



Fears of Inquiry Dampen Giving by U.S. Muslims

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Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

Najah Bazy, who runs a charity in Dearborn, Mich., says donations have fallen because people think that the government is monitoring their giving for ties to terrorism. She says she receives more anonymous gifts now.

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR
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DEARBORN, Mich. — By the end of Ramadan last year, Najah Bazy remembers having more than \$10,000 in cash donations to distribute to the needy, and a vast auditorium ringed with tables groaning with enough free food for 400 poor families to celebrate the holiday.

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J. D. Pooley for The New York Times

Sayyid Hassan Qazwini, an imam in Dearborn, fears that the government is casting too wide a net.

This year, Mrs. Bazy formalized the good works she had been doing for a decade among the tens of thousands of Muslims who live in the Dearborn area by establishing a charity, Zaman International.

But by the end of the holiday, charitable contributions were meager. She said cash donations amounted to less than \$4,000, and for the first time since she began her charity work she bought food to feed about 85 needy families instead of counting on gifts.

There are similar stories in Muslim communities across the country. Fearful that donations to an Islamic charity could bring unwanted attention from federal agents looking into potential ties to terrorism, many Muslim Americans have become reluctant to donate to Islamic causes, including charities.

“We can’t stop giving because it’s a pillar of Islam — it’s a must,” said Mrs. Bazy, an animated 46-year-old nurse who veils her hair with a headscarf in keeping with Muslim

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traditions of modest dress. "It's a real moral dilemma. Do you forget about the rest of the world out of fear? My family has been here for 101 years, and as an American I'm offended."

The holy month of Ramadan is supposed to be a time of giving, particularly for the Muslim faithful, for whom charity, or zakat, is one of the five main tenets of their religion. The meaning of "zakat" is rooted in the Arabic word for purification, and sacred texts even define the amount — at least 2.5 percent of net annual earnings.

But recently, fear has often trumped faith.

When Mrs. Bazy calls people to solicit contributions, they quickly beg off and hang up, telling her later in the grocery store or the bank not to ask them for money on the phone because the government is probably eavesdropping.

Nobody wants to write a check for any amount, and they look at her in horror when she offers a receipt — some of the largest donations she still receives have been anonymous wads of \$100 bills stuffed into envelopes.

The developer of the new building that had volunteered office space for her charity begged off, saying that even the potential for a raid might drive away other tenants and bring down rents. The irony, she points out, is that she deliberately avoided any connection with a religious institution, even taking out a loan on her house to finance her longstanding dream of starting the charity. But given her headscarf, many people assume it is a faith-based organization.

Seemingly no individual or organization trying to collect funds is immune.

The imam at the Islamic Center of America, Sayyid Hassan Qazwini, is a favorite of the American government for publicly standing behind President Bush, both literally and figuratively, over the invasion of Iraq.

Imam Qazwini, by his own account, has been invited to the White House four or five times, with the president even photographed kissing the turbaned cleric on the cheek. Imam Qazwini delivered the opening benediction in Congress on Oct. 1, 2003, the first Muslim religious figure accorded that honor after Sept. 11.

Yet, his gleaming new \$15 million mosque here, a handsome white structure with a gold dome and soaring twin minarets that is billed as the largest in America, remains \$6 million in debt. Contributions dropped sharply this summer after the war in Lebanon, the imam said, when the Bush administration expressed its unreserved support for Israel. Other mosques report similar difficulties. The general sentiment is that the American government's tilt toward Israel extends to hounding anyone supporting Arab causes.

Much of the fear comes from federal actions that many Muslim Americans view as unnecessarily invasive.

The Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence at the Treasury Department has shuttered five major Muslim charities in the United States since 2001, seizing millions of dollars in assets, yet not a single officer or organization has been convicted of anything connected to terrorism. Muslim charities operating overseas have been directly linked to terrorist operations, but if such evidence exists in the United States it has remained secret.

"The sad fact is that there are some Islamic charities involved in terrorist financing," said Daniel L. Glaser, the deputy assistant secretary for terrorist financing and financial crimes. "We can't close our eyes to that. We have to find ways to deal with that."

Imam Qazwini, the descendant of a long line of prominent Iraqi Shiite Muslim clerics, points out that many Muslim Americans, particularly those from the Arab world, fled the region to escape repressive regimes, expecting the United States to provide both freedom and opportunity. Instead they find themselves facing similar problems.

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“Many people who came from the Middle East still live with the psyche of being chased by the intelligence forces,” he said in an interview. “Having these same forces acting here intensifies the sense of fear in these communities.”

Ahmad Chebbani, 46, served as the president of the American Arab Chamber of Commerce for eight years until this June. His accounting firm, Omnex Accounting and Tax Service, occupies a neat two-story building on Warren Avenue, the heart of the community, where most of the shop signs are in both English and Arabic.

Arab-Americans make up more than a third of Dearborn’s population of 100,000, and [Michigan](#) has one of the country’s largest concentrations of Muslim Americans. The sentiments expressed here are echoed in Muslim communities across the United States.

Between himself and his company, Mr. Chebbani says he used to contribute some \$50,000 annually to charity, the bulk of it to religious organizations. He still gives, but directly either to needy families, business groups or secular institutions like the Arab American National Museum.

As one of the community’s most successful accountants — in his office is a picture of him with former Vice President [Al Gore](#) — he also sees the tax returns of some of the most affluent families in Dearborn. Some have stopped giving entirely, and some give but decline to claim any deductions. His rough estimate indicates that community giving is down by about half.

“Contributions across the board have been drastically reduced because of the fear; people associate contributions with risk and they don’t want that,” he said. “There’s a lack of trust in the U.S. judicial system, with just an accusation you could end up in jail with secret evidence used as a means of prosecution.”

Religious scholars say that compromises made over who gets charity might conflict with Islam’s precepts. Verse 60 in Chapter 9 of the Koran, the Sura of Repentance, specifies eight religiously sanctified beneficiaries of zakat. All eight dictate giving to the poor or those who help them. Other charity is considered a blessing but does not fulfill the religious obligation in the same way, they argue.

“There are eight categories; you cannot invent a ninth,” said Khalil Jassem, a professor and lay prayer leader who helped found Life for Relief and Development, a charity based in Michigan started to help Iraqis living under sanctions that now works across the Muslim world. “You can’t give money to the animal shelter and call this your zakat.”

The offices of Life for Relief and Development were raided in September on the basis of a sealed affidavit. The government has said that the raid was not terrorism-related, although agents of the Joint Terrorism Task Force were along on the raid. The hanging questions put a damper on fund-raising.

Events like that have left some Muslim organizations across the country pondering whether to sue the federal government for denying them their First Amendment rights to practice their religion freely.

Like most Muslims interviewed for this article, Imam Qazwini emphasized that he fully supported a crackdown on any real terrorist financing, but that he thought the government was blindly casting far too wide a net. In a speech by Mr Bush immediately after Sept. 11, 2001, the imam noted, the president said terrorists might be able to destroy a few buildings in this country but could not harm its foundations.

“I hope he’s right, but I’m afraid he’s not,” the imam said after being the host of a Ramadan banquet for a cross-section of Michigan’s political and religious leaders. “It seems like the terrorists have been able to touch our foundations — our civil liberties are being compromised, our religious freedoms are being compromised.”

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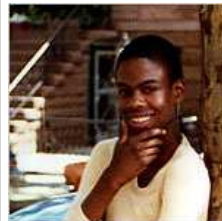


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