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## A Brief History of Humanitarianism in the Muslim World

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# **A Brief History of Humanitarianism in the Muslim World**

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The modern humanitarian principles of saving lives and alleviating poverty are divinely entrenched in the teachings of Islam; according to the Qur'an, saving a life is like saving the whole of humanity.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by these teachings, acts of charity, concern for others and the provision of social welfare have played an integral role in Muslim societies for the last 1400 years. This document provides a brief historical overview of humanitarianism in the Muslim world and in doing so demonstrates the centrality of humanitarian principles in Islam.

## The Concept of Humanitarianism in Islam

Before looking at the history of humanitarianism in the Muslim world it is important to define what humanitarianism means from an Islamic perspective. In Islam, humanitarianism is a very broad concept that encompasses traditional forms of charity, with which modern humanitarian aid is more often associated, and also more holistic interactions between human beings and indeed all creatures.

Charity, in the traditional sense of a transfer of material resources from the rich to the poor, falls into two categories in Islam: voluntary and obligatory. Obligatory charity is institutionalised in Islam through *zakat* which is the third pillar<sup>2</sup> of Islam. *Zakat*, which is mentioned many times in the Qur'an, is a mechanism in which Muslims donate a portion of their wealth every year for the poor and needy.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally the amount of *zakat* payable is one fortieth of a person's assets per year, providing their wealth reaches a certain threshold, in addition to a small annual payment (*zakat al-fitr*) that all Muslims are required to pay during Ramadan. *Sadaqah* on the other hand is a form of voluntary charity of which Muslims can donate any amount, at any time. A common form of *sadaqah* is *waqf*, which is an endowment often given in the form of land or property that is either used directly for charitable purposes or used to support charitable activities through the return from its investment.

The concept of charity is central to social justice, which is a sacred value in Islam and a central tenet of the faith. *Zakat* and *sadaqah* are intended to balance social inequality and hence promote a more just society. Indeed the Qur'an considers an act of charity as more than just a good deed because of its function in balancing social inequalities.<sup>4</sup>

Humanitarianism in Islam, however, is not confined to the transfer of resources between the rich and the poor. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) taught that any act of kindness towards, or concern for other living things is also an act of charity.<sup>5</sup> This holistic concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Qur'an, Surah 5:32

<sup>2</sup> The five pillars/duties of Islam are Shahada (Profession of Faith), Salah (prayers), Zakah (Giving of Alms), Saum (fasting during Ramadan) and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca).

<sup>3</sup> Qur'an, Surah 9:60 states that *zakat* can be given to eight categories and these are the destitute, the needy, *zakat* collectors, those whose hearts are to be conciliated, slaves, debtors, those whose purpose is serving God and wayfarers.

<sup>4</sup> See also 'charitable giving and social justice' in Islam, in Khan, A. Tahmazov, I. and Abuarqub, M. (2009) 'Translating Faith Into Development' available at <http://www.islamic-relief.com/Indepth/downloads/Translating%20faith%20into%20development.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> According to a *hadith* (saying of the Prophet), The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) told followers "Indeed the gates to goodness are many: glorifying God, praising Him, magnifying Him, saying 'There is no god but Allah', enjoining the good and forbidding the wrong, removing any source of harm from the road, listening to the aggrieved, guiding the blind, showing the seeker his need, striving as far as your two legs could carry you and with deep concern to give succour to him who asks, carrying with the strength of your arms (the burdens of) the weak. All these are (acts of) charities which are an obligation on you." (reported by Al-Bukhari / Muslim)

humanitarianism means that people are not divided into givers and receivers, weak and strong, but in fact all have the capacity to do good regardless of their material wealth or social standing.

## **Humanitarian Practice in the Muslim World**

Throughout the history of the Muslim world, many acts of kindness towards individuals and other living things would have been committed at an individual level and were unlikely to warrant documentation unless they involved a prominent member of society. Consequently this overview focuses largely on more regulated and documented forms of charity, such as *zakat* and *waqf*, and the *sadaqah* of prominent Muslim rulers.

### **Zakat**

*Zakat* collections began during Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) time and were the responsibility of the ruling caliph. During the Caliphates which ran from the death of Muhammad (pbuh) to the thirteenth century, caliph's frequently employed their political power to ensure that the humanitarian needs of their people were met during times of crisis. For example the first caliph elected after the Prophet's (pbuh) death, declared war on tribes who refused to pay *zakat* (Krafess: 2005: 336). While recipients generally tended to be poor, *zakat* was also used to feed religious pilgrims, travellers and students (Lev: 2006: 7). Some credit the *zakat* system with creating exemplary social cohesion in the early Muslim world and significantly raising the standard of living of the poor (Krafess: 2005: 337).

According to Singer (2006: 315) the organised official collection of *zakat* does not seem to have endured with the expansion of the Islamic state and the record of *zakat* collection is not consistent, with only scattered evidence of collections in the successive Muslim states and empires up to the twentieth century. This does not necessarily mean that *zakat* payments stopped. Instead it is thought that the oversight of *zakat* distribution was in the hands of community leaders rather than the state, and this meant that payments were not officially recorded (Singer 2008: 64).

This being noted, there were attempts to revive state-led *zakat* systems. For example, after conquering Egypt in the twelfth century, the Muslim leader, Saladin Al-ayobi, noted that people had begun to pay their *zakat* money directly to the poor. To ensure its efficient distribution, he re-established the government regulation of collecting *zakat* and under him *zakat* funds were distributed to the poor and needy, debtors and travellers. This practice continued after Saladin's death and a fourteenth century traveller noted that *zakat* pay stations lined his route from Cairo to Syria (ibid: 48). However it would appear that once the collection of *zakat* became the responsibility of the state it was treated more as a form of public tax (ibid: 49). Therefore historical documentation does not present *zakat* records independently from other state revenue and expenditure records so the exploration of its impact in more recent Muslim societies is limited.

### **Sadaqah**

Although highly encouraged in the Qur'an, *sadaqah* is not considered obligatory in the way that *zakat* is. Therefore the charitable intention behind *sadaqah* is much easier to identify and it is the prevalence of this voluntary charity that perhaps best reflects the centrality of humanitarian principles in Muslim societies of the past.

It is advised that when you give *sadaqah* with your right hand, your left one should not know about it. Therefore acts of *sadaqah* committed by individuals were rarely declared or documented. However given their position in society, the *sadaqah* of Muslim rulers was regularly recorded and the evidence available suggests that ensuring the welfare of their people was a key priority for Muslim leaders

In particular, charitable giving appears to have been customary following Friday prayers. For example, during the Fatimid period in tenth century Egypt, the general, Jawhar, distributed alms to the poor after attending prayers with his troops. Similarly in the fifteenth century, European residents of Cairo reported that prominent members of the community gave food and money to the poor after Friday prayers, and in sixteenth century Istanbul it was reported that the Sultan gave out alms to the needy following his processions after Friday prayers (Singer 2008: 74).

If Friday was the most popular day for charity, Ramadan was certainly the most popular month. Islamic teachings ask Muslims to particularly remember the poor and needy during Ramadan, the month in which the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). While there are a number of festivals in the Islamic calendar in which alms giving is said to be particularly rewarded, Ramadan is most renowned for charitable giving. The Fatimid caliphs, who ruled across Egypt, the Maghreb (Morocco), and parts of Europe from the tenth to the eleventh centuries, used to hold large banquets at Eid al-Fitr, the celebration that marks the end of Ramadan, in which guests were encouraged to take away surplus food and distribute it to the poor. Similarly in Anatolia, the Akhi brotherhoods of the thirteenth century regularly organised huge gatherings and feasts in which the poor and destitute were welcomed, while the rulers of sixteenth century Turkey visited orphans and the sick during Ramadan and invited the poor to their homes to collect meat, bread and coins (ibid: 79).

In addition to regular alms giving, there also appears to have been a determined effort from Muslim rulers to achieve social equality and justice. This is illustrated by the proclamations of Ottoman sultans which show that rulers were expected to secure the welfare of their subjects and promote justice (Singer 2008: 143).

Further evidence of this welfare provision is gathered from the response of Muslim rulers to major emergencies such as famine. In the seventh century the second caliph, Umar, ordered governors from surrounding provinces to make food collections and organise aid convoys in response to famine in Arabia (Krafess 2005: 328). On another occasion during a famine in Medina at the time of Abu Bakr's caliphate, Uthman, a companion of Muhammad (pbuh) who was later to become the fourth caliph, received a huge caravan from Damascus carrying food and other goods. Local merchants gathered around and began bidding for the goods so that they could sell them to the people. Uthman declared that no merchant could offer him a price as high as Allah, who would reward him for his charity, and he proceeded to distribute the goods free of charge (Ahmad 2000: 42). Again, when famine struck the Egyptian state during the Mamluk era the ruling Sultan took responsibility for feeding the poor and demanded that his amirs, state officials, and wealthy merchants do the same (Sabra 2006: 165).

## **Waqf**

Of all the charitable activities of the Muslim world both past and present, *waqf* which as voluntary charity is a form of *sadaqah*, is the most comprehensively and consistently

documented. Although not mentioned specifically in the Qur'an, the practice of donating *waqf* is alluded to several times and is the subject of an important *hadith*. The *hadith* describes how a Muslim came to the Prophet (pbuh) for advice about a piece of land he had recently acquired. The follower was not sure what to do with it and the Prophet (pbuh) suggested that he block the capital and give its fruits as alms. He added that the field should always be kept for that purpose and should not be sold by those who inherited it (reported by Muhammad Ali). Other sources also recall that the Prophet (pbuh) asked Umar Ibn-alkhatab, who was later the second caliph, to appropriate a piece of land and have its revenues given to the poor (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003: 32). This practice became known as *waqf* and once its legal status was consolidated in the eighth century, the practice extended across the Muslim World (ibid: 30).

The resources generated from *waqf* property have since been a vital source of funding for a wide range of public services and welfare activities including; the digging of wells, the construction of water fountains, the construction of homes for the poor who were unable to pay rent, free hostels and hotels for travellers, the maintenance of bridges and roads, the organisation of funerals for the poor, the upkeep of cemeteries, help for the blind, the handicapped and the imprisoned, the financing of weddings for the unmarried poor, food centres serving free meals, the provision of milk for children, and the construction and maintenance of mosques, colleges, schools and hospitals (Krafess 2005: 338; Singer 2008: 94 & 97).

Of all of these services, hospitals were one of the greatest legacies of *waqf* in early Islam. While some hospitals and medical dispensaries were built using private funds, it was largely due to *waqf* that the early Muslim world became a global leader in the universal provision of medical care. The first Islamic hospital was built in Damascus eighty-six years after the Prophet's (pbuh) emigration (*Hijra*<sup>6</sup>) from Mecca to the city of Medina. Its mission was to cure the sick, give care to those afflicted with chronic diseases and look after lepers, the blind and poor people. Unlike the majority of medical services in the world at that time, all treatment and care was universal and free of charge (Sayali 2006: 3).

Other hospitals soon followed throughout the newly emerging Islamic empire from Asia Minor to the Maghreb, funded by *waqf* endowments from caliphs, other rulers, philanthropists and religious foundations (Turner 1997: 133). In tenth century Baghdad, a hospital endowed by the mother of the caliph was extended to meet the needs of prisoners and people living in rural areas and the inner city (Hamameh and Anees 1984: 51). During the thirteenth century, an Islamic hospital in Morocco, heavily endowed by *waqf* donations, was considered to be unequalled in the world. Each patient received a visit from the Prince of Morocco after Friday prayers and on leaving the hospital, poor patients were given a sum of money on which to survive until they could find employment (Zaimeche 2004: 16).

Like hospitals, mosques which have historically been instrumental in the provision of various social services, have also relied heavily on *waqf* revenue for both their initial construction and their maintenance. In many places, mosques provided students with accommodation and a place to study and some even gave students a monthly maintenance allowance. Furthermore some of the larger mosques, especially those providing shelter for large numbers of people, had adjoining kitchens which fed hundreds of people each day (Stillman 2006: 217). One of the most famous of these was found at the Ibrahimi Mosque (Mosque of Abraham) in Palestine,

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<sup>6</sup> The *Hijra* of the Prophet (pbuh) is the start of the Islamic (Hijry) calendar which began in 622 A.D.

which during the tenth century, provided pilgrims with meals and a place to study (ibid: 217). As well as housing students, the mosques often provided shelter for refugees, something called for by the Prophet (pbuh) who was himself a refugee after fleeing persecution in Mecca.<sup>7</sup>

In Islam, the care of orphans is an important religious duty, and this was something particularly encouraged by the Prophet (pbuh) who was himself an orphan.<sup>8</sup> Although there is no evidence of orphanages being built in the early Muslim world there were numerous *waqf* endowed schools for orphans. One such example was found in thirteenth century Cairo where a large school provided orphans with an education, food and clothing but did not provide them with a place to live (ibid: 218). Given Islamic teachings on the care of orphans, Stillman (2006: 218) suggests that most orphans were probably cared for by their extended families so there was no need to provide them with institutional accommodation.

*Waqf* donations were also used for ordinary schools because education is particularly important in Islam. The Qur'an repeatedly encourages Muslims to learn and increase their knowledge in order to become stronger in their faith.<sup>9</sup> In particular, *waqf* led to the emergence of Islamic schools which were developed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries particularly in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Egypt. Usually attached to mosques, they contained purpose built colleges, spaces in which students could pray and study and living quarters. *Waqf* donations covered the salaries of the teachers, accommodation, education, meals, a cash stipend and clothes for the students (Singer 2008: 84).

Documents from the era of Mamluk rule in Egypt from 1250 A.D. to 1517 A.D. show that *waqf* funds played an important role in the running of the state, providing services such as medical care, education, the provision of food and water and the burial of the dead. When the Ottoman Empire conquered the region in 1517 A.D. most of Cairo's buildings and nearly half of Egypt's agricultural land was designated as *waqf* (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003: 34).

Donations of *waqf* continued in the Ottoman Empire which ran from 1299 A.D. to 1923 A.D. and at one time spanned three continents. Records show that the elite donated a large portion of their wealth as *waqf* which sustained many destitute and unemployed people in Ottoman cities and towns (Inalcik and Quataert 1994: 47). Indeed at the beginning of the eighteenth century, between one half and two thirds of the lands of the Ottoman Empire were designated as *waqf*. In addition *waqf* funds supported public services such as education, health care and water works and secured the upkeep of roads and bridges (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003: 30).

*Waqf* is also responsible for some of the most notable, or at least the most documented, charitable acts of the great empires of the Muslim world: the soup kitchens of the Ottoman Empire. The soup kitchens, known as *imarets*, were established throughout the Empire often in properties donated as *waqf*. They were well organised, with specific instructions as to who was allowed to receive food and the portion that they were entitled to. Not all of those who attended the *imarets* were poor; patrons included visiting dignitaries, travellers, scholars, students, and

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<sup>7</sup> For more on Islam and refugees see Kirmani, N., Khan, A. A. and Palmer, V. (2008) 'Does Faith Matter?: An Examination of Islamic Relief's Work With Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons' available at [http://www.islamic-relief.com/Indepth/research\\_articles.aspx](http://www.islamic-relief.com/Indepth/research_articles.aspx)

<sup>8</sup> Qur'an, Surah 2:83 states "[and be good] to the orphans and the very poor, speak kindly to men, make prayer, and give in charity."

<sup>9</sup> For more on Islam and education see Abuarqub, M., (2009) 'Islamic Perspectives on Education' available at <http://www.islamic-relief.com/Indepth/Default.aspx?depID=6>

staff of the *imaret* and the local mosque. *Imarets* varied in size with some feeding several hundred a day. First established in the fourteenth century, many of them survived the fall of the empire in the twentieth century and continue to operate today. For example in the Old City of Jerusalem, the Tikiyat Khaski Sultan which was established over five hundred years ago, still serves vegetables to around a hundred people a day and meat to around a thousand people a day during Ramadan (Benthall 2002: 153).

The practice of *waqf* was by no means curtailed by the fall of the Muslim empires. Anthropologists visiting Morocco shortly after the end of the French occupation, reported that in one town they visited, *awqaf* (plural of *waqf*) accounted for much of the town's property including; shops, ateliers, ovens, hostels for caravans, public baths, granaries, and a slaughterhouse and in the surrounding countryside, gardens, wheat fields and orchards (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003: 35). In Turkey, new legislation introduced in the 1960s, partly inspired by Islamic law, led to a significant number of new *waqf* foundations. The 'Koç Foundation' set up shortly after the laws were introduced and founded on the 'Ataturk tradition of putting Islam to the service of nation building' is now one of the biggest philanthropic institutions in Turkey and has made considerable contributions in the fields of education and healthcare (ibid: 36). In the Old City of Jerusalem, since the Israeli occupation began in 1967, there has been an increase in the number of *awqaf* as Muslims try to safeguard religiously important land for future generations (ibid 2003: 36).

## Contemporary Humanitarianism

Today, Muslims all over the world continue to adhere to the principles of humanitarianism prescribed by Islam. *Waqf* remains a substantial source of charity, so much so that most Muslim majority states now include a Ministry of *Awqaf* to oversee the management of *waqf* donations. For example in the Sultanate of Oman, hundreds of *awqaf* are administered by the government and they are not limited to traditional assets such as mosques and hospitals but also include farms and prime real estate (ibid. 2003: 29-35).

Similarly following renewed interest in *zakat* in the twentieth century, a number of Muslim governments including those of Jordan, Libya, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yemen have reclaimed responsibility for collecting *zakat* and the practice has once again become a regulated system of collecting money from the wealthy and distributing it to the poor.<sup>10</sup> However, unlike in early Islam the practice is not obligatory and *zakat* does not constitute a public tax. Governments rather facilitate the collection and distribution of *zakat* funds from individuals wishing to pay them.

Humanitarian activity among Muslims has been further facilitated by the emergence of non-governmental development and relief organisations which provide Muslims with a medium through which they can channel their charity. Among these organisations a number of Muslim faith based development organisations (FBOs) have emerged, which take their inspiration from Islamic teachings and the humanitarian principles they promote. In general, their work includes the provision of emergency relief to the victims of man-made and natural disasters; longer term development projects such as the provision of education and healthcare or the sponsorship of

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<sup>10</sup> Interest in *zakat* resurfaced in the twentieth century as Islamist thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb promoted the practice as 'a powerful corrective to economic inequality and agent of increased social justice' (Singer 2008: 202)

orphans; and seasonal projects including Ramadan campaigns which ensure the provision of food to the poor during Ramadan and enable Muslim families to celebrate *Eid al-Fitr*.

In particular Muslim FBOs have given renewed impetus to the practice of *waqf* and *zakat*, particularly for Muslims living in secular or predominantly Christian countries in the West where such forms of charity are not common practice. As Benthall (2003: 36) explains, since the 1990s organisations such as Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid have managed to integrate *waqf* and *zakat* into western style fundraising mechanisms. Donors can purchase *waqf* bonds which are invested in property or monetary instruments and the profits are then used to fund projects in the developing world. Similarly by allowing donors to specify the source of the funds they are donating for the cause they wish to support, these organisations have also made it easier for Muslims to donate their *zakat* money to the poor all over the world.

This overview illustrates the importance of humanitarian principles in Islam and the durability of the mechanisms devised to embody them. It has demonstrated that principles associated with the modern concept of 'humanitarianism' have long existed in Muslim societies and Islamic principles of justice and equality can continue to enrich modern approaches to humanitarianism.

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