

## RELIGION

## Interview with Ahmad Ali Noorbala\*

*Dr Ahmad Ali Noorbala is President of the National Red Crescent Society of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Professor of Psychiatry at the Medical Faculty of Tehran University. The Iranian Red Crescent was established in 1922 and changed its former name, the Persian Red Lion and Sun Society, to the present one in 1980. It has 30 governorate headquarters, and 330 branches throughout the country. With about 7,000 paid staff members and more than two million volunteers, as well as the mainly high school and university student members of its youth organization, it is one of the world's largest National Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies. Beside its core activity of relief and disaster preparedness, the Iranian Red Crescent engages in wide-ranging humanitarian services in health and rehabilitation, training and research. The Society is held in high esteem by the Iranian general public.*



***The Iranian Red Crescent is working in an Islamic Republic where religion is not relegated to the private sphere, but intervenes in politics and the public domain. What are the challenges for your Society in this regard?***

Since it was founded 83 years ago, the Iranian Red Crescent has experienced three different political systems in this country: it began its work under the Qajar dynasty, then continued it during the Pahlavi regime, and now we are working under the third political system, the Islamic Republic of Iran. In each of these political periods we have had to adjust our activities to the new political system and environment. Part of our present challenge is, as in the past, to harmonize the religious Islamic values and principles that we have in our community and the fundamental principles and the humanitarian values that we have in the Red Cross and Crescent Movement.

\* The interview was conducted on 26 April 2005 in Geneva by Toni Pfanner, Editor-in-Chief of the *International Review of the Red Cross*, Andreas Wigger, ICRC Deputy Director of Operations, and Mostafa Mohaghegh, Operations Coordinator, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

***How have you retained your autonomy during those different political regimes?***

We have been moving progressively towards greater independence of our own and less dependence on the authorities, although we have been receiving ever greater responsibilities in disaster relief. The question is how and to what extent an independent non-governmental organization should be responsible at the national level for the disaster response. Sometimes governmental institutions have been involved in activities similar to what the National Society was doing. Another challenge has been the rapid growth of non-governmental organizations and its effect on the resources of the National Society, particularly the voluntary resources that it wants to receive. By insisting on its humanitarian values and principles and also by keeping up close interaction with the government and the public, including other NGOs, the Iranian Red Crescent has been able to maintain a positive impact on humanitarian services at the national level.

***Iran is an Islamic State in which religion plays a dominant role and pervades all aspects of daily life, including the activities of the Iranian Red Crescent. How do you position the Iranian Red Crescent in this environment? Can or should it also be perceived as a religious organization?***

There are two possible approaches for us. Along with the various developments and changes in the country, the Red Crescent Society could integrate itself in the whole environment and context there and form part of the political and social changes. The second approach is to maintain our fundamental principles and independence, but at the same time come up with a strong information-sharing and dissemination policy, especially towards the government, thereby helping it to understand the difference that an independent National Society could make and the valuable asset it could be in that context. I have chosen the second approach, since I have confidence in the National Society's ability to find its own particular way.

***What is your particular way?***

Our National Society has come far over the past 83 years. Whenever we have been very close to the government, the impact and consequences have somehow been negative. On the other hand, when the Society has underscored its distance from the government, national resources have been harder to obtain. In other words, we find that the Society received a very positive input in the short run, but in the long term the dependence created difficult challenges for it. We should therefore come up with a balanced midway solution. We should neither get too close to the government nor move too far from it. We should stick firmly to our principle of independence, but we should at the same time aspire to good cooperation with the government.

***And how about religious and civil society?***

Yes, there may be a difference between the term "government" as the executive body and the whole national system, including the religious authorities and

the corporate civil sector. The Iranian Red Crescent already has close contact and good relations with the whole national system. We have been trying to make it clear and understandable to everyone in religious and civil society that the humanitarian principles, values and services of the National Red Crescent Society are not in contradiction with the country's religious values and culture.

***Which principles of the Red Crescent and Red Cross require harmonization with Islamic values? Do the people understand the meaning of these principles, for instance impartiality?***

We need to adhere to and therefore explain in particular the two principles of impartiality and neutrality. The equivalent term for impartiality that I myself have found in the Islamic values and literature is the Arabic word “*ikhlaas*”; it means “purity in action”. It means that if we want to do any good deed, it should be purely for the sake of God and His satisfaction — there should be no other primary or secondary consideration. So I think that the principle of impartiality is anchored in Islamic values and instructions and is somehow seen as *ikhlaas*.

***Is there a distinction to be made between Muslims and non-Muslims?***

Here we perhaps have to elaborate a little bit more. We may differentiate between two aspects: the first is the concept of that principle as it applies to emergency situations, i.e. the type of action which is typically called relief action. The second is the implementation of this concept in terms of action for certain groups, such as the wounded, the displaced, civilians and those who are not engaged in any way in war or armed conflicts: they are seen simply as people who are entitled to certain services because of their humanitarian needs. These activities are based on our religious values and rules, and there is no contradiction with the principle of impartiality of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Our religious rules emphasize for instance that in war, attending to and helping prisoners of war and enemy detainees have priority even over attention to our own soldiers, so we first have to take care of enemy prisoners before addressing our own soldiers' needs. These precise religious instructions show that the principles we have in the Movement coincide with the religious values. Humanitarian assistance should therefore not be based on a religious affiliation, but should depend solely on the needs of the people, even if they are considered to be enemies.

***The concept of neutrality exists in Islamic history too (Abyssinians, Nubians and Cypriots). But is neutrality possible in religious matters? Sometimes there is a conflict of interests between political interests that the government pursues and what you believe should be done for humanitarian reasons. Do you rather follow a “neutral” relief approach or do you advocate your cause?***

First, we start to put our case to government officials on behalf of the many beneficiaries and try to convince the authorities that vulnerable groups of people, such as refugees, should be assisted because they need our assistance, regardless of the political context and its implications. That we, as a humanitarian organization should do our part, and you, as the Islamic government defending the humanitarian

Islamic values, should actually be ahead of us and supporting us in this endeavour. When we have convinced them and have elicited a favourable response, then we try to be effectively involved in the relief operation and provide the assistance. We even try to get the government to help us with these activities.

***Do you have practical examples?***

I will give you two examples: those of Afghanistan and Iraq. Although the relationship between the government of Iran and the Afghan government was not friendly at the time of the Taliban regime and even less so with the Iraqi regime during the war between Iraq and Iran, our Society convinced the government that assistance should be given to the refugees from both Afghanistan and Iraq. Eventually we were supported by the government in our relief efforts. It is worth mentioning that in both cases there were many hardliners from political and religious groups in Iran who were against any relief operations in favour of Afghans and Iraqis, given the political background. In addition the Iranian Red Crescent, in cooperation with the ICRC in both Afghanistan and Iraq, was one of the first humanitarian organizations to start also assisting the people within those countries.

***Islamic organizations — like organizations from other religions — are heavily involved in charitable work. You may be in competition with powerful Islamic foundations and the growing number of non-governmental organizations.***

We have taken various kinds of action in this regard. First of all, we have tried to ensure that the community is well represented within the structure of the National Society. In the Supreme Council of the Iranian Red Crescent, which is similar to the board of other institutions, there are four representatives selected by the President of the Republic in order to make sure that the National Society maintains its relations with the entire national system. They specialize in relief work, health, humanitarian values and youth activities. On the other hand, the Society is strongly represented in diverse fora, institutions and meetings. For example, it is a member of the National Supreme Council for Disaster Management and Prevention, the Supreme National Health Council, the Iranian Supreme Youth Council and the Social Affairs National Council — important national bodies within which we make known our values and activities. Some of these fora and counselling bodies are chaired by the President and others by Ministers. In this way we try to ensure participation, backing and support by the government in decision-making processes in our country, and our presence in key areas relevant to our mandate and our activities.

***Are you financed by government contributions or does the money come from the religious duty (zakat)?***

The National Society's resources consist primarily of the membership fees that any member should pay. Many National Society volunteers donate property, money or whatever they can in line with the *waqf* (alms in the form of legacy) institutions. In addition, under national parliamentary legislation a small percentage of public taxes is collected annually and given to the National Society to

fund its services within the country. The Society has some income-generating activities and projects such as manufacturing plants and agricultural activities. In disaster situations, the government sometimes provides assistance to enable the Society to carry out its mission. International projects contribute to its financing, especially if there is a major natural disaster such as the earthquake in Bam in December 2003. Unlike religious non-governmental organizations, we do not rely on or receive contributions in the form of *zakat*.

***You also have to position yourself in relation to Islamic humanitarian organizations which have a religious mission and promote proselytism, or to political-religious organizations.***

There are a few points to be highlighted. First of all, humanitarian services are endorsed by all divine religions, including Islam. So there is no contradiction between humanitarian services and religious activities in general. The political aspects might constitute more of a special case, in particular the different trends reflected in the approach of the political-religious groups to questions of charity and humanitarian services and their participation in those services. These are the areas that we try to avoid as much as possible and not to get involved in at all. With its popularity and sound experience of providing humanitarian services, the Iranian Red Crescent is well positioned. If there are new organizations becoming involved in humanitarian action, we do not regard them as much of a threat.

***Your Society and others bearing the red crescent emblem are also working internationally, and National Red Cross Societies are working in Islamic countries. The red cross and red crescent emblems are often perceived as religious symbols.***

We have been making considerable efforts to put over the idea that the red cross emblem has no religious significance, just as the red crescent does not represent the Islamic religion. As we know, the red cross emblem is in fact used in Indonesia and many Islamic countries in Africa. Even the change in Iran from the “red lion and sun” to the red crescent was not mainly due to religious reasons; it was more a matter of reducing the number of emblems for the sake of greater unity. The people in other countries where we have worked among other National Societies as part of the International Red Cross and Crescent Movement have seen that, in our activities under the red crescent emblem, there was no intention of religious or political dissemination. Similarly, when Red Cross Societies come to Iran, we have been able to convince the people that the red cross emblem does not indicate a Christian organization.

***In the western world and especially in the framework of the so-called “war on terror”, Islamic charitable organizations, including some supported by Iran, are not perceived as carrying out humanitarian action but basically as favouring “terrorism” under the cloak of humanitarianism.***

As you have mentioned, this is first of all a question of perception. Some of these perceptions are not really based on facts and what is happening in actual

reality. We cannot deny that some institutions, some so-called Islamic groups or institutions, may be perpetrating unacceptable acts — as other political-religious groups are doing in other religious settings. But we at the National Red Crescent Society believe strongly that anything done to affect people who are not engaged in hostilities and make them suffer is against the values and rules of all religions. Another project to which we are committed is to explain the goal of humanitarian action and, by clarifying it, to help eliminate erroneous perceptions. This is part of our mission: we are working in the National Society for more understanding on a global level as well.

***A dispute about the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons has recently given rise to tension. How does the National Society deal with such situations?***

As a psychiatrist, I believe that prevention should always be given priority. We have to prevent and avoid tension, conflict, wars and hostilities as much as possible. And this is why the National Society has fundamentally taken the initiative of promoting dialogue, tolerance and friendship nationally and internationally. If a crisis occurs and develops and hostilities nonetheless take place, not only the people of Iran but many people of other countries will be affected. Therefore, not only the Iranian Red Crescent but also all members of the Movement should endeavour to the best of their ability to prevent a new conflict in the region.

***Iran went through a ten-year war with Iraq and was and still is being affected by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.***

We know that the people were affected at different levels. It's like a big iceberg. You see the tip of the iceberg above the surface of the sea, a small part that represents the people who are directly affected, killed or wounded. But most of the ice is beneath the sea — encompassing all the people who are psychologically affected. The psychological dimension has a greater, much more durable impact on the community. For that reason we have included in our relief system psychological support programmes to assist people with post-traumatic disorders.

***You have to recruit members and attract people to join your Society. What in your opinion is its appeal especially for young people? Why do volunteers want to work with the Red Crescent and not with somebody else?***

As I have already mentioned, the Iranian Red Crescent has a long history and tradition in the field of humanitarian activity. It is the main relief organization here, and the only national one. In terms of disaster preparedness and relief it is very remarkable, almost unique in Iran, so anybody who wants to get involved in relief activities has to join it. The National Society is also very popular in Iran, so young people and volunteers from the general public perceive it as such and therefore as an attractive place to work. With regard to relief activities we have no competitors in Iran.

But with regard to social welfare activities and social services to vulnerable people, we do have competitors, both Islamic foundations and NGOs. Our main approach, and this has helped the Iranian Red Crescent to be even more

enterprising, is to encourage youth volunteers to organize and run all their own activities. In other words, we encourage them to come up with their own planning ideas for social welfare activities and we promote their ideas and management of youth volunteers. We just support them and do not manage their activities. So they find an appropriate place in our Society to realize their own aspirations through their activities. This even applies to international cooperation, perhaps the situation which needs the most cooperation and participation of the national institutions. The last element which we think is very helpful to the Society in this regard is the aforesaid very big national campaign to promote peace, friendship and tolerance in the community in order to prevent violence, conflict and war in general.

***A campaign with a domestic or an international dimension?***

It has both dimensions. At the national level, young National Society volunteers, both girls and boys, have been involved in it. There are what is called the Young Humanitarian Groups of the National Society Youth and Volunteers. One of the projects and programmes has been for these groups to meet various political parties in the country, familiarize them with the common humanitarian values and promote the idea of tolerance and avoiding tension among political groups. It is a very attractive activity at the national level. At the international level, this concept of the promotion of peace and friendship and prevention of conflict and violence was presented by the Iranian Red Crescent at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Conferences in 1999 and 2003. It has been very well received.

***How do you see the relationship between the Islamic rules and values and the concept of humanitarian law and principles?***

I personally believe that in this regard all religions could be likened to a tree and this likeness is also mentioned in the Quran. All religions have three levels: the first level is the roots of the tree. This is a universal concept and all religions have common roots. Therefore at this level there is no major distinction between the religions. The second level of religion is behavioural and I compare it to the leaves. It is at this level that we see differences between religions and civilizations. From an Islamic point of view I could mention here, for example, praying or fasting as two obligations of Muslims. The third level represents ethical values and could be illustrated in our tree image by numerous fruits. One fruit is fidelity and trust, another fruit is to keep one's word or promises or maintain respect for human dignity, etc. All religions and all humanitarian schools promote such values. The leaves — or the behaviour — may differ in the various religions and cultures. But the roots and fruits (or values) are the same. Ethics and ethical values are the same in all religions and there is no essential difference in this respect.

***The difference lies in the behaviour?***

Yes, but we think that Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies should concentrate primarily on the fruits of this tree. Values are common to all religions and

civilizations, but there is no universally identical behaviour. We also cite the Prophet of Islam: "I have come in order to complete the ethical values." We therefore have to present the objectives of the National Societies as the fruits of this tree. For example, the objectives set by the Iranian Red Crescent Society are based on similar values. The first objective is to alleviate human suffering. The second one is to promote respect for other people. The third is to foster friendship and mutual tolerance and peace among people, and the fourth is to protect life and the health and well-being of people.

In focusing on the values, we believe that there will be less controversy and that we shall not need to get involved in it at the behavioural level. My view is that any prophet who came brought more trees of peace, and there is not one human being in the world who has any complaints to make about those fruits. The problem is that some gardeners show only the top of the branches to the people, and not the fruits.

***Islamic law basically lays down the same rules in situations of war as international humanitarian law does, namely the distinction between combatants and civilians, no unnecessary destruction, humanitarian behaviour, and proportionality, to mention only the most important ones. Are those values to be respected because they have religious grounds or because international law is binding?***

Of course, international rules and agreements should be respected, but we are more likely to comply with them when respecting religious values and rules. People can talk about things from different perspectives, but what we think is that if Muslims promote religious concepts and values today, that approach has a greater impact on the Muslim community.

***Reciprocity is an important factual and psychological factor in respect for humanitarian law. Even though largely banned by international humanitarian law, it is still a valid argument in Islamic law if one party considers that fundamental rules of ethical conduct are being violated. Do you regard attacks on non-military persons or civilians, or even suicide attacks, as justified in exceptional circumstances?***

What we can do and have to do in general is to try to find the underlying causes of the whole problem, to spend time looking deeper down at why these things are happening. For instance, if someone with a religious mentality and belief is committing acts contrary to the internationally accepted rules, regulations and practices of agreements, we have to take time to identify the causes for their illegal acts. By analysing the situation, we may be able to understand better why such acts are committed. For example, the silence about the desperate situation of those individuals in their environment could be a cause for the frustrations that prompt them to commit yet another act which is not acceptable under international rules. They may even find religious justification for what they do and thus consolidate their arguments.

What I think we can do as a humanitarian organization is to talk and listen to both sides very carefully and to consider the real and perceived reasons



for such acts. Of course, it is not up to us to pass judgment on those acts, but what we can do, outside the political context, is find the root causes of them and then try to reform the offenders in the process. Everybody, as a human being, has a mind-set which determines his or her view of others. If that is distorted, it creates suspicion which can cause misperceptions or illusions, and they in turn can lead to conflict and even suicide. We have to make efforts to correct and improve the mind-set.

***Religion is a very powerful factor for the prevention of wars and for reconciliation, but it is ambivalent as it can also trigger hostilities. Because of its absolute character, it may even antagonize communities and enhance violence.***

I think that we should always focus more on the common values and not on differences of behaviour in religions when we see that conflict is growing. If we focused more on the fruits, the real fruits of religions, and the benefits they bring, there would be more conciliation and understanding and tolerance. It would be very useful to promote and disseminate those values and rules in any conflict or war, for then behaviour and action in war would be closer to the prescribed rules and a minimum of humanity could be preserved even in the worst of circumstances.