also wisely framed that these are all outsourced from the concepts of tribalism, ethnocentrism, and racism, which are byproducts of the very concept of `asabiyyah of the early jahiliyyah era.*

*This paper discusses the concept of `asabiyyah and attempts to redefine it for a Muslim unity based on the tawhidic worldview.*

Key words: `Asabiyyah, Muslim unity, Ummah, Islamic civilization, introspection.

### Prologue

Islam has been facing the most crucial time of its history for last few decades, and the Muslims being victimized as a result of the recent events that are taking place around the world. Yet, Muslims are not ready to face the challenges, at least not until now. Due to the massive ruin in the thoughts and minds of the Muslims, many have come up with demands to unite the Muslims together. In fact, it has become one of the most significant and momentous obligations of the time. From Rashid Ridha to Said Nursi and Mawdudi, everyone had made their calls for unity of the Muslim *ummah*.

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The division of the *ummah* by devastating creed of Ethnicity and Nationalism as implanted by the colonial powers, requires a counter defeat with the united approach of the *ummah*.

The core of the Muslim unity, as learnt from the civilizational history, is a common sense of collectivity, cohesiveness and integrity. Since, Islam demands for a worldview, which is transcendent, divine, and based on the revelational framework of nature and human, the unity as we talk about is, naturally, a spiritual one. It is a unity that not only unites under the same banner, but guides toward a harmonious world for the whole of humankind. The spiritual sense of unity intrigues the human psyche and emotions, which defines the motion of human civilization, restricting it from being strayed.

*'Asabiyyah* is a feeling of unity, morally judged to be ethnic-based. However, the core of the famous concept discussed by the great philosopher Ibn Khaldun could be reshaped within a framework, which in turn would produce the desired unity. As this concept is morally shaped by religion, a universal phenomenon, and is beyond the limitations of blood relation, its redefinition is, thus, never ludicrous.

### Conceptualizing *'Asabiyyah*

*'Asabiyyah* is one of the most significant concepts in Ibn Khaldun's works, and has been thought to be the most important factor in the development of society. The word *'Asabiyyah* is a derivative from the Arabic root "*'asab*," which means 'to bind;' to bind peoples in groups. *'Usbatun*<sup>1</sup>, *'Isbatun* or *'Isabatun* are also derivatives of the same root, which means group (*majmu'ah*). While *ta'assub* demands a unity of thought and actions against desires, wishes and wants, no matter be it right or wrong.<sup>2</sup>

Although *'asabiyyah* holds an immense significant role in Ibn Khaldun's literatures, he did not go deep to define the term vividly. He might not have felt it necessary to describe such a proverbial term of his time.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Simon quotes Khemiri who pointed out that Ibn Khaldun uses this term as a technical one, yet frequent use of it does not permit a flexible translation as De Slane's.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it should be noted that

what Ibn Khaldun meant by *'asabiyyah* is a decisive feature that functions momentarily in human history as a motor of social change.

So far, the closest connotations for the term used are mainly 'solidarity,' 'group cohesion,' and 'group feeling.' Since the Arabic term if translated into English, would not give the exact and adequate meaning, Simon suggests keeping the term as it is.<sup>5</sup>

Although *'asabiyyah* was found in the very early stage of Islamic literatures; as early as the Hadith literature, for it being a distinctive quality of the pre-Islamic Bedouin tribalism; it held a negative sense of perception which was disapproved of in Islam<sup>6</sup>. Rejection of *'asabiyyah* in the early Islamic literature were mainly due to its repulsive features; which conceptualize close-knit of people, economic cohesiveness and determine their thoughts and actions by the tribal ideology. It is more a blindly following the chieftain of a tribe. *'Asabiyyah* was also an instrument of defense and aggression.<sup>7</sup> It was viewed in a modified version in the later Islamic thoughts, as Simon thinks, where we find two concepts of *'asabiyyah*, one being negative in nature, like fanaticism and prejudices of that of the Bedouins, and it is nullified in Islam. And the other one possesses some positive concept, like bravery and forbearance.<sup>8</sup>

*'Asabiyyah*, as Fida Mohammad contends, is a "we-feeling" among people, which is the utmost base, and a fundamental criterion for the survival of a political or a social organization. It is not just group solidarity; it is the merged effect of the group solidarity with a political determination to power and organized leadership.<sup>9</sup>

Baali refutes the argument of Gellner<sup>10</sup> and other scholars claiming that *'asabiyyah* is confined to nomadic tribalism of the Bedouins. He argues, Ibn Khaldun used it as a foundation of historical explanation of social life in nomadic and urban societies, which is *'asabiyyah*-centric and describes the shifts between *badawa* (nomadism) and *hadhara* (urbanism).<sup>11</sup> In describing *'asabiyyah*, Baali<sup>12</sup> conferred the following characteristics of the term:

1. It is not inevitably a blood related concept, although many propose so.

2. It is natural and universal. And not confined to the Arabs only, as Ibn Khaldun pointed out the *'asabiyyah* of non-Arabs, like the Persians, Jews, Assyrians, Greeks and others.
3. *'Asabiyyah* and economy of a nation are intertwined. The economy of a *badawa* society changes proportionately with the change of a society to a *hadhara* status.
4. *'Asabiyyah* plays an immense influence on polity of a society. A dynasty evolves with the cohesiveness of *'asabiyyah* in a society. It is *'asabiyyah* which manipulates leadership. Fida Mohammad's arguments place 'leadership' and 'power' as contributing factors to *'asabiyyah*, while the same factor, i.e. 'power,' if misused, turns to bring about dissolution of *'asabiyyah* which gears to the downfall of the society.<sup>13</sup>
5. *'Asabiyyah* also ties with "religion" for a higher social solidarity. Ibn Khaldun exemplifies the colossal success of the Arabs, being tied in unity of Islam. Fida Mohammad unmistakably judged Ibn Khaldun's concept of *'asabiyyah* being influenced by religion or ideology, as 'a factor,' and not 'the factor.'<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, Fida avows that excessive zeal for luxury and wealth, leading to corruption, plays vital roles behind the downfall of *'asabiyyah* of a society.<sup>15</sup>

However, Ibn Khaldun, although prescribed his concept of *'asabiyyah* as the factor behind civilizational growth and disgrace, yet believed that there could be dynasties established without the basis of an "*'asabiyyatic*" bond. He gave examples from the experience of Egypt and Syria, where there happens to be a very few cases of revolts and seditions.<sup>16</sup>

Although Baali cites Spain as Ibn Khaldun's example, it seems that later in *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun affirmed that the Spanish ruler was not without a group support. He rather started with one, but it was a small group which was sufficient for him at that time.<sup>17</sup>

It could be concluded that *'asabiyyah* is a psychological and emotional factor, a mutual understanding, which holds people together united, bound, and keeps away from revolts, riots and mutinies. It is never a necessity for there to be a blood relation; as it binds people on the basis

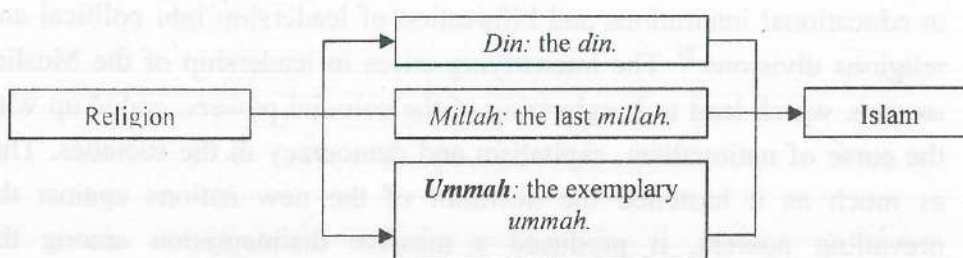
of religions and ideologies, polity, economy, culture, and approval of a common leadership. And the core of it is a sense of ‘commonality,’ a spiritual unity.

**Ummah**

The Arabic term “*Ummah*,” can be traced through various roots: Akkadian (*Ummatu*), Sumerian (*Ummān*), Aramaic (*Ummetha*), and Hebrew (*Umma*). In all these languages, the term remains very similar in meaning.<sup>18</sup> Arabic root of it is *umm*, meaning ‘mother,’ and thus it denotes unity of origin and the centre. This is the most reasonable and valid meaning of the term, despite of differences of opinions in its etymology.<sup>19</sup>

Qur’anic usage of *umam* (pl.) or *ummah* denotes a group of people who form a religious, moral, social, and political community. And occasionally it connotes ‘a nation,’ ‘a people,’ ‘a culture,’ ‘a civilization;’ but central to all these groups of people is the idea of one binding religio-moral system of law and values.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, *ummah* is meant as ‘religio-moral and socio-political community.’<sup>21</sup> But Yusuf Ali prefers using ‘brotherhood’ for *ummah*, instead of ‘community,’ ‘nation,’ ‘race,’ or ‘people.’<sup>22</sup>

Aasi also denotes *ummah* as a synonym of the terms *din* and *millah*, which in fact, in their perfect sense have been identified with *Islam*. Besides, these three words are employed for the term ‘religion’ in the Qur’ān.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the whole picture turns to be as following:



[Figure: Meaning of ‘religion’ in the Qur’ān.]

On the locale context of the Western notions of race-addiction and race-orientation, Islam comes up with an ‘anathema’ for them. Islam demands human civilizations to purge ethnocentrism, racism and racial

bigotry. The concept of *Ummah* is a deathblow to the Western notions of ethnic bound societies. Qur'ân valiantly declares:

*Verily, this brotherhood of yours is a single brotherhood, and I am your Lord and Cherisher: therefore serve Me (and no other.)*<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, Islam acknowledges ethnicities as long as it is for reference.<sup>25</sup> But Islam is vehemently against the exaltation of ethnicity and ethnocentrism. And *Ummah* is a universal brotherhood, a collective community, which surpasses all geographic, territorial, ethnic, racial, or any boundaries set, be it by language, colour or location. The focus of identity in the *ummah* is the Islamic ideology and is determined by its divine mission; as Ismail Faruqi cites it as 'translocal,' 'transracial,' and 'transtatal.'<sup>26</sup> The Islamic concept of *ummah* is neither a 'chosen' people nor a 'saved' community as that of the Jews and Christians. Indeed. It is the *ummah wahidah* of the believers by the virtue of final *din*; *din al-fitrah*, a community by decision, not by nature. It is anti-ethnocentric, universal, totalistic, and mission oriented in nature.

*Ummah* was not a new concept abruptly emerging from the time of the final Prophet صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ; rather than earlier people had their own respective *ummah*. Mumtaz Ali suggests that rather than operative forces, the inherent elements of the *ummah* of the Prophet صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ were: faith, action, organization and leadership. And also the decline of the *ummah* is irrefutably due to division in religion and politics, diarchy in educational institutions and bifurcation of leadership into political and religious divisions.<sup>27</sup> The intensifying crises in leadership of the Muslim *ummah*, which lead to burglarizing of the colonial powers, ended up with the curse of nationalism, capitalism and democracy in the societies. This as much as it hastened the downfall of the new nations against the prevailing powers, it produced a massive disintegration among the Muslims.

There have always been hues and cries to unite the Muslims from various levels. From Iqbal, Hasanul-Banna, Mawdudi to the contemporary scholars alike are articulating the same voice of 'unity.' Yet, it remained a greater issue with lesser remedy.

### ***Ummatic Unity: Can 'Asabiyyah Help?***

Despite the on going crises and deathblows to Muslim unity process, there are glad tidings and common grounds for the Muslims to unite. The fundamentals of *Tawheed*, the unity of the whole Muslim community in terms of a faith, a conviction rather, in terms a common guide, a constitution, in terms of a common message renders a 'commonality', a 'we-feeling,' and a divine inspiration to be together.

The unity among the Muslim community is not solely a materialistic one, as that of nationalism, or tribalism. Nor it is a 'blind imitation' with irrational convictions. Indeed, it is a spiritual feeling to unite, a divine transcendent to commune. The spiritual aspect of the Islamic concept of unity nullifies unity based on nation-states, material grounds, and ethnicities. ASEAN, NATO, African Union, the EU and alliances alike are not the examples of Muslim Unity; in fact, Muslim unity is a unique example of itself. The *khulafa al-rashidun* by their exemplary *khilafah* could only be the model of Islamic unity.

Since spiritualism is the core (*ruh*) of Islam, there can be no unity devoid of it. And thus, developing a spiritual 'we-feeling' among the Muslim states would be the base for any unity. It is more likely to name it a 'spiritual *'asabiyyah*,' or an 'Islamic *'asabiyyah*.' An *'asabiyyah* based primarily on the fundamentals of *tawhidic* worldview, shaped by a common cooperative goal, and sustained through analogous actions. It is more inclined towards the positive *'asabiyyah* mentioned by Simon, rather than the negative *'asabiyyah* of the Bedouins.<sup>28</sup>

It requires an intimate acceptance of a universal aspiration, a firm and mutual relationship, a tenable agreement to sustain it. It is the time for the Muslim world to go beyond all the disagreements, and work for a collective mission, with a spiritual *'asabiyyah*.

Mutual trade and businesses among the Muslim nations, exchange of education and technology, collective approach towards technological transfer, cooperatively bridging the lapses among the Muslim states primarily and then the other states are some of the strategies that Muslim states may take. Massive reconstruction in the cultural arena to regain a chaste Islamic cultural identity, contributions to Islamic literatures,

modification of Muslim media to Islamic media for an Islamic presence are similarly significant.

Educational advancement projects should be taken in hand, where there would be a *taqwa* based learning, revolving around the dynamism of *Tawhidic* worldview. A more comprehensive curriculum seems to be at apex for the Muslim *ummah*, considering the current backwardness in science and technology, education and training of the Muslim world.

It should not be a dream to come true that the Muslims are united. Creation of a spiritual 'we-feeling' among the Muslims would ignite the speed towards unity, with a common goal.

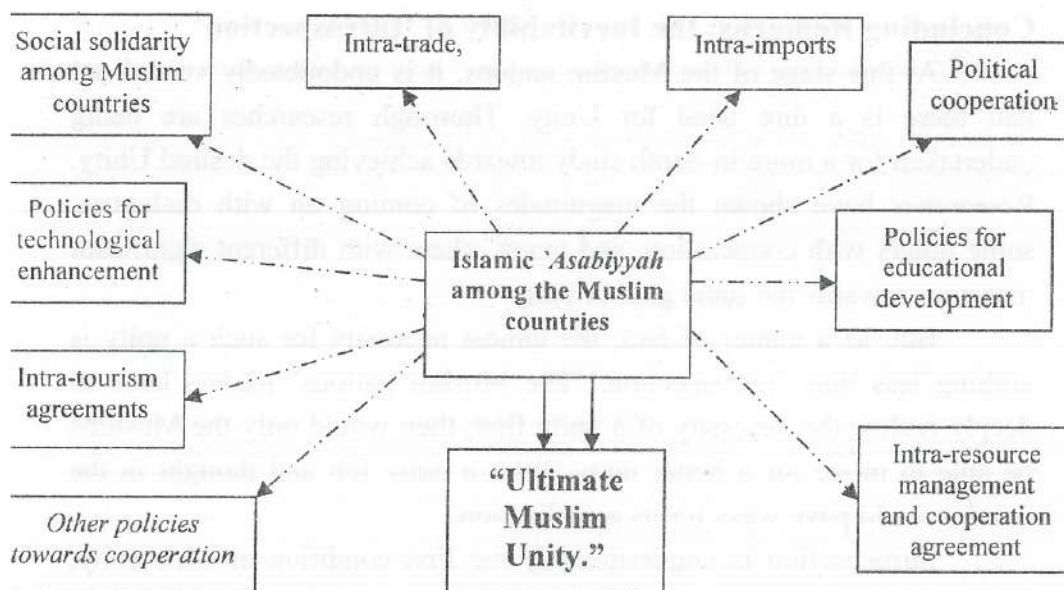
### **Paradigm of an "Islamic 'Asabiyyah"**

Although Ibn Khaldun did not discuss about "Islamic '*asabiyyah*'", a very new-looking term, Ibn Khaldun's works were available on religious '*asabiyyah*'. As W. Ra'ees refers to the three types of '*asabiyyah*' in the context of political affiliation, namely: animal, rational and religious.<sup>29</sup> Ra'ees refers to Ibn Khaldun, to argue that the third type of '*asabiyyah*' is a feeling developed in man governed by Divine Light or Divine Law, and it leads to the existence of a regime whose ends are both mundane and other-worldly.

Moreover, Ibn Khaldun's works further discussed the influence of '*asabiyyah*' on the Arabs, shaped through a religious feeling, paving them the way to the apex of civilization<sup>30</sup>.

Likewise, the paradigms of the "Islamic '*asabiyyah*'" among the Muslim countries, do not only include a religious feeling, but also entices incentives for material benefits. It enthuses towards intra-trade and intra-import among Muslim countries, political cooperation, social solidarity, policies and strategies towards educational and technological enhancements, and technological transfers from developed nations towards the developing nations, which would ultimately lead to a 'meta-regional' bond among the Muslim nations and communities. It could be better shown with diagram in the following:





[Figure: The *'asabiyyatic* bonds enthusing towards cooperation among the Muslim nations, which ultimately would form a Muslim Unity.]

As the West has already declared its aspiration to continue the hegemony over other civilizations, Islam, as proposed to answer the threat, is by only the means of a 'holistic unity.' Hunter sees the possibility of an Islamic response to the challenge of the West only through a viable economic and political counterweight, which would induce Islam to defy the West.<sup>31</sup> It vehemently identifies the necessity of an incentive oriented Muslim unity, which is primarily based on the *'asabiyyah* of Islamic spirit, the 'Islamic *'asabiyyah*.'

On the other hand, Khurshid Ahmad's framework for a Muslim Economic Union (MEU) undoubtedly indicates the significance of an economic cooperation among the Muslim nations. He argues<sup>32</sup> that the Muslims are occupying around 20% of the world's land area, a strategic stance between Asia and European hemisphere. Furthermore, 60% of the world petroleum reserves belong to the Muslim nations, with abundance in natural resources like gold, iron, copper, tin, rubber, jute etc. Besides, human resources are not short in any means.<sup>33</sup> According to the Department of Energy, Saudi Arabia is estimated to gain \$154 billion in oil revenues in 2006 alone.<sup>34</sup>

**Concluding Remarks: the Inevitability of ‘Introspection’**

At this stage of the Muslim nations, it is undoubtedly voiced out that there is a dire need for Unity. Thorough researches are being undertaken for a more in-depth study towards achieving the desired Unity. Researches have shown the magnitudes of coming up with dialogues, some others with cooperation, and many others with different significant measures towards the same goal of unity.

But, as a matter of fact, the utmost necessity for such a unity is nothing less than ‘introspection.’ The Muslim nations’ leaders have to deeply realize the necessity of a unity first; then would only the Muslims be able to move for a better unity. With a unity felt and thought in the minds, would pave ways for its actualization.

Introspection is unquestionably the first condition of such unity, followed by sincere actions and commitments towards its actualization. In the Qur’ân on ‘*Tazkiyatun-Nafs*’ has been highly emphasized, which does not only demand purity (*tazkiyah*) of the self, rather a deep understanding of one's own-self first.

Hence, there could be ultimately no Muslim unity without an introspective nature of the Muslim nations’ leaders, sincere willingness, followed by commitment of thoughts and actions.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> As it appears in the Qur'ân, Sura Yusuf (12): 14, which reads "They said: "If the wolf where to devour him while we are (so large) a party, then should we indeed (first) have perished ourselves!" See: Ali, A. Yusuf, *The Holy Qur'an: Translation and Commentary*, Amanah Corporation, Maryland, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Farhat, Yousuf Shukri, *Mu'jamut-Tullab*, Darul-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 2005, p.395

<sup>3</sup> See Baali, Fuad, *Society, State, and Urbanism: Ibn Khaldun's Sociological Thought*, State University of New York Press, Albany, N.Y., 1988, p.43.

<sup>4</sup> De Slane habitually translates as "*esprit de corps, famille, parti, force*" etc.

<sup>5</sup> Simon, Heinrich, *Ibn Khaldun's Science of Human Culture*, Fuad Baali (Tr.), Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, Pakistan, 1978, pp.73-4.

<sup>6</sup> Please see: *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith:3440, *Ibn Majah*, Hadith:3938 and 2625, *Sunan Nasa'i*, Hadith:4045-6, and *Sunan Abi Daud*, Hadith:4456

<sup>7</sup> Gustave, Von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1971, p.119

<sup>8</sup> Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 69

<sup>9</sup> Mohammad, Fida, "Ibn Khaldun's Theory of Social Change: A comparison with Hegel, Marx and Durkheim, in *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences (AJISS)*, vol. 15, no.2, 1998, AMSS and IIIT, Virginia, p.37

<sup>10</sup> Gellner, Ernest, *Muslim Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, pp.17-20

<sup>11</sup> Baali, *op. cit.*, p.45

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.45-8

<sup>13</sup> Mohammad, Fida, *op. cit.* p.39

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.39-40

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Rosenthal, Franz (Tr.), Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1986, pp.334-5

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.336

<sup>18</sup> Mardini, Souran, "The Concept of Islamic Ummah in the Sources of Islam: The Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad", in *The Islamic Ummah*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1988, pp. 29-30.

<sup>19</sup> See: Aasi, Ghulam Haider, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Hazm's Kitab al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa wa al-Nihal*, IIIT and Islamic Research Institute, Pakistan, 1999, p.9

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2

<sup>22</sup> Ali, A. Yusuf, *op. cit.*, p. 843, 883 etc.

<sup>23</sup> Aasi, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2

<sup>24</sup> Al-Qur'ân, Surah al-Anbiyaa (21): 92, See: Ali, A. Yusuf, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Al-Qur'ân, Surah al-Hujurat (49):13 reads: "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) or male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other..."see: *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Ismail R. Faruqi, *Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life*, Washington D.C. 1984, pp. 124-5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27-8.

<sup>28</sup> Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 69

<sup>29</sup> Wahabuddin Ra'ees, "The Role of 'Asabiyyah and Religion in Building Political Institutions", Abushouk, A. I., *Ibn Khaldun and Muslim Historiography*, International Islamic University Malaysia, 2003, pp.34-40.

<sup>30</sup> Mohammad, Fida, *op. cit.*, p.39, also see: Baali, *op. cit.*, pp.45-8.

<sup>31</sup> Shireen T. Hunter, *The Future of Islam and the West: Clash of Civilization or Peaceful Co-Existence?* Centre for Strategic and International Studies, London, 1998, p.73.

<sup>32</sup> This was a report of 1994, by now, many of the statistics are to change and take a new shape, and believed to have improved conditions of the Muslim nations.

<sup>33</sup> Khurshid Ahmad, *Islamic Approach to Development: Some Policy Implications*, Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad, 1994, pp.43-44.

<sup>34</sup> Rachel Ehrenfeld, "Saudi Charity Begins...Nowhere," *FrontPage Magazine*, July 7, 2006, published online: <http://www.frontpagemag.com>

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