

Islamic Relief Worldwide: Building a Reputational Risk Management Strategy in the face of Islamophobia-motivated attacks

Islamic Relief Worldwide 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.

(i) The organisation takes action

What triggered the policy response? In June 2014 the Government of Israel designated Islamic Relief Worldwide as an 'unauthorised association' in the West Bank, alleging links with Hamas. Islamic Relief 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.

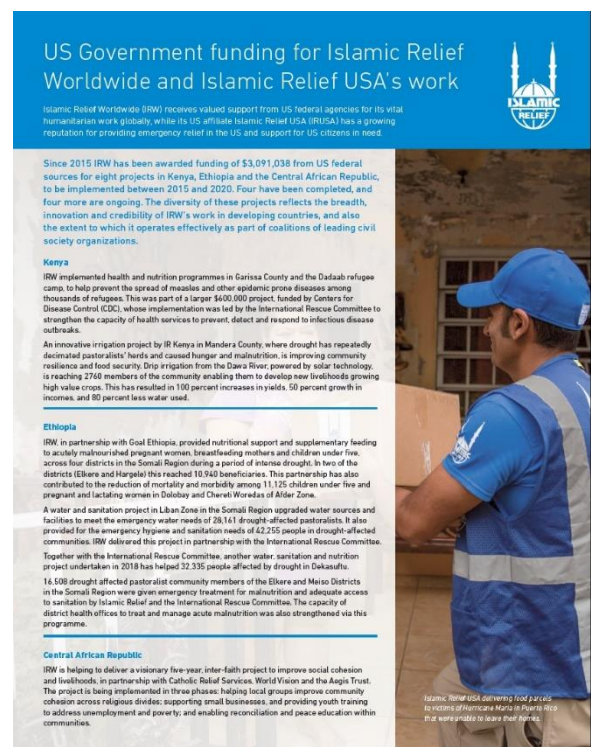
The Response: The External Relations & Advocacy Division, supported by the CEO and other senior managers, came together in 2017 to work on a **Reputational Risk Management Strategy**, the objectives of which were to:

- 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:

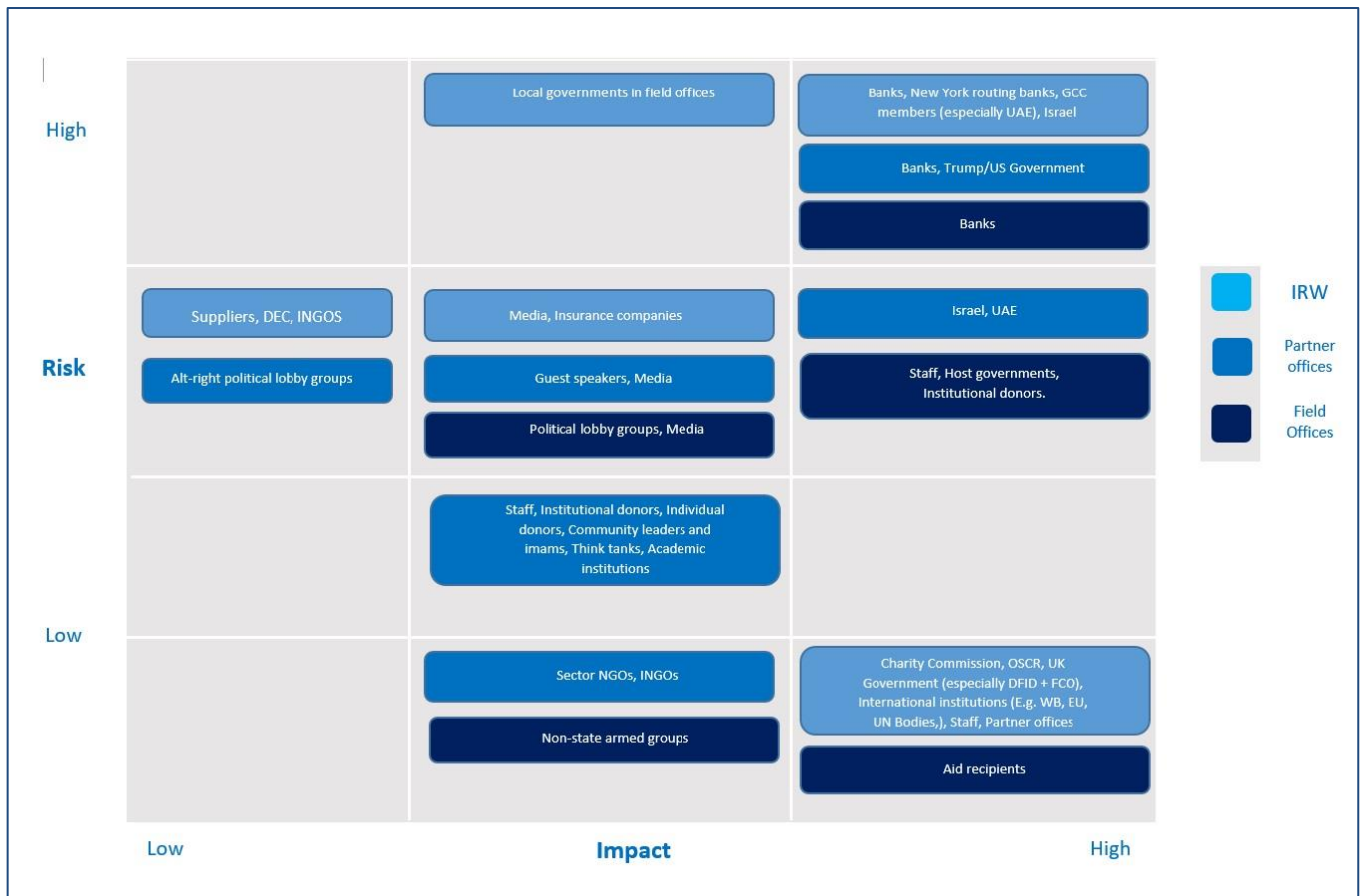
- Building a **crisis management team**, who would then create bespoke strategies and teams for each emergency – this included a **new hire in the form of a Senior Communications Advisor** dedicated to reputational risk management
- Agreeing **protocols and processes**
- Identifying the biggest **reputational 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.

Figure 1: 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.



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.

Figure 2: example of stakeholder mapping exercise



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.

(ii) The response in practice

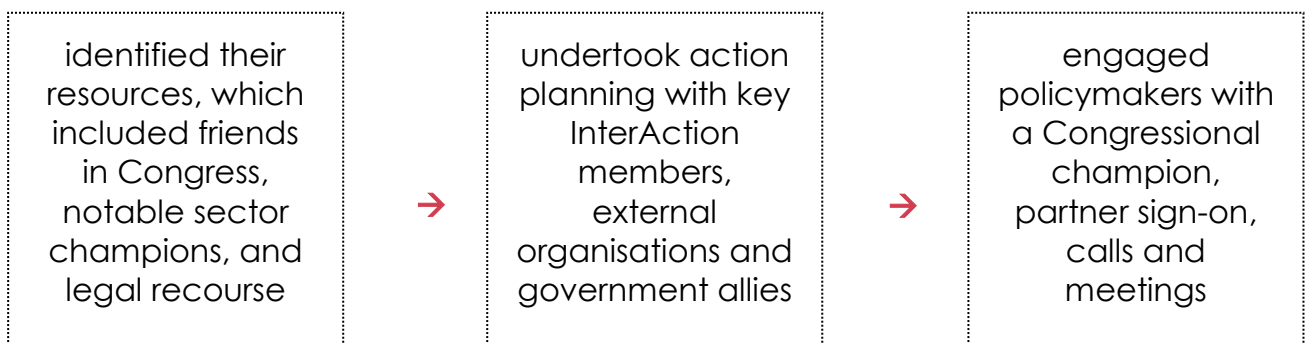
What triggered the response? In 2017, Rep. Ron DeSantis tabled a congressional amendment to cut US government funding to Islamic Relief Worldwide. The 'evidence' behind this proposal had been promoted by a think tank with conflicting aims to Islamic Relief, and it was baseless and promoted out of context. 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 response – Thanks to their own experience in dealing with reputational risk, Islamic Relief's North American affiliate, Islamic Relief USA, 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

The Together Project was established in January 2017, and represents a hub of advocacy and solidarity for U.S.-based 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.

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.

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



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.

(iii) Organisational Learning

Outcomes – IRW 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 organization; that in itself is a success, and an endorsement of its actions on this front.

Key Lessons

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 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 CSOs to discuss and analyse the ongoing uncertainty of financial services for locations of greatest need, as only a joint approach can address this issue.

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.

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