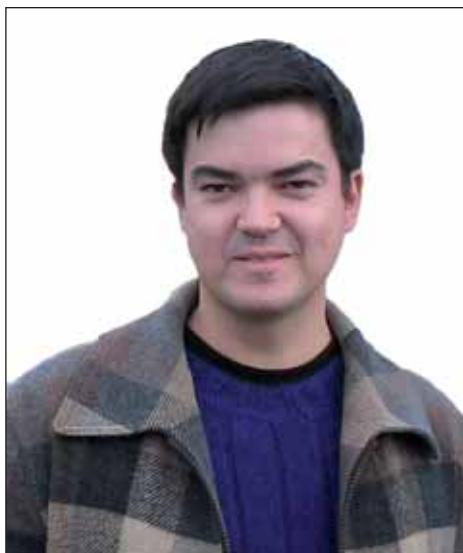


Zakat as sadaqah or sadaqah as zakat?

In the second of a two-part analysis, Dr Renat Bekkin, senior research fellow at Mardjani Foundation, Moscow, continues the discussion on poverty alleviation, in the case of Russia.



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It is not accidental that the Muslim Religious Boards in Russia promote federal legislative amendments regarding waqf and almost ignore the issue of zakat while the latter could be a part of a federal religious tax, like, for example, 'church tax' in Germany.

The lack of interest in zakat of Muslim clergymen is logical. As distinct from waqf, zakat is not a universal instrument designed to cover the expenses of religious organisations. Most theologians, for example, are convinced that the money received as a purifying tax should not be used to build mosques in places where there are enough of them. They believe that the state (obviously, the Muslim state) should shoulder these expenses. In a non-Muslim state, likewise, it is undesirable to spend the larger part of zakat on the same things. Zakat can be used, however, to fund education, publishing, and other activities designed to promote religious knowledge among Muslims.

As for the culture of zakat in Russia, it was lost during Soviet rule, just like the culture of waqf. However, during the first years of Soviet power in Russia zakat was collected in places with predominantly Muslim populations (the Volga area, the North Caucasus, Central Asia) and was used to buy tools for collective farms. Yet, during the following years zakat was not collected in the areas of compact settlement of Muslims. It was replaced by irregular sadaqah paid by devout Muslims on the days of religious holidays.

Sooner or later the Russian Muslims would inevitably come across the issue of zakat since – unlike waqf – it is one of the five pillars of Islam. Since February 2005, two

domestic banks, Ak Bars Bank and Tatfondbank, have been receiving zakat payments from the Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan (a federal subject of Russia); it seems that they work as intermediaries between the payers of zakat and the recipients. It should be said that the money received is unlikely to be used as effectively as in some of the Muslim states.

In some regions of Russia, the Islamic clergymen are trying to use other religious taxes, although their original meaning is not always certain in the Shari'ah. In some districts of Tatarstan, imams ask collective farm chairmen to donate potatoes for the students of Muslim religious establishments. This should be described as the collection of sadaqah, a charitable donation paid once in a while, not ushr in Tatarstan, which is a tithe.

It's another matter if zakat paid by Muslim businessmen will be paid in the form of an interest-free loan given to those collective farms or individual farmers under the condition that they should provide the needy with food instead of paying back the principal of the loan – in other words, to provide those who belong to at least one of eight categories of zakat recipients.

The zakat culture has been very slow to strike root in Russia because the local Muslims know next to nothing about it. The above example shows that most of the faithful do not distinguish between zakat and other Islamic charities. So far, the clergy has failed to deal with this ignorance. Several years ago, a Russian anthropologist, Ahmed Yarlykapov, did some research in the North Caucasus. He described this situation: the imam of a mosque in Maykop (capital of the

Republic of Adygeya, Russia) set up two boxes – one for zakat, the other for sadaqah – only to remove them after a while because the believers could not distinguish between them.

However, confusion of zakat and sadaqah is half the trouble. In Moscow regular payments of Muslims that cover administrative expenses of local communities are often called zakat. It is obvious that the leaders of those communities deliberately seek to sacralise the membership dues collected for the community's needs and attach a 'special' status to them. From the author's point of view, such tricks are rather improper. The believers see that the money paid as 'zakat' does not go to those categories that were indicated in the Quran, and consequently they lose trust in zakat as an institution that contributes to effective redistribution of wealth in society for the benefit of its needy members.

Abuses are inevitable while redistributing the part of the purifying tax that is supposed to go to the collectors of zakat. Often their share goes up to 30 per cent of the redistributed zakat.

In recent years in Russia paying such Muslim tax as zakat al-fitr has been observed. Some Muslim peoples of Russia, for example, Adygs and Kabardin, distribute zakat al-fitr even before the end of fasting. At the same time paying zakat al-fitr is regulated not only by Shari'ah, but by local customs as well. Yarlykapov described a case, when one of the women in aul (village) Hatukai in Adygeya while calculating zakat al-fitr included not just her children among those for whom she should pay the tax, but her cows as well, saying that they are also living creatures and she should pay alms for them to. In another aul in the region, Koshehabl, zakat al-fitr was distributed mostly among relatives and close friends of the payer.

Unfortunately, it is the local superstitions and prejudices rather than conscious necessity to follow one of the five pillars of Islam that form the basis of paying irregular alms by many Muslims in Russia. For example,

in the North Caucasus they pay sadaqah for deceased relatives if the payer saw them in dreams.

Given that there is no centralised zakat system in Russia, some regional Muslim religious administration assumed the function of collection and distribution of the purifying tax. At the same time, in most mosques the clergy and believers continue to confuse 'sadaqah' and 'zakat'.

The Republic of Karelia probably has the most positive record of collection and distribution of zakat in today's Russia with direct participation of the local Muslim religious authorities. There, the collection and distribution of zakat is the responsibility of the regional Muslim religious board, which has communities in major cities of Karelia.

The success of the Karelian community in collecting and distributing zakat is to a large extent explained by its small population. The community members know each other as well as those who can pay zakat and those who are in need. Consequently, the Muslim Religious Board of Karelia fulfills a rather technical task of collecting and distributing the purifying tax. It is also important that the mufti of Karelia, Wisam Ali Bardwil, places emphasis on the necessity to pay zakat in his sermons, publications and public speeches.

One can't underestimate the personal authority of Bardwil (born Palestinian Arab, now a citizen of Russia) in development of the system of zakat in the region. His honesty seems to be the best guarantee for zakat-payers. They can be confident that their money would be used properly and according to Shari'ah rules. Unfortunately, there aren't enough persons among Muslim spiritual leaders who enjoy the same confidence in the material issues among Russian Muslims as Bardwil. As to official Muslim organisations on a federal level, the majority of Muslims believe that their capacity to collect and distribute zakat is much lesser than of Muslim boards on a regional level. The lack of knowledge of zakat among Russian imams also does not strengthen the

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confidence of Muslims to this purificatory alms.

Today, it is too early to talk about establishment of a centralised all-Russia zakat collection and distribution system under the aegis of the Russian Mufti Council or some other Muslim co-ordination structures given the absence of a Muslim religious board that would be common for all Muslims. The first step on this path should be improvement of the database of those who receive the purifying tax. Moreover, it is necessary to spread the use of modern technologies. For example, in 2005, a local website, Takafol.ru (the first Russian internet resource on Islamic economics and finance), launched the country's only zakat-calculator in the Russian language.

Given the imperfect system of zakat collection and distribution under the aegis of the Muslim religious boards in Russia, it is often misinterpreted by both the zakat officials collecting it and zakat payers. For example, instead of paying zakat to a dedicated fund or zakat officials, some payers tend to give money (including in the form of non-interest loans) to small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs), usually to those that are owned or run by businessmen originating from the same ethnic community.

To collect and distribute zakat in Russia it is not necessary to amend the legislation. Yet it is necessary to provide tax remissions for regular payers of zakat. Otherwise zakat is bound to be irregular charity payments – in other words, it will merge with sadaqah. However, there is nothing wrong in the de-

velopment of an Islamic charity based on sadaqah. The main condition here is the same as in the case with zakat: the payers should be provided with a transparent system of collecting and distributing of their money. Sadaqah has several advantages over zakat in Russia; one being that it does not need mediators in the form of bodies responsible for the collection and distribution of collected funds. The only thing needed is technical support to ensure that those who lack the funds and those who can grant them, find each other. A good example is the Islamic charitable project named Sadaka.ru. The purpose of the project, according to its website, is to unite Muslims to help brothers and sisters in faith who are in difficult life situations. There is a special form on the website, which anyone in need of financial assistance can fill out. Those who want to help can directly contact the needy through the information displayed on the site. The website organisers themselves do not accept any funds to their accounts.

The disadvantages of such projects should include the fact that not all those in need have access to the internet, and that in such a situation the deception by the applicant in the section ‘need help’ is quite possible. So far, these projects have been effective in large cities with high levels of internet users and with large numbers of wealthy Muslims.

Despite this, there is hope that the future of Islamic charity is for projects such as Sadaka.ru, which enables benefactors and those in need to find each other directly, without any difficulties. It is possible that such innovation will be popular among

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Qolsarif mosque
Tatarstan, Russia



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payers of zakat, who do not trust the existing structures responsible for the collection and distribution of zakat: fortunately, there is a technical opportunity to calculate tax purification using online zakat-calculators.

As to compact Muslim communities in small towns and rural areas, the most effective form of Islamic charity still remains traditional sadaqah – and sometimes zakat. The effectiveness of collection and distribution of the latter will be directly dependent on the competence of the local spiritual leaders of the Muslim community in the issue of zakat, as well as his honesty in such matters.

However, an independent entity in the form of a zakat-foundation is not the answer. Such independent foundations, not under the wing of the official Muslim structures, will attract increasing attention from security services.

Conclusion

- At the moment, unco-ordinated Muslim religious boards in Russia, while imperfect, are still the only working structures able to collect and distribute zakat and sadaqah.
- In the majority of Muslim regions of Russia notions of zakat and sadaqah are often confused.
- Innovation technologies need to be developed in order to facilitate payment and distribution of zakat.
- The future of the Muslim charity in the big cities will be largely determined by independent internet portals, in which benefactors will not need intermediaries to find each other.
- There is no need to amend legislation in order to form a system of collecting and distributing zakat. However, to stimulate payment of purifying tax on a mass and regular basis, it is necessary to provide tax benefits for regular payers of zakat, at least on the level of regional legislation. ☀