

Decentralization vs. Authoritarian Control: Palestinian Zakat Institutions (1961 – 2011) in the Local Context

Abstract

This paper will review the different types of zakat committees and Islamic charities in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip focusing on their role in the local context. It will provide an overview of the different types of zakat-based charities in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) in historic perspective, with a particular focus on aspects of local transparency, popular confidence, and communal self-reliance, as well as the different legal models and frameworks shaping the relationship of zakat-based charities to acting authorities and administrative oversight bodies. Looking back to the pre-2007 situation of zakat institutions in the oPt, this paper argues that, until the Hamas-Fatah split, zakat-based charities in the oPt by and large formed a decentralized and locally rooted institutional zakat system which successfully mobilized the competencies of local doctors, pious businessmen, small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, and imams. The locally rooted character of these institutions enhanced the transparency of zakat organizations within their community, increased their efficiency and local legitimacy, as well as protected them to a certain degree from party-political interferences. They were seen as committed to the needs of the local communities – and were widely perceived as independent from foreign agendas of aid. The Palestinian zakat institutions were trusted access points for people in distress, and even if the amounts of aid they distributed could not match the amounts of aid channelled by European and North American government agencies, they still played a very important symbolic role.

The Hamas-Fatah split in 2007 increased centralized control over zakat institutions in both territories with a negative effect on efficiency, trust, and the potential for communal self-reliance. This is, however, only part of a wider development in the oPt towards a more authoritarian, oppressive, and seemingly more stable political landscape under two separate authorities in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as continued Israeli occupation.