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## Muslim charities see boost in donations with new accreditation program that aims to ease fears



In this photo taken Tuesday, Sept. 2, 2009, patients are seen at the University Muslim Medical Association Community Clinic in Los Angeles. American Muslims want to ensure that they can fulfill "zakat," or obligatory charitable religious giving, following zakat pledge by President Barack Obama. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes) (Damian Dovarganes, AP / September 2, 2009)

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DETROIT (AP) — As the Islamic holy month of Ramadan winds down, Rami Nashashibi sees a promising fundraising trend for the Chicago charity he runs.

Online donations ranging from \$50 to \$2,500 to his Inner-City Muslim Action Network have increased over the past weeks as part of an aggressive Ramadan Internet marketing push on the group's Web site and through social networking sites, he said.

But Nashashibi also credits the influx of online donations to his organization becoming one of the nation's first to be accredited by the Better Business Bureau's newest charity wing tailored for Islamic nonprofits.

Those involved in the accreditation program hope it along with the election of President Barack Obama — who has voiced his commitment to work with U.S. Muslims — will allow many Muslim groups to move past the mistrust that has come to define their post-9/11 relationship with the federal government.

After the Sept. 11 terror attacks, Islamic charities came under intense scrutiny in the United States over fears that some had ties to terror groups. The Bush administration shuttered nine

Muslim charities, raided six others and froze the assets of one.

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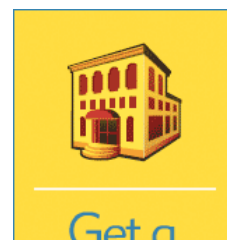
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The crackdown sent chills through the country's Muslim community as many became fearful about giving to charity, which is called zakat and is one of Islam's five requirements. The [American Civil Liberties Union](#) said in a report this summer that some Muslims had stopped donating or limited how much they give out of worry they could be swept up in a federal investigation.

Since then, Islamic organizations have struggled to find ways to erase the cloud of suspicion and ease donors' concerns. Last year, the BBB partnered with Muslim Advocates, a legal organization based in [San Francisco](#), to create the Muslim Charities Accreditation Program, which evaluates nonprofits and trains leaders on compliance with the government's legal and financial rules.

In August right before the start of Ramadan and the Islamic calendar's peak period for donating, Nashashibi's group and two others — the UMMA Community Clinic in [Los Angeles](#) and the Islamic Networks Group in [San Jose](#), Calif. — were the first to complete the program's rigorous review.

"Because the Muslim charities have been particularly in the public focus, I think they have a greater interest in demonstrating to the public that they are just like every other charity, they meet standards like everybody else," said H. Art Taylor, president and CEO of the BBB Wise Giving Alliance.

About 17 other Islamic charities are in varying stages of the review process, according to Muslim Advocates. The program's effect on donation levels won't be known until after Ramadan ends, but those involved say it's increased interest and is drawing donors from a wider geographical area.

The 20 standards for accreditation include regular board of director meetings, increased detail and frequency of financial statements and performance assessment of officers.

The key is putting the charities on firm financial and operational footing that leaves no doubt about what they do and how they do it, said Akil Vohra, counsel for the Muslim Charities Accreditation Program.

"The key part of this is transparency," he said. "Donors want to know the same thing: Where is our money going? Where is it being used?"

Nashashibi said one of the challenges has been reconciling anonymous giving, reinforced by a religious and cultural principle that "the best zakat is when the right [hand](#) doesn't know what the left hand has given," with the issue of transparent bookkeeping.

"Sometimes that spirit of giving can be perceived to be at odds with the needs, for instance, to list all of your donors in annual reports and all of the financial transparency records," Nashashibi said.

He said his group already performed audits of its books because of contracts with major foundations. But the accreditation process "really helped with putting a little fire under us to usher in an even more intense collection of documents (for review)."

Nashashibi said his community organization hasn't come under government scrutiny and didn't suffer a drop in donations since 9/11. But he said the accreditation has offered "an additional layer of comfort" to donors.

His group seeks to raise \$225,000 by Sunday — \$30,000 of which it hopes come from online donations — as part of its Ramadan drive called "Grow Your IMAN Campaign."

"What we've seen so far is a broad, diffuse set of donations, particularly online, which could be attributed to the accreditation," said Nashashibi, who is the organization's executive director.

UMMA Community Clinic also has received more online donations. President and Chief Executive Yasser Aman said the accreditation adds "that extra leverage — especially for communities that are not familiar with Muslim institutions or community clinics."

"It's opening the doors to communication," he said of the accreditation.

But while any effort that offers some protection to Muslim charities is worthwhile, it's too early to say if the BBB accreditation will forestall future government scrutiny, said Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the [Council on American-Islamic Relations](#).

"Past cases ... seem to be more politically oriented than financially oriented," he said.

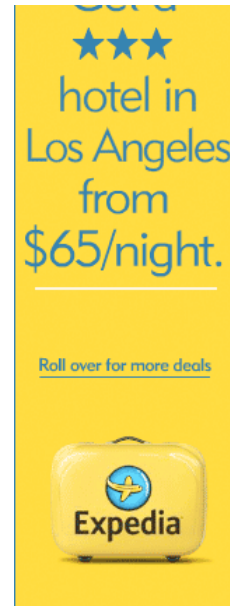
On the Net:

Muslim Charities Accreditation Program: [www.muslimadvocates.org](http://www.muslimadvocates.org)

Inner-City Muslim Action Network: [www.imacentral.org](http://www.imacentral.org)

UMMA Community Clinic: [www.ummaclinic.org](http://www.ummaclinic.org)

Islamic Networks Group: [www.ing.org](http://www.ing.org)



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