

Upholding Justice Through Zakat: The Role of CAIR in Protecting Muslim Rights under "Fi Sabilillah"

Zakat, one of the five pillars of Islam, is an obligatory form of charity with specific categories of recipients as outlined in the Qur'an. Traditionally, Zakat distribution has focused on providing direct financial assistance to the poor and needy. However, in the contemporary landscape, there is increasing scholarly support for using Zakat to fund broader causes that protect and promote the welfare of the Muslim community through advocacy and policy initiatives. Both the Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA) and the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA) have explored this issue and provided guidance on the eligibility of such causes under the category of "**Fi Sabilillah**" ("in the cause of Allah").

The Meaning of "Fi Sabilillah" and Its Expanded Scope

The term "**Fi Sabilillah**", translated as "in the cause of Allah," is one of the eight categories outlined in the Qur'an (Surah At-Tawbah, 9:60) as permissible recipients of Zakat. Traditionally, this term was understood to mean directly supporting defensive efforts in early Islamic contexts. However, modern scholars argue that the scope of "Fi Sabilillah" encompasses various efforts aimed at upholding justice, promoting societal welfare, and protecting the rights of Muslims.

Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA) on Advocacy as Zakat-Eligible

The Fiqh Council of North America, a leading scholarly body providing guidance on Islamic jurisprudence in the U.S., has addressed the use of Zakat funds by organizations such as the **Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR)**, which focuses on defending the civil rights of Muslims in America. FCNA has recognized that CAIR's mission to provide legal defense for Muslims aligns with the "**Fi Sabilillah**" category, as it fulfills the principle of defending the rights and dignity of the Muslim community, thereby contributing to justice and societal welfare. By defending Muslims against civil rights violations, CAIR's work aligns with the broader understanding of "Fi Sabilillah" as a legitimate Zakat category.

FCNA's Endorsement: The Fiqh Council's endorsement serves as a significant precedent, affirming that defending the rights of Muslims aligns with Islamic principles and is worthy of Zakat support. By engaging in advocacy and legal defense, organizations like CAIR play a critical role in securing justice, which is a key objective of Zakat itself.

Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA) on Zakat for Advocacy and Policy Change

The Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA) has similarly addressed questions about Zakat eligibility for nonprofit organizations engaged in advocacy, policy reform, and intellectual efforts on behalf of the Muslim community. AMJA recognizes that "Fi Sabilillah" includes protecting the interests of Islam and Muslims, a concept that can extend to activities aimed at countering Islamophobia, advocating for policy changes, and defending the rights of Muslims through non-violent and intellectual means.

AMJA's Position: In a fatwa related to the Zakat eligibility of a nonprofit working on community data and representation, AMJA articulated a broad understanding of "Fi Sabilillah" by stating that "many contemporary scholars believe it includes protecting the interests of Islam and the Muslims, da'wah, intellectual efforts, and any related projects that promote them." This perspective allows for Zakat to be used in various forms of advocacy that contribute to the protection and advancement of Muslim communities, even if they are not direct acts of financial aid.

Evidence from the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) Life

Several examples from the life of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) illustrate principles that align with the modern concept of advocacy and social support under Zakat distribution:

1. **Community Defense and Security:** During the Prophet's time, Zakat was used to support those engaged in defending the Muslim community from external threats. Scholars cite the use of Zakat for "Fi Sabilillah" to provide for community defense, which was essential to ensure safety and stability. Today, advocacy and civil rights work defending Muslims from discrimination aligns with this purpose, as it provides necessary protection and security to the Muslim community.
2. **Allocating Zakat for Influential Figures (Mu'allafat al-Qulub):** The Prophet allocated Zakat to certain leaders and tribes who were influential but not yet Muslim, to strengthen alliances and promote peace. Known as **Mu'allafat al-Qulub** ("those whose hearts are to be reconciled"), this use of Zakat served to foster understanding, peace, and community security, indirectly protecting Muslims and their rights. Modern scholars extend this reasoning to advocacy, outreach, and policy work that builds understanding and mitigates negative perceptions of Islam.
3. **Liberating the Oppressed:** Zakat funds were used during the Prophet's time to free captives (Ar-Riqab), aiming to alleviate oppression and restore dignity. The principle of freeing individuals from oppression and injustice can be seen in today's support for civil rights, policy reform, and advocacy for Muslims facing discrimination. This understanding aligns with the concept of using Zakat for

justice-oriented initiatives, helping protect Muslims from systemic injustices.

4. **Justice as a Core Principle in Islam:** The Prophet (pbuh) frequently emphasized justice and protection of the oppressed. His farewell sermon highlighted the sanctity of life, property, and honor, underscoring the need for justice in the community. Many scholars interpret this directive as a basis for Zakat eligibility, allowing for funds to support organizations working to uphold justice, advocacy, and human rights.

Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR): Defending Muslims, Advocating for Civil Rights, and Empowering Muslims for Policy Change

The **Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)** stands as a leading advocate for justice, civil rights, and systemic policy reform in the United States. CAIR's work focuses on defending vulnerable populations, protecting religious freedoms, improving public opinion about Islam and Muslims, and establishing policies to end systemic injustices. These efforts align closely with the principles of Zakat under "**Fi Sabilillah**".

Defending the Vulnerable and Protecting Religious Freedoms

CAIR's mission emphasizes the protection of civil liberties and ensuring that American Muslims can freely practice their religion without fear of discrimination or marginalization. By combating Islamophobia and promoting mutual understanding, CAIR works tirelessly to uphold the rights and dignity of Muslims while advocating for justice across all sectors of society.

Advocating for Policy Reform to End Systemic Injustices

One of CAIR's critical roles is advocating for policy changes that address systemic discrimination and inequality. By engaging policymakers, drafting legislation, and mobilizing community support, CAIR works to create long-term solutions to the challenges faced by American Muslims. These efforts include improving public perceptions of Islam, ensuring equal treatment under the law, and dismantling systems of injustice that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

Building Bridges and Empowering Communities

CAIR also focuses on building bridges between the Muslim community and broader American society. Through interfaith dialogues, media engagement, and public awareness campaigns, CAIR fosters a more inclusive and respectful environment for Muslims. Additionally, CAIR empowers American Muslims by providing resources, training, and leadership opportunities to help them contribute positively to their communities.

CAIR's Role Under "Fi Sabilillah"

CAIR's multifaceted advocacy efforts align closely with the principles of "**Fi Sabilillah**", as outlined in the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). By defending the vulnerable, promoting justice, and working toward systemic reform, CAIR exemplifies the objectives of Zakat to uplift and protect the Muslim community. Supporting CAIR through Zakat contributions ensures these vital efforts can continue, fostering a society rooted in equity, understanding, and justice for all.

In supporting CAIR through Zakat, Muslims are directly contributing to the protection and empowerment of their community. These contributions help establish a secure environment where Muslims can practice their faith without fear of legal repercussions or discriminatory policies. This impact is consistent with the goals of Zakat to uphold justice, protect the oppressed, and ensure the community's welfare.

Conclusion

The interpretations by the Fiqh Council of North America and the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America affirm that Zakat can be directed to advocacy and policy change initiatives, particularly those protecting the rights and welfare of the Muslim community. Examples from the Prophet's (pbuh) life demonstrate the importance of justice, defense, and social support as core Islamic values.

Given the critical role the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) plays in defending civil rights, combating Islamophobia, and advocating for systemic change, it is imperative for American Muslims to recognize CAIR as an essential recipient of their Zakat. By supporting CAIR, Muslims ensure the protection and empowerment of their community while upholding the principles of justice and societal welfare that Zakat embodies.

References

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