



Islamic Relief Worldwide

Building a Reputational
Risk Management Strategy
in the face of Islamophobia-
motivated attacks



Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) is an independent humanitarian and development organisation, which has been serving humanity since 1984.

They have an active presence in over 40 countries across the globe, and strive to make the world a better and fairer place for millions of the three billion people still living in poverty. Their global family includes national offices, affiliated partners and field offices. They work to enable communities to mitigate the effect of disasters, prepare for their occurrence and respond by providing relief, protection and recovery. They promote integrated development and environmental custodianship with a focus on sustainable livelihoods, and they support the marginalised and vulnerable to voice their needs and address root causes of poverty through advocacy.

Overview

Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) has often faced disproportionate hostility and scrutiny because of its Islamic faith and framing. However, it faced a new level of threat in 2014 when it was designated as a terrorist organisation or front – first by Israel, and then by the United Arab Emirates. It responded to these designations swiftly and as robustly as possible, but the organisation felt that it was constantly on the back foot during this fight. Three years after the designations, prompted by fresh reputational

risks, IRW decided to adopt a more proactive approach, and invested in developing a new strategy to manage reputational risk. The strategy was backed with new infrastructure and resources to ensure they were in a stronger position, and more firmly on the front foot. This stood them in good stead when they faced reputational threats further down the line. Thanks to their strategy they were able to move beyond fire-fighting.



Organisation takes action

Trigger

In June 2014 the Government of Israel designated Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) as an 'unauthorised association' in the West Bank, alleging links with Hamas. IRW took these allegations very seriously. Though delivering aid to 78,000 people, it took the decision to suspend its programmes in the West Bank and commissioned an independent investigation. The investigation found that IRW's systems and processes were sound, and that there was no evidence of any links with terrorism.

In November 2014, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) listed IRW as a "terrorist" organisation, along with 80 other groups. This happened despite IRW never having any presence in, or connections with, the UAE.

IRW was determined to defend itself strongly against these untrue allegations and slurs. It engaged with funders and key partners – such as its regulators, main bank, umbrella body, host government and sympathetic media – to make the case for why the designations were ill-founded, and challenged the designations via legal processes in both Israel and the UAE. This was the biggest crisis management that the organisation had faced.

Once the storm had calmed somewhat (the designations remain in place to this day but key stakeholders have been successfully reassured), IRW wanted to be able to focus on its mission once again, and believed it could only do that effectively by moving from the back to the front foot, and developing a new strategy.

Response

The External Relations & Advocacy Division, supported by the CEO and other senior managers, came together in 2017 to work on a **Reputational Risk Management Strategy**, the objectives of which were to:

- Contain, and where possible reverse the negative impact of reputational risks.
- Identify significant upcoming risks and prepare to counter them.
- Maintain and enhance the organisation's reputation with key stakeholders as an effective, credible group achieving its objectives despite many challenges.
- Ensure there is a robust process in place for responding to and mitigating possible future challenges to reputation with appropriate **internal infrastructure and a supporting budget**.

Key elements of the strategy

- Building a **crisis management team**, who would then create bespoke strategies and teams for each emergency – this included a **new hire in the form of a Senior Communications Advisor** dedicated to reputational risk management.
- Agreeing **protocols and processes**.
- Identifying the biggest **reputational risks** on the corporate risk register and developing a plan of action.
- **Mapping key stakeholders** and engaging with them proactively.
- Planning for and practising **crisis communication scenarios**.
- Managing media and social media decisively and effectively.
- Getting internal communications right to inform and empower staff.



Once this strategy had been developed, IRW presented it to its family of national offices, making the case for mutual self-interest and seeking investment so that the strategy could be backed up with a robust budget and resources. This strategy is currently being implemented at a global level across Islamic Relief offices.

Connecting with the national level

The strategy took three months to develop and a further period of three months to share with other offices and secure their support for funding and roll out. In 2018 training was selective and targeted, identifying media spokespeople and involving them in scenario-planning and messaging work. But the ultimate aim is to build the capacity of other offices so that they can take the strategy and tailor it to their own operations, and a reputation management toolkit is being developed for partner offices. There isn't always the capacity centrally to be the hands-on resource for every reputational risk challenge, and so it was important to share central learning and resources so that national offices could develop their own strategies.

In cases where offices with low capacity need a helping hand, the Secretariat assists in responding to reputational challenges. There might be instances where the Secretariat needs to deal with the challenge in its entirety, and times where offices may just need information and support to deal with questions that they are facing. The Reputation Management Team determines who is best placed to deal with each emergency as and when it arises.

BROCHURE

US Government funding for Islamic Relief Worldwide and Islamic Relief USA's work



Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) receives valued support from US federal agencies for its vital humanitarian work globally, while its US affiliate Islamic Relief USA (IRUSA) has a growing reputation for providing emergency relief in the US and support for US citizens in need.

Since 2015 IRW has been awarded funding of \$3,091,038 from US federal sources for eight projects in Kenya, Ethiopia and the Central African Republic, to be implemented between 2015 and 2020. Four have been completed, and four more are ongoing. The diversity of these projects reflects the breadth, innovation and credibility of IRW's work in developing countries, and also the extent to which it operates effectively as part of coalitions of leading civil society organizations.

Kenya

IRW implemented health and nutrition programmes in Garissa County and the Dadaab refugee camp to help prevent the spread of measles and other epidemic prone diseases among thousands of refugees. This was part of a larger \$400,000 project, funded by Centers for Disease Control (CDC), whose implementation was led by the International Rescue Committee to strengthen the capacity of health services to prevent, detect and respond to infectious disease outbreaks.

An innovative irrigation project by IR Kenya in Mandera County, where drought has repeatedly decimated pastoralists' herds and caused hunger and malnutrition, is improving community resilience and food security. Drip irrigation from the Dawa River, powered by solar technology, is reaching 2766 members of the community enabling them to develop new livelihoods growing high value crops. This has resulted in 100 percent increases in yields, 50 percent growth in incomes, and 80 percent less water used.

Ethiopia

IRW in partnership with Coal Ethiopia, provided nutritional support and supplementary feeding to acutely malnourished pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers and children under five, across four districts in the Somali Region during a period of intense drought. In two of the districts (Elbere and Hargele) this reached 10,940 beneficiaries. This partnership has also contributed to the reduction of mortality and morbidity among 11,125 children under-five and pregnant and lactating women in Dolobay and Charab Woredas of Afder Zone.

A water and sanitation project in Liban Zone in the Somali Region upgraded water sources and facilities to meet the emergency water needs of 28,141 drought-affected pastoralists. It also provided for the emergency hygiene and sanitation needs of 42,255 people in drought-affected communities. IRW delivered this project in partnership with the International Rescue Committee.

Together with the International Rescue Committee, another water, sanitation and nutrition project undertaken in 2018 has helped 22,335 people affected by drought in Dadaab.

14,500 drought affected pastoralist community members of the Elbere and Mieso Districts in the Somali Region were given emergency treatment for malnutrition and adequate access to sanitation by Islamic Relief and the International Rescue Committee. The capacity of district health offices to treat and manage acute malnutrition was also strengthened via this programme.

Central African Republic

IRW is helping to deliver a visionary five-year, inter-faith project to improve social cohesion and livelihoods, in partnership with Catholic Relief Services, World Vision and the Aegis Trust. The project is being implemented in three phases: helping local groups improve community cohesion across religious divides; supporting small businesses, and providing youth training to address unemployment and poverty; and enabling reconciliation and peace education within communities.



Islamic Relief USA delivering food parcels to victims of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. The work helps to save their lives.

Example of proactive engagement - IRW produced a brochure sharing key facts about the organisation and challenging 'fake news', to use privately with key institutions and politicians in the US.

Response in practice

Trigger

In 2017, Rep. Ron DeSantis tabled a congressional amendment to cut US government funding to Islamic Relief Worldwide. The 'evidence' behind this proposal had been promoted by a think tank with conflicting aims to Islamic Relief, and it was baseless and promoted out of context. It linked the charity to supposed terrorist activity and funding, and used this to advocate with different congressional offices for the US to end their funding. As a Muslim member of Congress stated at the time it was: ***“Another attempt to criminalize and demonize organisations that are affiliated with the Muslim community.”***

The Together Project was established in January 2017, and represents a hub of advocacy and solidarity for U.S.-based civil society organisations (CSOs) that provide vital development and humanitarian relief around the world, and confront discrimination in the U.S. due to their operating principles or religious faith. It enables members to share information and develop strategies in response to shrinking civil society space experienced by these CSOs.

Response

Thanks to their own experience in dealing with reputational risk, Islamic Relief's North American affiliate, Islamic Relief USA (IRUSA), had invested in relationships with key stakeholders and coalition-building, including via active participation in InterAction, the largest alliance of international NGOs and partners in the United States. Alongside this, Islamic Relief USA mobilized community and constituency support, especially within DeSantis's district. The Together Project, a sub-project of InterAction, aims to protect the ability of all international development and relief organisations to access financial services and respond to changes in the regulatory environment. It was thanks to Islamic Relief USA's good relationship with this coalition and its members that Islamic Relief and IRUSA – working together – were able to respond so quickly and effectively to the DeSantis amendment, and protect themselves against the risk to both their reputations and to IRW funding.

Nearly 50 of the world's most prominent humanitarian aid groups publicly opposed the amendment, including American Jewish World Service (AJWS), Catholic Relief Services, CARE, Oxfam, Refugees International, Mercy Corps, Church World Service, and the InterAction alliance of over 200 organisations.

Outcomes

The strength and diversity of solidarity and support led to the amendment being withdrawn, leaving IRW's US funding intact. Furthermore, learning from this case around working with government administration and elected representatives has been applied by IRW to similar challenges elsewhere.

When the amendment was tabled, the Together Project and Islamic Relief quickly:



Organisational learnings

Outcomes

- ✓ Islamic Relief Worldwide is better prepared for any threats to its reputation and operations, and therefore more resilient. Since the designations in 2014 which were made by two influential nations, IRW has continued to grow as an organisation. That in itself is a success, and an endorsement of its actions on this front.

CHALLENGES

Costs

Some of the tools needed to either repel or prepare for threats are expensive, such as legal or lobbyist fees. They're effective mechanisms, but expensive, and so need to be included in budgets.

Staff time

Often, the people best-positioned to deal with these issues are in demanding, senior roles - to find time to deal with these issues can be difficult. The new role of Senior Communications Advisor at the International Secretariat has been vital in helping to underpin their strategy, doing the legwork that the crisis management team requires. It also means that the rest of the communications team can continue with their business as usual, rather than spending all of their time on reputational risk management.

LESSONS LEARNED

Engage with the truly influential

Engage with the truly influential, and not necessarily with your opponents. Fighting back on every false allegation or vilifying comment gives those attacks oxygen and draws more people to the debate. Time is better invested in targeting those actors your opponents are trying to influence, to make your case there.

Make friends while the sun shines

It's important to identify your key stakeholders and invest in building relationships with them. Ensuring that you have transparent, close relationships with

those groups means that you can seek their support, and where appropriate their endorsement, in the face of an emergency.

Fail to prepare, prepare to fail

Risk analysis and scenario planning are key.

Say who you are

In response to reputational attacks, do not to get dragged into publicly arguing about what you are not. Instead, re-double your efforts to talk about who you are and what you do. Invest the time and resources required to tell your story and represent yourself in order to protect against misrepresentation.

Collaborate

It's important to acknowledge where issues are bigger than 'communications' alone, and your strategy must recognize areas where the work needed goes far beyond what you can achieve in isolation.

For example, due to continuing **bank de-risking**, IRW's Head of Governance has undertaken outreach work on the issue. He is on a tri-sector committee convened by the Treasury in the UK, which brings together government representatives, banks and leading civil society organisations to discuss and analyse the ongoing uncertainty of financial services for locations of greatest need, as only a joint approach can address this issue.

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solidarityaction.network

Solidarity Playbook

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