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"الأراء في هذا البحث تعبر عن رأي الباحث وليس بالضرورة عن رأي أئما"

Opinions in this research are solely those of the author and do not represent AMJA.



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Political participation by Muslims has largely been a secular enterprise, and so it is timely and necessary that AMJA discuss the use of zakat for lobbying, policy work and electioneering. The goal of this paper is not to determine by itself if spending in the political system, either through nonpartisan issue advocacy, lobbying, policy development or electioneering, is "zakat eligible." Rather, it is, to explore why (1) Use of zakat funds in the American political system may contribute to preexisting structural injustice and (2) Political organizations that seek to use the funds often want money for abstractions that cannot be subject any accountability or specificity.¹

Contested Nature Expansion of Zakat

Politics is at its core in the United States about allocation of resources.² While many Muslims consider zakat to be a "poor tax," or the right of the poor³ zakat has been interpreted by scholars in a variety of ways. However, scholars have agreed that the categories of permissible zakat beneficiaries in the Quran are not strictly limited to the poor and needy.⁴ While all categories are subject to interpretation by scholars, some have pushed to expand the definitions of zakat categories to make them more abstract, while others have tried to keep that impulse in check.

Indeed, sometimes zakat standards can be quite different within organizations that are seen as being the same, such as various CAIR chapters and Islamic Relief affiliates.⁵ Islamic Relief USA's zakat policy explicitly permits the use of zakat for lobbying in a couple of distinct circumstances. The category four (reconciling hearts) includes

¹ Muslim political organizations tend to have political missions that are both vague and similar to other progressive affinity groups. See Emgage, "About," <https://emgageusa.org/about/> (accessed July 29, 2025).

² Thomas R. Dye, *Understanding Public Policy*, 15th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2017). Various scholars have used variations of "conflict theory" for generations. For a summary of conflict theory, see Investopedia, "Conflict Theory," <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/conflict-theory.asp> (accessed July 29, 2025).

³ Narrated Ibn Abbas: "When Allah's Apostle (peace be upon him) sent Muadh to Yemen, he said (to him), 'You are going to people of a (Divine) Book. First of all invite them to worship Allah (alone) and when they come to know Allah, inform them that Allah has enjoined on them, five prayers in every day and night; and if they start offering these prayers, inform them that Allah has enjoined on them, the zakat. And it is to be taken from the rich amongst them and given to the poor amongst them; and if they obey you in that, take zakat from them and avoid (don't take) the best property of the people as zakat.'" *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Volume 2, Book 24, Number 537.

⁴ Qur'an 9:60 specifies eight categories including: (1) the poor, (2) the needy, (3) zakat administrators, (4) those whose hearts are to be reconciled, (5) those in bondage, (6) the debt-ridden, (7) in the cause of God, and (8) the wayfarer. The interpretations that lend themselves to use of zakat for political spending and lobbying are categories 4 and 7.

⁵ Various CAIR chapters, such as CAIR National and CAIR California, make all their programs and services "zakat-eligible" based on opinions obtained from scholars. See CAIR, "Why CAIR Qualifies for zakat," https://www.cair.com/about_cair/why-cair-qualifies-for-zakat/ (accessed July 29, 2025). However, this is not universally accepted by all CAIR chapters. CAIR Michigan, for example, does not advertise itself as "zakat-eligible." See CAIR Michigan, "Donate," <https://cairmichigan.org/services/donate/> (accessed July 29, 2025). Islamic Relief Worldwide has a zakat policy with real restrictions on fund usage. See Islamic Relief, "Zakat Policy," <https://islamic-relief.org/zakat-policy/> (accessed July 29, 2025). Islamic Relief USA has created its own zakat policy with fewer practical restraints. For a comparison of these policies, see Ahmed Shaikh, "Islamic Relief USA's New Zakat Policy," *Ehsan* (Substack), <https://ehsan.substack.com/p/islamic-relief-usas-new-zakat-policy> (accessed July 29, 2025).

Public Affairs & Advocacy work that serves to educate the public on critical needs and issues is considered zakat eligible. This work also mitigates Islamophobic risks and builds alliances for IRUSA that prevents harm that may come to the organization and beneficiaries.

The Islamic Relief policy goes on to say:

Spending in this category will not be used for political contributions or political activism. Zakat funds will primarily be used to support event-based activities and staffing costs in this area.

What we understand from this is that zakat is to be used for “event-based” activities to educate on “critical needs.” The seeming restrictions however is that the category will not be used for “political activism” or political contributions, though it is unclear how they define this term and how the restriction may be violated. Political contributions by Islamic Relief are of course banned as a matter of federal law and would be regardless of what the zakat policy says.⁶

Perhaps nothing is more contested than the phrase “in the cause of Allah”- which can be interpreted as being completely irrelevant to Muslim living in non-Muslim majority states, or as a potential wastebasket category to steer spending priorities that might not otherwise be justified, including economically regressive wealth redistribution policies.⁷

The Islamic Council of Europe has a zakat policy that discourages Islamic organizations from the use of zakat for “the cause of Allah” because it is meant only for “a Muslim state’s military personnel.”⁸

Advocates for expanding the pool of zakat recipients to political spending will also cite “those whose hearts may be reconciled.” as a rationale for justifying political spending.

Notable scholar Hatem El-Haj has publicly argued for the “expansion” of the “cause of Allah” as one of the categories of zakat.⁹ El Haj observes on “in the cause of Allah”:

[M]any 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 was also the conclusion reached by the Islamic Fiqh Council in their 8th conference. Therefore, if the work done by this organization and others like it, which includes gathering detailed and beneficial information concerning Muslims and making them available to those involved in *da'wah*, [and to] think tanks and policy makers, serves those objectives, then it is eligible to receive zakat – according to this opinion.

⁶ This ban is found in IRC Section 501(c)(3), which states that qualifying organizations must ensure that “no substantial part of the activities of which is carrying on propaganda, or otherwise attempting, to influence legislation (except as otherwise provided in subsection (h)), and which does not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.”

⁷ Ahmed Shaikh and Osman Umarji, “This Article Could Be Zakat Eligible,” *Muslim Matters*, June 10, 2019, <https://muslimmatters.org/2019/06/10/this-article-could-be-zakat-eligible/> (accessed July 29, 2025).

⁸ Islamic Council of Europe, “Zakat Policy,” March 2022, <https://iceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ICE-Zakat-Policy-v1-Mar-2022.pdf> (accessed July 29, 2025).

⁹ Hatem al-Haj, “Zakat Eligibility of Islamic Organizations,” *Muslim Matters*, July 20, 2021, <https://muslimmatters.org/2021/07/20/zakat-eligibility-of-islamic-organizations/> (accessed July 29, 2025).

El Haj Continues elsewhere in the article, regarding a separate category of zakat “those whose hearts are to be reconciled”:

We know, for example, that the Mâlikis and Ḥanbalis still consider the category of “those whose hearts are to be reconciled” to be applicable to non-Muslims. And while such expenditure should be done by the imam or his deputies (including major Islamic organizations in today’s circumstances), it is legitimate for individual Muslims to give their entire zakat of one year for this purpose. This money could be used to lobby policymakers or to support some of them for the interests of the Muslim community: not to usurp the rights of other communities, but to defend our own.

Here, El-Haj is quite explicit in that there is support in Islamic jurisprudence for “support” of policymakers, to which I presume includes elected representatives, as well as lobbying of them, with funds derived from zakat. My purpose is not to argue the issue as a fiqh opinion, but rather to sketch out the real-world ramifications of this kind of zakat usage, and if this represents a value proposition for the Muslim donor.

We should ask a few non-fiqh questions that may be pertinent before scholars start to consider things like fiqh permissibility and donors to consider the best use of zakat funds:

1. Is it possible for the Muslim community to use funds not allocated for zakat to achieve the same purpose?
2. What are the economic impacts of expansion to include political spending, particularly to the poor?
3. Are there any structural issues that would make political spending, based on how Muslim organizations and leadership are presently constituted, futile or at least, worth reforming?

A Sovereign Ummah

There are strong elements of sovereignty associated with the the Muslim community. For example:

“The believers are a single community to the exclusion of others.”
-Constitution of Medina

“And never will the Jews or the Christians be satisfied with you until you follow their way.”
-Surah Al-Baqarah (2:120)

“And Allah will never grant the disbelievers a way (dominion) over the believers.”
— Surah An-Nisa (4:141)

Though each state and the federal government maintains "sovereignty" in their realms these are powers that are enumerated and restricted by the bill of rights.¹⁰ Muslims maintain sovereignty over the practice of their religion and what political views they hold and how they will exert their influence on governmental bodies.

It is a dangerous proposition for Muslim leaders to cede vital issues to those who are not only outside the Muslim community but in some cases are actively hostile to Muslims and Islam. Muslim communities to varying degrees, have done exactly this in many instances. Most concerning includes:

1. Leadership of Muslim organizations.¹¹
2. Administering zakat programs.¹²
3. Determining policy positions for Muslim political organizations.¹³
4. Determining who is or is not a Muslim, a "radical Muslim" or a "moderate Muslim."¹⁴
5. Economically, fields such as Islamic Finance¹⁵ and halal food¹⁶ are dominated or at least heavily influenced by non-Muslim forces.

Though this is a paper on the use of zakat for political spending, the willful ceding of sovereignty by Muslim leadership and institutions is of vital importance to the Ummah of Muhammad ﷺ. As Muslims who are merely playing a role, acting in a system for which they did not write the story or have any say in what the plot is supposed to be would be ineffective in advocating for Palestinian freedom, or really much of anything.

Islamic scholarship requires that zakat administrators be Muslim.¹⁷ This makes sense, as it may be incoherent to allow non-Muslims to lead Muslims in fajr prayer or provide the

¹⁰ The United States, like many countries, has a system of "dual sovereignty," - this is implied by the 10th Amendment of the US Constitution, but has also been spelled out by the courts repeatedly. See *Heath v. Alabama*, 474 U.S. 82 (1985).

¹¹ "Jacob Bender Is the First Jew to Lead a Chapter of CAIR," CAIR, https://www.cair.com/cair_in_the_news/jacob-bender-is-first-jew-to-lead-chapter-of-cair/ (accessed July 29, 2025).

¹² Prominent organizations administered by non-Muslims who handle zakat with certifications from Muslims include World Central Kitchen (see <https://wck.org/zakat>, accessed July 29, 2025) and the UNHCR Zakat Fund (see <https://zakat.unhcr.org/en>, accessed July 29, 2025). For a review of the UNHCR program, see Ahmed Shaikh, "UNHCR Refugee Zakat Fund Is the Best," *Ehsan* (Substack), <https://ehsan.substack.com/p/unhcr-refugee-zakat-fund-is-the-best> (accessed July 29, 2025).

¹³ Ahmed Shaikh, "Review of Emgage," *Ehsan* (Substack), <https://ehsan.substack.com/p/review-of-emgage> (accessed July 29, 2025).

¹⁴ This was common during the Obama Administration's promotion of "Countering Violent Extremism." See Hedieh Mirahmadi, "Safe Spaces" (Muslim Public Affairs Council). MPAC, a "Zakat eligible organization," determined extremism based largely on findings from the Combating Terrorism Center of the US Military Academy at West Point, which problematized readers of Islamic scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah and writers such as Sayyid Qutb.

¹⁵ Salman Ahmed Alamad, "Islamic Finance Ethics and Perception of Western Consumers," *Research Gate*, 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333221233_Islamic_Finance_Ethics_and_Perception_of_Western_Consumers (accessed July 29, 2025).

¹⁶ "The Global Halal Food Industry: An Overview," *Islamic Economist*, <https://islamiceconomist.com/?p=2331> (accessed July 29, 2025).

¹⁷ Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Fiqh al-Zakah: A Comparative Study*, trans. Monzer Kahf (Jeddah: Scientific Publishing Centre, King Abdulaziz University, 2000), 33, https://monzer.kahf.com/books/english/fiqhalzakah_vol1.pdf (accessed July 29, 2025).

sermon at Arafat. It is no insult to non-Muslims that Muslims must be sovereign in their own religious affairs, as translated from the Quran:

Oh disbelievers:

I do not worship what you worship.
 Nor are you worshipers of what I worship.
 Nor will I be a worshipper of what you worship.
 Nor will you be worshippers of what I worship.
 To you be your religion, and to me be my religion.¹⁸

The problem of influence from outside the Muslim community for what are apparently “Muslim” policy or political organizations has been apparent in several important examples.

Zakat vs. the “Portfolio Theory of Change”

It should be self-evident non-Muslim funders do not, as a rule, donate to Muslim organizations for the purpose of propagating a religion in which they do not believe. They do not have any special affinity for Islamic Law, or the lives, wealth and dignity of Muslims. Instead, what non-Muslims funders care about is what is known as the “portfolio theory of change.”

These theories of change are often published guidelines grantees can read and contemplate. Understanding what a Grantmaker wants in terms of its 'portfolio theory of change' or 'logic model' is spelled out in manuals for grant writers and grantees.

Grant awards are not isolated projects - grantees work as an ensemble cast, each playing their assigned role in the larger drama the Grantmaker envisions. The advocacy organization delivers confrontational scenes, the policy group handles the technical dialogue, while the astroturf organizing group stages what appears to be grassroots enthusiasm but is directed from above.

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding is an organization has seen itself as being “zakat eligible” based on a position of AMJA¹⁹ though it has also received substantial non-Muslim grant funding, including the Ford Foundation.²⁰ There are other non-Muslim foundations that support the organization (as well as, of course, Muslim Donors).

Similarly, Muslim Advocates is a Muslim organization that has historically worked in policy and lobbying. They similarly mark themselves as “zakat eligible.” Muslim Advocates is also funded by non-Muslim foundations, including, again, the Ford Foundation.²¹

¹⁸ Qur'an 109:1-6.

¹⁹ Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, "Zakat Eligibility from the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America," <https://ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Zakat-Eligibility-from-the-Assembly-of-Muslims-Jurists-of-America.png> (accessed July 29, 2025).

²⁰ Ford Foundation, "Grants Database: Institute for Social Policy and Understanding," <https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/awarded-grants/grants-database/institute-for-social-policy-and-understanding-136280/> (accessed July 29, 2025).

²¹ Ford Foundation, "Grants Database: Muslim Advocates," <https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/awarded-grants/grants-database/muslim-advocates-154447/> (accessed July 29, 2025).

Until 2023, Muslim Advocates, as a matter of policy, did not mention Palestine at all, and ISPU rarely mentioned it in its public reporting, as it tended to be a glaring omission from its reports.²² ISPU is notable as ostensibly it is an organization that is supposed to report on what Muslims care about. Both organizations have "Islamophobia" or "anti-Muslim hate" as part of their mandate. As Islamophobia in the United States has intertwined with U.S. foreign policy, the omission can often appear jarring.²³

On October 2023, Muslim Advocates announced, "for the first time in its history," it announced, "solidarity with Palestine." It was a remarkable step for an organization that managed to exist in the Muslim community as an advocacy organization without being in solidarity with Palestine. This can only be possible because the organization played its part.

A Case Study in External Funding: Emgage

One of the major innovations for Muslims in political organizing was Emgage, a 501(c)(3) and (c)(4) organization. It was founded by the Mitha family from central Florida, who are [Nizari Ismailis](#), or followers of the Aga Khan.²⁴ While they certainly have the right to believe and practice what they want, the group differs from Muslims in a variety of respects. For example, Nizari Ismailis do not need to do salah or siyam and their rules permit alcohol and gambling. Farooq Mitha oversaw Muslim engagement for both the Hillary Clinton campaign in 2016 and the Joseph Biden campaign in 2020.

The Biden Administration rewarded Farooq Mitha by making him the head of small business contracts at the Department of Defense.²⁵

Emgage does not solicit zakat. They have been funded from outside the Muslim community. While they fundraise within the Muslim community, their funding largely comes from outside the Muslim community. Emgage was somewhat different as far as organizations go in the Muslim community because there were several instances of Muslim leaders, institutions and individuals pushing back and rejecting it as a presence that did not belong in the community. It had a long history of being kicked out of Masajid for example. Even recently, Emgage's CEO complained that in Muslim spaces, his team was "being muzzled, harassed, and blocked" from doing what he claimed was his "critical work."²⁶ Ordinary Muslims were resisting. While Emgage has been remarkably successful in obtaining funding from the Open Society Foundations, they are also in the Ford Foundation portfolio.²⁷

²² The cases of ISPU and Muslim Advocates differ in that Muslim Advocates leadership was explicit about its policy not to address "foreign policy" issues. ISPU included a question on BDS in its 2022 survey but did not report on the results.

²³ Center for Security, Race and Rights, Rutgers University, "Presumptively Antisemitic," <https://csr.rutgers.edu/issues/presumptively-antisemitic/> (accessed July 29, 2025).

²⁴ Gary White, "Businessman Follows His Faith as He Works to Improve the World," *The Ledger*, February 21, 2005, <https://www.theledger.com/story/news/2005/02/21/businessman-follows-his-faith-as-he-works-to-improve-the-world/26145033007/> (accessed July 29, 2025).

²⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, "Biography: Farooq A. Mitha," <https://www.defense.gov/About/Biographies/Biography/article/2580009/farooq-a-mitha/> (accessed July 29, 2025).

²⁶ Emgage Action, "Open Letter," archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20241007171407/https://emgageaction.org/emgageopenletter1/> (accessed July 29, 2025).

²⁷ Ford Foundation, "Grants Database: Emgage Foundation Inc.," <https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/awarded-grants/grants-database/emgage-foundation-inc-151298/> (accessed July 29, 2025).

Like any good script, some of the performances are good and worthy. The direction, however, does not come from the Muslim community.

It is true though for non-Muslim foundation funded Muslim organizations, the Overton window²⁸ has changed when it comes to Palestine. Muslim Advocates was explicit about it, and them breaking out of their shell to express "solidarity" did not cause them a loss in institutional funding.

The inquiry, however, should be more than if an organization is good or bad on one issue or another. That inquiry is fine in certain contexts. However, when it comes to the claim that we are funding Muslim institutions with zakat to advocate for our rights, interests and dignity- we should also ask who the arbiters of those things are. If Muslims are not involved in the production beyond being actors in a play, we may not like the ending.

The Vertically Integrated Machines

The United States has a two-party political system, each supported by its own political machine. These machines are made up of a complex network of law firms, think tanks, charitable foundations, consulting firms, and major donors. Corporate and megadonors play a central role, strategically funding both parties—though through different channels and at different points in the policy process. These political ecosystems are not only designed to win elections but also to shape public opinion, influence legislation, and maintain long-term policy agendas that serve the interests of their financial backers.²⁹

In many respects, the system is analogous to the Hollywood "studio system," the vertically integrated system that controlled content, what stories can be told, all the talent, all aspects of production and distribution, though ownership of all theatre chains.

³⁰

There are two potential issues in discussing the political machine. The first is related to social justice. That zakat being distributed for this purpose will have the effect of circulating wealth among the rich.³¹ The other problem is related to the problem of careerism, and that

²⁸ For more on the Overton Window, see Mackinac Center for Public Policy, "The Overton Window," <https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow> (accessed July 29, 2025).

²⁹ This refers to Elite Theory. See Wikipedia, "Elite Theory," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elite_theory (accessed July 29, 2025).

³⁰ The breakup of the studio system began with federal antitrust action. See *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, 334 U.S. 131 (1948), addressing "pooling agreements" among ostensibly competitive theaters.

³¹ A reference to Qur'an 59:7, though this appears in a non-zakat context.

Muslims have often become instruments of the system designed to oppress and kill other Muslims.³²

How Political Spending Is Distributed

There is a variety of political spending. A corporation may have its own government relations department. Nonprofit organizations organized under various subsections of IRC Section 501 have different rules relating to political spending, with (c)(3) organizations being the most restrictive. There are also 527 organizations, which are set up explicitly as political groups. Investopedia looked into Presidential election spending, based on "Open Secrets" data. Most of the spending on political candidates goes to media buys, but there are also staff and consultants. Money is usually going to people who are wealthier.

This part of the calculus might be somewhat less interesting if we have already conceded that zakat as a wealth transfer from the wealthy to the wealthy is fine if it is in pursuit of some other goal that is permissible for zakat. Say, for example in Jihad, which is a permissible use for zakat, the funds may go to wealthy industrialists who will sell weapons for a profit. Similarly, zakat may be used for media buys, consultants, lawyers and staff for various 501 organizations, 527 organizations and for-profit corporations.

However, there is a major distinction between wealth transfer among the wealthy for warfare, and wealth transfer to feed a political machine. Wars have a goal, like self-defense or some kind of objective, after which the war is over. Zakat can then be redirected for non-warfare purposes, like the poor.

However, zakat to feed a political or advocacy machine would not have any plausible endpoint. A soldier marching to battle wants the war to end so he can go home to his family. He wants his battalion to decamp. An employee of a policy advocacy organization wants better 401(k) matching and a promotion. His organization wants to find more ways to get more zakat for decades to come.

Moral Hazard of Abstraction

Muslim organizations can seek zakat funds in the pursuit of non-measurable, abstract goals, like "fighting anti-Muslim hate" or "mitigates Islamophobic risk"³³ This type of language is a

³² Examples include Michael D'Andrea, who headed the CIA's Counter Terrorism Center and was instrumental in the drone program that killed many civilians. See Wikipedia, "Michael D'Andrea," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_D%27Andrea (accessed July 29, 2025). Rashad Hussain currently serves as Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, with a mandate to protect Jewish and Christian minorities in Muslim-majority countries, but has been unable to address the destruction of over 1,000 Muslim places of worship in Gaza. See U.S. Department of State, "Biography: Rashad Hussain," <https://2021-2025.state.gov/biographies/rashad-hussain/> (accessed July 29, 2025).

³³ Islamic Relief USA, "Zakat Policy," <https://irusa.org/zakat-policy/> (accessed July 29, 2025). Abstract goals also include language about preventing "harm that may come to the organization and beneficiaries" and "building alliances."

linguistic shield from accountability. Muslims are trained to regard being against “anti-Muslim hate” as being work that is deserving of zakat. While Muslims will usually regard working towards such goals as being good, understanding the progress being made in this is nearly impossible. Donors have no way of understanding the value of their donations.

Abstraction also serves to distance people who do the abstract work from the consequences of their actions. If the work of “building alliances” or even “fighting Islamophobia” is done within a frame provided by others, distant from the people affected by those decisions. Often the role of a Muslim in the political system is theatre. It may serve to legitimize harm while the Muslim playing their role of “representation”, may have the illusion of agency in believing they are somehow reducing harm.

Serve the Machine

The other aspect of the political machine is that it tends to attract actors who do what is expected of them, while the machinery of production and direction remains in the hands of others.

This was seen concretely in the 2015 CVE Summit convened by the Obama Administration. It was an effort to bring the war on terrorism to places of worship, schools and community centers by making Muslims accept that their communities and their religion was a security concern. Muslim organizations who participated took pains to describe how they would be acting within their own communities to stop radicalism or extremism. Some Muslim leaders worked to build careers out of becoming experts on Muslim extremism or radicalization.

The Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), which claims to be a zakat-eligible organization explicitly because of its policy advocacy work,³⁴ had sought CVE funds related to its work on a program called “Safe Spaces.” The program was a surveillance model masquerading as social services. It was framed exactly as the government wanted it framed, (it was a government grant), with good Muslims, rooting out the bad ones. It made frequent use of terms such as “assessment,” “referral system” and “intervention activities.”³⁵

The underlying model itself relied heavily on non-Muslim derived ideas of what bad Islam is. For example, according to MPAC, reading Ibn Taymiyyah indoctrinates future terrorists. MPAC got this information from the “Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) in the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.”³⁶

³⁴ Muslim Public Affairs Council, “Donate Your Zakat to MPAC,” <https://www.mpac.org/support-us/donate-your-zakat-to-mpac/> (accessed July 29, 2025).

³⁵ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “EMW-2016-CA-APP-00294 Full Application,” <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/EMW-2016-CA-APP-00294%20Full%20Application.pdf> (accessed July 29, 2025).

³⁶ Muslim Public Affairs Council, “Safe Spaces,” 108, U.S. Department of Homeland Security application document, <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/EMW-2016-CA-APP-00294%20Full%20Application.pdf> (accessed July 29, 2025).

Indeed, much of what the MPAC produced was derived from sources that worked closely with the US and Israeli security establishments. The author of Safe Spaces, as well as others associated with MPAC, went on to become contractors or employees focused on CVE.³⁷

Here, a “zakat-eligible” Muslim political and policy organization, perhaps the oldest such organization in the United States, assumed the illusion of agency. They perhaps understood all along that participating in this farce was bad, but that by participating, they could somehow make it better. Since that time, MPAC admitted it was wrong.

The organization stated³⁸

We must now acknowledge our errors in attempting to improve a policy that unfairly and incorrectly singled out our community. We understand that our attempts to mitigate the harms posed by CVE programs were overshadowed by the unjust concept of CVE itself, which is built on a deeply flawed theoretical foundation.

They went on to say:

Notwithstanding our past mistakes, MPAC—with the lessons learned from our CVE work—is recommitting to closely scrutinizing government-sponsored programs that mask underlying systems of unjust and discriminatory surveillance. We commit to fight harder against government intrusion in the religious spaces of Muslim communities. We oppose as unconstitutional and unjust any efforts by the government to encroach on theological issues within Muslim communities by trying to define who is a “good” Muslim and who is a “bad” one. We similarly oppose any policy that singles out Muslim communities or that promotes debunked radicalization theories. Most importantly, we are recommitting ourselves to building community strength as a precondition to government engagement. Our advocacy efforts are only as strong as our bond with the *ummah*.

It is unfortunate MPAC saw fit to delete this statement later. As this part of their statement was a value reflection of a lesson learned. It was MPAC’s own safe spaces that encroached on theological issues, even condemning scholars of Islam, in the hopes of seeking government funding, all the while also soliciting zakat for advocating for the interests of Muslims. MPAC and its leadership never had agency in CVE. They were actors in someone else’s production. Actors have no ability to change the plot, modify the script or decide that the movie will not be made at all.

Some CVE proponents understood this early on. Muqtedar Khan, a Professor in Delaware, when speaking at ISNA on why Muslims should support CVE though acknowledging it was quite bad, said that it was harmful for the Muslim community to be seen as “dissidents.” He likened the Muslim community to watermelon and the government to a knife. Either the knife falls on the watermelon, or the watermelon falls on the knife. Being cut is

³⁷ Ahmed Shaikh, “MPAC’s Long Con: CVE and Gaslighting,” *Ehsan* (Substack), <https://ehsan.substack.com/p/mpacs-long-con-cve-and-gaslighting> (accessed July 29, 2025).

³⁸ This statement has been deleted but is preserved in the Internet Archive. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20210123015932/https://www.mpac.org/blog/statements-press/we-were-wrong-on-countering-violent-extremism.php> (accessed July 30, 2025).

unavoidable.³⁹ If Muslim leaders are not involved, Islamophobes will take their place. If you have some influence on the cutting, it may not be that bad.

That is fundamentally about casting, not the writing, production or direction. If a Muslim leader's or Muslim Organization's work can be replaced by someone who does not like Muslims, then perhaps the endeavor is not in the interests of Muslims.

Dr. Sherman Jackson made this point when he justified being on the CVE Commission⁴⁰, he wrote⁴¹:

Everyone I consulted agreed that this report was going to be written and that if I had any chance to shape it I should take it.[...]I was, albeit in a very limited way, able to influence some of the wording of the report, wording that many of the other commissioners didn't even recognize as problematic.

Jackson was saying something analogous to the "watermelon" concept Khan had explained. This was about getting cut. The CVE commission was sponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), which is funded by major defense contractors and various governments and was chaired by the former Director of the CIA and Secretary of Defense, as well as a former British Prime Minister.⁴² It problematized Islam and Muslims as the only kind of violent extremism and also endorsed CVE as an extension of the global war on terrorism, plainly endorsing widespread violence against Muslims.⁴³

Sherman Jackson did not take zakat for his role with CSIS. Indeed, neither he, nor the other Muslim leader in the commission, Imam Mohamad Magid, took any compensation at all. They were, however, cast in a subservient role written for them before they came along. Jackson was right, the report would have been written regardless. He and Magid had the illusion of agency in thinking they could make it better. It's like the actor cast to play "anti-terrorist Muslim #2" thinking he has the power to make the movie better. They never stood a chance.

³⁹ "Debating CVE: Engagement with Law Enforcement, Harm or Benefit?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNk0y9kZIQ> (accessed July 30, 2025). Previously described by the author in Ahmed Shaikh, "The Muslim Lords of CVE," *Muslim Matters*, October 19, 2016, <https://muslimmatters.org/2016/10/19/the-muslim-lords-of-cve/> (accessed July 30, 2025).

⁴⁰ Ahmed Shaikh, "Sherman Jackson, CVE, UAE and Some Questions," *Muslim Matters*, August 29, 2019, <https://muslimmatters.org/2019/08/29/sherman-jackson-cve-uae-and-some-questions/> (accessed July 29, 2025).

⁴¹ Jackson, Sherman A. "From Demagoguery Into the Lizard's Hole – A Response to Ali al-Arian." *ALIM Program*, www.alimprogram.org/blog/from-demagoguery-into-the-lizards-hole-a-response-to-ali-al-arian (accessed July 30, 2025).

⁴² Ahmed Shaikh, "Imam Mohamed Magid's War," *Ehsan* (Substack), <https://ehsan.substack.com/p/imam-mohamed-magids-war> (accessed July 29, 2025).

⁴³ The report acknowledged that some participants did not engage in discussions of military matters, though all CVE actions must work in coordination with military objectives.

Use Non-Zakat Funds

Of course, money can be used to influence policy. However, money is being used by Muslim leaders and institutions so that they can act in farces and dark comedies written about Muslims by others. There are three interrelated questions we should ask when it comes to a program that an organization wants Muslims to support.

1. Should we pay for it with zakat?
2. Should we pay for it at all?
3. Maybe we need a different strategy?

There is no question Muslims have substantial wealth and are quite generous. One study found that Muslims in the United States gave \$4.3 Billion dollars in charity in 2020.⁴⁴ If Muslims are shown a way to use their money for something beneficial to humanity, they will donate for it and do not need to be restricted by zakat funds.

Zakat is not charity and paying it does not represent generosity. It is worship. It is an obligation for some, and a right for others, particularly the poor.

While fiqh is one possible way to look at zakat, and this being a conference for Imams, that is appropriate. However, social justice is the other way to consider it. When Muhammad ﷺ told his representative to Yemen that zakat is to be taken from the rich amongst them and given to the poor amongst them.⁴⁵

Instead of this, at least in part of the finite resource of zakat, we are offered a vision where Muslims can donate their zakat to political candidates, to policy nonprofits and lobbying organizations. Some Muslims can donate to opposing candidates and ideas, because Muslims, naturally, will disagree with each other about what is most beneficial for the community. They will all become actors in different productions, though with the same plot and likely, the same ending.

One potential alternative to zakat, is organizing through Masajid, which is underutilized as a community-based political platform where non-zakat donations are often the norm. While Section 501(c)(3) organizations have extensive lobbying restrictions and an absolute ban on electioneering, there is nothing stopping them from creating local affiliated organizations under Section 501(c)(4) or Section 527 organizations. This strategy has been encouraged by the United States Supreme Court.⁴⁶ It is also genuinely grassroots, membership driven and accountable to local communities through shura.

⁴⁴ Nicole Lewis, "Muslim Americans Are More Generous Than the Overall U.S. Population," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/muslim-americans-are-more-generous-than-the-overall-u-s-population> (accessed July 29, 2025).

⁴⁵ See footnote 3 above.

⁴⁶ *Regan v. Taxation with Representation of Washington*, 461 U.S. 540 (1983)

Zakat as Worship, or as an Actor in Service of a Director

Expansion of zakat to include politics is in many ways, politics itself, in that it is a decision on the allocation of the Muslim community's resources. The decision of how Muslims allocate their religious obligations is itself an act of sovereignty that defines the community's priorities and values. If we hand this over to the frames, machinations and agendas of non-Muslims, we are making a mistake. Allah knows best.
