



Islamic Relief Worldwide's Strategic Response to Tackle Mis-, Dis-, and Malinformation

In recent years, the use of mis- and disinformation to harm civil society organisations has ramped up significantly, with Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) experiencing the brunt of these challenges.

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As a faith-based organisation, IRW has faced smear campaigns and discriminatory attacks that threaten its reputation as an essential aid and development organisation. The International Civil Society Centre's [2019 case study](#), delves into IRW's strategic response to these issues, highlighting their proactive measures to combat a harmful information landscape.

A crucial turning point occurred in 2014, when Israel designated IRW as a terrorist organisation. This unfounded allegation has had enduring legal ramifications for IRW's operations in Israel and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank. In response, IRW developed a comprehensive strategy in 2017 to manage reputational risk, moving beyond mere firefighting to proactively prevent further mis- and disinformation attacks. A key element was establishing a crisis management team and investing in measures to counter mis- and disinformation.

"Our decision to invest in staff capacity and create a reputation management focal point in 2017 was one of the key turning points for us. We had to shift from simply firefighting misinformation to ensuring we had the resources to counter it with truth, no matter where the attacks came from", said Mohammad Shakir, Senior Communications Advisor.

This plan included proactive engagement with

relevant stakeholders and meticulous crisis communication planning and practice, all aimed at global implementation while working closely with national entities. Mohammad Shakir emphasised that implementing such a strategy is a long-term endeavour: "you can't think it is an overnight fix" in terms of resources and capacities.

Over the past seven years, IRW's strategy has been rigorously tested and refined through various challenges, including Islamophobia-motivated attacks. The strategy's effectiveness was evident as IRW engaged consultants to advocate for and represent them in the US, holding regular meetings with key stakeholders in the administration and on Capitol Hill to mitigate the adverse effects of smear campaigns. The reduction in attacks in recent years has allowed IRW to reassess and plan future engagement strategies based on this year's election outcomes.

Following the attacks on Islamic Relief and other faith-based organisations, an interfaith initiative called the [Together Project](#) was established by civil society groups. The goal of this project is to provide solidarity and support, as well as to combat discrimination and targeted prejudicial regulations, particularly in the United States.

Globally, the lessons learned from implementing this strategy highlight the importance of patience, endurance, and continuous investment in staff,

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budget, and time. The surge of mostly online mis-, dis- and mal information attacks, particularly in light of recent Middle Eastern conflicts, has necessitated ongoing vigilance and adaptive strategies. Islamic Relief sent rebuttals against articles published, in the Jerusalem Post and Forbes Israel to contest what both publications had written about the organisation.

IRW's strategy has led to significant positive outcomes, such as taking successful legal action against individuals in Canada who launched online smear campaigns and retaining control of their Wikipedia page. Legal mechanisms play a crucial role in countering mis-, dis- and mal information attacks, with IRW seeking legal advice to respond to false allegations, whether through in-house teams or external counsel. Long-term legal battles, such as those with Israel and the UAE, demonstrate IRW's commitment to challenging baseless designations and protecting their reputation.

Further governance and accountability processes have been embedded within the strategy, including a committee for their international general assembly conducting thorough background checks and online screenings of applicants to prevent potential damage. This was implemented after an independent review in 2020, assessing the charity's governance following incidences of antisemitic content being shared online by board members, who subsequently resigned.

Financial oversight by a dedicated working group ensures strong relationships with financial stakeholders, essential for mitigating reputational risks associated with banking and financial operations. The bigger an organisation is, the higher the scrutiny is on their financial accounts; hence, financial partners must be treated as top priorities to mitigate reputational risks that could impact banks and could circle back on the working function of the CSO. A good maintenance of relationships with financial stakeholders such as bank advisers is therefore key.

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– Mohammad Shakir, Senior Communications Advisor –

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IRW has faced further instances of mis-information affecting their staff and fieldwork in country offices. In Ethiopia, for example, an online campaign sought to undermine the country office's credibility. In response, IRW collaborated closely with the country director to commission an independent report through a regional body, which was communicated to stakeholders to counter the misinformation. Safeguarding staff remains a priority; in instances where staff members are targeted, as seen in the UK, measures are taken, including police involvement when necessary.

The overarching success of IRW's strategy lies in the resilience it has fostered within the organisation. Shakir emphasised the importance of staying proactive in the face of rising misinformation: "In a world where misinformation spreads faster than truth, we have made it our mission to stay ahead. We've developed crisis communication plans, prepared our staff globally, and refined our strategy with each new challenge. What we've built is not just a strategy but a culture of resilience." The organisation's crisis response team operates effectively with a clear understanding of their roles, ensuring quick decision-making and integrated crisis management across all organisational levels. Thus, the best practice IRW can share is the importance of having a crisis resilient culture and a robust crisis response policy.

This policy, evolved over 2-3 years and multiple drafts, embodies institutional memory and lessons learnt from past crises. It emphasises important topics like the structure of the core crisis team, prompt responses, and adaptability. It is connected to serious incidents and safeguarding policies, ensuring comprehensive coverage. Effective stakeholder management, proactive reputational management, and regular training and scenario-based workshops are integral components. Despite restrictions like limited time, resources, and manpower, IRW prioritises major



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risk management through stringent screening and extensive media training, embedding a culture of preparedness and proactive response.

Islamic Relief Worldwide is marking its 40th anniversary this year, marking four decades of unwavering commitment to providing aid to those in need. Throughout these years, IRW has proven itself as a trusted organisation, resilient in the face of misinformation and Islamophobic attacks. Their steadfast dedication to humanitarian work has enabled them to deliver crucial assistance to vulnerable communities worldwide, reinforcing their reputation as a reliable and effective aid organisation. For more on their journey and achievements, visit [Islamic Relief – Trusted to Deliver](#).

The experience of Islamic Relief Worldwide offers valuable lessons for civil society organisations

globally. In an era where mis- and disinformation can rapidly undermine an organisation's credibility, all CSOs must prioritise reputational risk management as a core component of their strategy. Building and maintaining trusted relationships with stakeholders, including financial institutions, government entities, and the public, is essential for mitigating the impact of mis- and disinformation.

Effective communication, characterised by clarity and consistency, ensures that an organisation's message remains authoritative and resilient. Additionally, cultivating a culture of crisis resilience involves proactive measures such as regular training and scenario-based exercises. As demonstrated by IRW, a long-term commitment to governance, legal recourse, and stakeholder engagement is vital in navigating the complexities of modern information warfare. These lessons underscore the importance of vigilance, adaptability, and strategic foresight for all civil society organisations operating in today's challenging environment.

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