

ARE MUSLIMS IN WESTERN NATIONS RICH ENOUGH TO BUILD ISLAMIC INSTITUTIONS FROM SADAQA RATHER THAN USE ZAKAT FUNDS?

We can discuss how Muslims in western nations have progressed in income and wealth creation over the last few decades. But then we would also have to discuss how the cost of real estate in western nations may have outpaced the growth of income over the same period, what implications that has for affordability of building a masjid, and how this weighs on the priorities for the different categories of Zakat. We can then also discuss what implications there are when the cost of land in one city is three times the cost of land in another city less than 20 miles away with no significant difference in income for people with similar professions living in those two cities (other than occasionally wealthier people), thereby changing the affordability of building a new masjid by the community in the more expensive city, even though it may be needed.

We can certainly debate and discuss these questions. But in my mind the key issue seems to be that Zakat money, whose primary purpose is to be spent in the local community, is potentially being diverted from the local community to non-local communities (primarily internationally). It seems if each community gave the obligatory Zakat to the local masjid, and the masjid then distributed it equally over time to all eight categories of Zakat based on need, there would be no poor, there would be no shortage of Islamic institutions, and there would be no debate on relative priorities of Zakat usage.

As an example, preliminary calculations suggest that the Zakat money from the greater Irvine community alone could be greater than ten million dollars per year. However, ICOI gets less than one hundred thousand dollars in Zakat contributions annually, which seems to be less than 1% of what the Zakat obligation potentially is. If the obligatory money is being donated as Zakat, where does this money go? It seems like a lot of it goes elsewhere, and we debate what to do with the little that is left behind.

Why does that happen, when our scholars clearly tell us to spend on our community first? Is it because the local masajid are not trusted to distribute this correctly? Is it because the Shuyukh are not in agreement about what categories to use it for, and that uncertainty causes people to decide individually where to send Zakat money? Is it because we have so many charitable institutions trying to collect and administer Zakat on their own that efforts are duplicated with multiple food banks, clothing assistance charities, etc, within 5-10 miles of each other? Should we not consolidate this through regional Islamic Centers where it could have greater scale and effectiveness?

My opinion is that if we, as local Muslim communities (including local Religious leaders) established a uniform system of Zakat education, collection, and distribution that was transparent to the community, and based on the rules of Fiqh, more Zakat money would flow into the local system, thereby increasing the 'size of the pie' significantly. As a result, there would be plenty of money to address the needs of the poor, and promote our faith through the sponsorship of infrastructure, institutions, and teachers, all in parallel, in our local communities. This is particularly important when we think about the future generations whose needs are different than the previous ones. If in debating the uses of our collective donations we end up not building Islamic centers or infrastructure that address the needs of the next generation with real community centers, there is the danger that there may not be very many local people to collect Zakat from in the not so distant future.