

# Beneficiaries of Zakāh

## Preface

Islam has specified the beneficiaries of *Zakāh*, removing their arbitrary determination away from human authorities. Thus, the Qur'an says, "**(Zakāh) is only for the indigent (*fuqarā'*), the poor (*masākīn*), those employed to collect it (*al-ʿāmilīn ʿalayhim*), for unifying hearts of those inclined [to Islam] (*al-mu'allafatu qulūbuhum*), for (freeing) slaves (*ar-riqāb*), for (aiding) those indebted (*al-ghārimīn*), for (spending in the) Path of Allah (*fī sabīl Allah*), and for the wayfarer (*ibn sabīl*). It is an ordinance from Allah. Allah knows (everything) and is Wise**" (Q. 9:60).

The aforementioned are the only beneficiaries of *Zakāh*. To stipulate other beneficiaries, besides them, warrants proof from the Qur'an and Sunnah, i.e., *Sharia*. Let us, therefore, clarify each of these beneficiaries.

### 1. *Fuqarā'*

We must turn to the Qur'an and Ḥadīth or Arabic, language of the last divine revelation concerning the authoritative definition this and other beneficiaries of *Zakāh*.

*Fuqarā'* (sing. *faqīr*), "the poor" or "indigent" often refers to opposite of the rich,

usually indicating poverty of the abject kind. The Qur'an quotes Prophet Moses (peace be on him!) as saying, "**O my Lord, verily I am in need (i.e. *faqīr*) of any good that You may send down to me**" (Q. 28:24). In addition, "**Allah has heard the statement of those who say, 'Allah is *faqīr* but we are rich!'. . . We shall say (to them on the Day of Judgment), 'Taste the punishment of the Fire!'**" (Q. 3:181).

The Shaafites consider the *faqīr* as one who has no wealth or occupation, whereas the Hanafites consider the *faqīr* as one who does not possess the *niṣāb*, which is one of the conditions of *Zakāh*.

In modern times, *fuqarā'* includes the homeless, beggars, the indigent, and the like who are not making ends meet.

### 2. *Masākīn*

The *masākīn* (sing. *miskīn*) refer to poor people who eek out their livelihood, making ends meet but having little or no surplus means beyond what satisfies the necessities of life. They are neither rich nor indigent but are somewhere between the two states in respect of disposable income.

The Qur'an says, "**As for the ship, it belonged to some *masākīn* who work at sea**" (Q. 18:79). At times, the *masākīn* are wont not to ask others for aid, as the Prophet (ﷺ) said,

"The *miskīn* is one who does not find enough to enrich him, is not aware of it, and does not ask people for anything. He can receive charity" (Agreed Upon).

That is how the majority of Muslim jurists regarded the categories of *fuqarā'* and *masākīn*. According to Imam Abū Ḥanīfa, however, the definitions of them are reversed, whereas the Shaafites make no socio-economic distinction between the *faqīr* and *miskīn*.

### 3. *Al-ʿāmilīn ʿalayhim*

It was the practice of the Prophet (ﷺ), the Rightly Guided Caliphs, and other rulers to reward the *Zakāh* collector, who worked for the Islamic State, or give him a gift of money or other valuable.

Ibn as-Sa'dī al-Mālikī (may Allah be pleased with him!) narrated, 'Umar appointed me to collect *Zakāh*. When I completed my work, having given him what I collected, he recompensed me. I said to him, "I did it for Allah." He said, "Take what I gave you, for I worked for the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ), and he did to me, as I to you, saying, "If I give you something without you asking, consume it and give charity" (Agreed Upon).

This type of beneficiary is still extant in some Muslim countries employed under ministries of finance, whereas among Muslim minorities we

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find mosques assuming the role of *al-‘āmilīn ‘alayhim* but not necessarily with that intent, facilitating the collection of *Zakāh*) in the community.

## 4. *Al-mu‘allafutu qulūbuhum*

This beneficiary is typically associated in the Islamic traditions with new converts to Islam. For example, the Prophet (ﷺ) gave Abū Sufyān bn Ḥarb and others—former enemies of Islam—some wealth of the Muslims, as he did to ‘Alqama bn ‘Alāna. When the Anṣār reproved his actions, the Prophet (ﷺ) said, “Aren’t you pleased they go away with camels and sheep, while you go away with the Messenger of Allah?!” (Reported by Muslim). That is because Abū Sufyān and others were recent converts to Islam, so the Prophet’s generous charity to them served to reconcile their hearts to Islam, assimilating them.

Some scholars opine it is still permissible today to use *Zakāh* for the express purpose of ‘reconciling’ the hearts of new important converts to Islam. Others hold this beneficiary is no longer extant since the rise of Islam, its victories over its enemies, and its expansion, citing as evidence Abū Bakr aṣ-Ṣiddīq’s refusal to give *Zakāh* to Abū Sufyān et al during his caliphate. He was the first caliph

or ruler of Islam after the Prophet (ﷺ) died.

Ash-Shāfi‘i defined *al-mu‘allafutu qulūbuhum* as those who converted to Islam but whose intentions are weak or who are noble and, if given Muslim wealth, may influence others besides themselves to accept Islam. Abū Ḥanīfa opined their right to *Zakāh* ceased with the rise and dominance of Islam in the land.

## 5. *Ar-riqāb*

*Ar-riqāb* refers to slaves or captives, i.e. prisoners of war. According to Ibn ‘Abbās (may Allah be pleased with him!), “There is no harm in freeing slaves with *Zakāh*” (Reported by al-Bukhārī and others).

Scholars differ on *ar-riqāb*. Some Companions, the Hanafites, and Shaafites opined *ar-riqāb* are *mukātibūn*—i.e. those slaves who made written or other contracts with their masters, whereof the former shall pay to the latter a certain sum of money as the prices of themselves, and, on the payment thereof, attain their freedom—whom can be helped with *Zakāh*. Others like Imam Mālik, al-Bukhārī, Aḥmad, and others held *riqāb* are those slaves who are freed outright with *Zakāh*. The preferred view is that *Zakāh* may be used for both types of slaves.

## 6. *Al-ghārimīn*

*Al-ghārimīn* are Muslims who are indebted. Imam Abū Ḥanīfa held *ghārimīn* are those who indebted but who do not possess *niṣāb* and means to pay off their debts. As for Imam ash-Shāfi‘i, the *ghārimīn* are two types: (i) those who are indebted through lawful means and (ii) those who are indebted, even though they are rich.

The Qur’an uses *ghārimīn* in a general sense, which includes those who are indebted, whether they are rich or poor, obedient or disobedient Muslims.

## 7. *Fī sabīl Allah*

The Qur’an uses the phrase *fī sabīl Allah* (“for the path of Allah” or “for the pleasure of Allah”) generally. Yet scholars, including Abū Ḥanīfa insisted in relegating it specifically for jihad purposes and the poverty of Muslim soldiers (the latter is not a condition with the Shaafites), since jihad is often referred to in Ḥadīth literature as *jihad fī sabīl Allah*, that is, “fighting in the way of Allah.” A deeper investigation of the Ḥadīth literature indicates the Prophet (ﷺ) used *fī sabīl Allah* in connection with other Islamic good deeds, apart from jihad, such as “Al-Ḥajj and ‘Umrah are *fī sabīl Allah* (for the pleasure of Allah)” (Reported by Aḥmad); “*Zakāh* is not for the rich except (when given to them) as *fī sabīl*

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Allah or as a wayfarer (*ibn sabīl*)” (Reported by Abū Dāwūd).

In this context, the question is often asked, “Can a masjid receive Zakāh?” By extension, can Muslim educational and social services organizations receive it? The short answer is yes. No prohibition in Islamic Law prevents mosques, Muslim schools, and Muslim organizations dedicated to Islamic services from receiving Zakāh under the beneficiary of *fī sabīl Allah* (See FAQ at the end of this article).

## 5. *Ibn sabīl*

The wayfarer is entitled Zakāh to assist him or her in the journey. If the wayfarer is rich, but he or she is unable to access their wealth in time during the journey, they can receive Zakāh if they are in need of assistance. That is because the Qur’an uses the phrase *ibn sabīl* in a general sense without specifying the gender, socio-economic status, or religious observances of the Muslim for that matter, of the wayfarer, as with the other beneficiaries.

According to the Abū Ḥanīfa, *ibn sabīl* is a stranger in town who is separated from his wealth or his native country. Ash-Shāfi‘i considered *ibn sabīl* a sojourner who is in need of assistance.

## 9. Summary

Ash-Shawkāni wrote in his *Nayl al-awṭār*, “Muslim exegetes, ḥadīth, and fiqh scholars have discussed at length the possible meanings of the eight beneficiaries of Zakāh. The truth of the matter is the accuracy of their descriptions ought to rely on the point of view of Sharia or Arabic. Thus, whosoever (the Sharia) regards as *faqīr*, for example, qualifies as a Zakāh recipient, as is the case with the rest of the beneficiaries. If their descriptions are not found in Sharia, then the recourse is to the Arabic language (since it is the linguistic medium of the divine revelation). Opinions and stipulations of the scholars on the eight beneficiaries are to be considered only to the extent that they are supported by evidence from Sharia or Arabic.”

## 10. FAQ

- a) *Can Zakāh be given in lump sum to one of the eight ordained beneficiaries or should it be equally divided among all eight of them?*

Scholars differ. According to Ash-Shāfi‘i, if there is one of the *al-‘āmilīn ‘alayhim*, then Zakāh is to be distributed equally among them, that is, in 8

equal portions; if there are no *al-‘āmilīn ‘alayhim*, the remaining 7 beneficiaries receive the Zakāh.

Abū Ḥanīfa held it is permissible to give the entire amount of Zakāh to one beneficiary.

Mālik adhered to the division in the distribution of Zakāh, leaving details of the affair to the discretion of the Islamic ruler based on the welfare of the Muslim community.

We think that Mālik had the best legal position on the issue.

- b) *Can Zakāh be given to corrupt Islamic leaders or authorities?*

Scholars have debated the issue in the past. The preferred view is that Zakāh should be handed over to them in the context of an Islamic state or Muslim majority country in which leaders authorize its collection, which is based on a number of *āḥādīth* (sing. ḥadīth) and the practice of the early Muslims. For example, when the Prophet (ﷺ) asked, “What do you think about (the situation), whereof we have rulers who deny us our rights

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but demand their rights from us?” he said, *“Listen to them and obey them. They carry the burden of their actions, and you carry the burden of yours”* (Reported by Muslim, at-Tirmidhi, et al). Another time he (ﷺ) was asked, *“If I pay my Zakāh to your envoy, am I innocent before Allah and His Messenger?”* The Prophet (ﷺ) replied, *“If you pay it to my envoy, you are innocent before Allah and His Messenger. You will have your reward, and any sin will be on those who altered it (in a sinful way)”* (Reported by Aḥmad).

c) *Can Zakāh be given to non-Muslims?*

The answer is yes and no but different perspectives. The guiding principle here is ‘charity begins at home first.’ That is to say, if some or all of the eight beneficiaries of Zakāh are available in the community, preference should be given to them in its distribution.

On the other hand, if all beneficiaries are found wanting or lacking in the Muslim community, then

there is no harm if Zakāh is given to non-Muslims who are in need and not in hostile relations with Muslims. Such was the practice of some Muslim leaders in the past, including ‘Umar bn ‘Abdul ‘Aziz who, when Muslims in Medina during his reign as caliph refused to accept Zakāh because they did satisfy any of the criteria of beneficiaries, he ordered them to take it to Africa where they purchased the freedom for slaves.

d) *Can one give Zakāh to his wives, children, or relatives?*

A person’s family is more deserving of his or her charity provided they qualify under one or more of the divinely ordained beneficiaries. The Prophet (ﷺ) said to a woman, *“Your husband and your children are more deserving of your charity than others”* (Reported by al-Bukhāri).