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of Progressive Islam

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Abstract: This paper examines the trends in legal and social policies relating to abortion and family planning in countries that are predominantly Muslim. It begins by reviewing Islam's theological teachings on the morality of these issues, and then considers how varying interpretations and schools of thought have informed legislation throughout the Muslim world. While the laws in many Muslim countries remain far stricter than other parts of the world, a more progressive understanding of Islam, based on the principle of ijtihad (conscience), is gaining popularity in certain regions and at the same time, there has been a liberalization of the legal status of abortion and family planning programs in a number of countries. Many Muslim countries have succumbed to pressure to adopt the population control agenda that is promoted by UN agencies, particularly the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and pro-abortion NGOs.

Key words: Islam; abortion law and policy; family planning; demography; population control; United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA); Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region

Introduction

Diverse interpretations of the Qur'an and *hadith*—the sacred scriptures of Islam—have led to a variety of positions among Islamic theologians and scholars regarding the morality of abortion, contraception, and family planning. Though general Muslim consensus accepts that abortion is murder and consequently prohibited, there is considerable debate about when ensoulment occurs. Abortions per-

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formed before the fetus is “infused with life”² are not considered killing, and are therefore permissible. Contraception and family planning is predominantly permitted, though a minority of Muslims see it as a lack of trust in God, or believe it to be a Western conspiracy to prevent the growth of Islam. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad recently declared that family planning is “in the realm of the secular world”³, echoing the sentiment of the late Ayatollah Khomeini⁴, who strongly encouraged procreation and hoped to create “soldiers for Islam.”⁵

The demography of the Muslim world⁶ is inconstant and ever changing. Some countries, such as Iran, are experiencing a substantial population decline, while others, such as Yemen, maintain very high fertility rates. In Iran, state policies are responsible for a rapid fertility decrease, from seven children per woman in 1950 to less than two today.⁷ Experts view religion as an important factor in determining societal norms related to fertility.⁸ At the same time, Islam is frequently cited as the fastest growing religion, and many stress the imminence of “Eurabia”—a potential Europe where, due to immigration and high birth rates, the Muslim population is the majority. Yet, of the ten countries with the largest drop in fertility rates since 1980, eight are Islamic nations.⁹ Contraceptive use is higher than ever in the Muslim world, and the number of abortions is on the rise.¹⁰ What explains the divergence in fertility and abortion norms in the Muslim World?

This paper contends that at least part of the answer lies in liberalizing trends within Islam. The paper examines the trends in legal and social policies relating to abortion and family planning in countries that are predominantly Muslim. It begins by reviewing Islam’s theological teachings on the morality of these issues, and then considers how varying interpretations and legal schools have influenced legal and social policies across the Muslim world. This paper demonstrates that, while the laws in many Muslim countries remain far stricter than other parts of the world, such as Western Europe and North America, a more progressive understanding of Islam is gaining popularity in certain regions and has resulted in the liberalization of the legal status of abortion and family planning programs in a number of countries. Many Muslim countries have succumbed to pressure to adopt the population control agenda that is promoted by UN agencies, particularly the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and pro-abortion NGOs.

² Donna Lee Bowen, “Abortion, Islam, and the 1994 Cairo Population Conference.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (May, 1997), 163.

³ Associated Press, “Iran’s Leader Introduces Plan to Encourage Population Growth by Paying Families.” 27 July 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/28/world/middleeast/28iran.html>.

⁴ Khomeini led the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. He subsequently became the Supreme Leader of Iran until his death in 1989. Khomeini had the Shah’s family planning clinics demolished, and instituted pro-natalist policy that led to an annual population growth rate of 3 percent.

⁵ Isobel Coleman. *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East*. (New York: Random House, 2010), 92.

⁶ In this paper, the phrase “Muslim world” refers to countries with a population that is over 1 million with a Muslim majority. While India has the second-largest amount of Muslims (after Indonesia), they comprise only 12 percent of India’s total population. Therefore, I do not consider India’s laws and policies in this paper, since Muslims have a minor influence on Indian policies. Predominantly Muslim countries are mostly found in the Middle East and Northern Africa (referred to as the MENA region), but are also in Sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, and Europe. Further, some countries are Islamic states, while others have secular governments. Due to these factors, one can easily conclude that the Muslim world is anything but homogeneous—it is diverse, and therefore generalizations are difficult to make.

⁷ United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision*, 280-281.

⁸ See Eric Kaufmann, *Will the Religious Inherit the Earth: Demography and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Profile Books, 2010).

⁹ These are: Algeria, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Maldives, Oman, Syrian Arab Republic, and Tunisia. (Source: World Population Prospects: 2008 Revision, United Nations Population Division. <http://esa.un.org/unpp/index.asp>).

¹⁰ Borzou Daragahi, “Abortions on the rise in Mideast.” *Los Angeles Times*. 29 June 2008.

Islamic Teachings on Abortion

Islam values the traditional family and encourages procreation. Marriage and children are seen as a gift from God; the Qur'an depicts children as "the decoration of life"¹¹ (18:46). In contrast to Judeo-Christian traditions, Islam does not teach that procreation is the final end of marriage. Islamic teachings on marriage determine that an individual has the right to sexual pleasure within marriage that is independent of his or her choice to have children. For guidance in all areas of life, Muslims look to the Qur'an, the central text and holy book of Islam. However, despite its many specific instructions, the Qur'an does not directly address every possible moral situation that a Muslim may face, including abortion. Furthermore, since there is no central authority figure (such as the Catholic pope) to make definitive statements, there is an assortment of beliefs.¹²

On the occasion that the Qur'an is unclear, or does not speak on a particular matter, Muslims will consult the sayings and example of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*). Still, even the *hadith* may be subject to varying interpretations, in which case Muslims turn to the principle of *ijtihad*: the ability to determine the best and most reasonable solution to a current problem by examining a Qur'anic text in light of the cultural and historical context, complimented by a thorough understanding of Qur'anic principles and the *hadith*. There is a great deal of flexibility and adaptability in Islamic law. As the contemporary jurist and philosopher Azizah Y. al-Hibri remarked, "Islam was revealed for all people and for all times."¹³

Though the pronouncements (*fatawa*) of a religious leader, or *ulama*, carry much weight, personal conscience and individual interpretation are highly regarded principles in Islamic theology and Muslim life. Whereas traditionally *ijtihad* was reserved for scholars called *mujtahids*, today the average Muslim finds it necessary to practice personal *ijtihad* in daily life. Consequently, this has allowed for a diversity of interpretations and beliefs, especially on the issues of abortion. There are two passages in the Qur'an that describe the embryonic development process:

We created you from dust, then from a drop of fluid, then a clinging form, then a lump of flesh, both shaped and unshaped: We mean to make Our power clear to you. Whatever We choose We cause to remain in the womb for an appointed time, then We bring you forth as infants and then you grow and reach maturity (22:5).

We first created man from an essence of clay then placed him, a drop of semen [*nutfah*], in a secure enclosure. The drop of semen We made a clot of blood [*'alaqah*] and the clot a lump of flesh [*mudghah*]. This We fashioned into bones [*'idham*], then clothed the bones with flesh [*lahim*], thus bringing forth another creation. Blessed be God, the noblest of creators (23:12-14).

From these lines, scholars have understood that the fetus undergoes a series of transformations, beginning as a simple organism and eventually becoming a human being. The *nutfah* begins at conception and lasts for forty days, until implantation. There are five periods of forty days, and it is after the fourth (the *mudghah* phase) that the soul (*ruh*) enters the body. At that point the Qur'an regards the fetus as "another creation."

¹¹ Other translations: "ornament" or "adornment"

¹² Bowen, 163.

¹³ Al-Hibri made this remark in an address entitled "Family Planning and Islamic Jurisprudence," delivered on 19 May 1993 before the Panel on Religious and Ethical Perspectives on Population Issues, convened by the NGO Steering Committee at Prep-Com II of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) at the United Nations.

The general consensus is that abortion is prohibited once ensoulment has occurred—that is, the moment when the soul is united with the developing fetus, thus making it a human being (*insān*).¹⁴ There is considerable debate, though, over precisely when ensoulment takes place. Some theological schools posit that the fetus is ensouled at the moment of conception, while others suggest, forty, eighty, or 120 days after conception. Thus, abortion is either prohibited at all times, or permitted up to forty, eighty, or even 120 days after conception, depending on the dominant legal school (*madh'hab*) in the given area.

The major schools, which have both religious and jurisprudential dimensions,¹⁵ form their position on abortion from their interpretation of the *hadith*. The explanation (of the *hadith*) most often quoted regarding fetal development comes from Abd Allah ibn Mas'ud, a close companion of Muhammad:

The Prophet of God told us—and he is the one who speaks the truth and evokes belief—Each of you is gathered in his mother's womb for forty days; then [he is] a clot of blood [*'alaqa*] for the same period; then he is a clump of flesh [*mudgha*] for the same period. Then God sends an angel who is commanded regarding four things: his livelihood, his span of life, and that he be blessed or cursed [in the afterlife]. Then [the angel] breathes the spirit into him.¹⁶

That ensoulment takes place 120 days after conception (three periods of forty days) is accepted by both the Hanafi and the Zaydi schools accept, as well as some members of the Shafi'i School. Thus, abortion is permitted before 120 days (or, before the end of the fourth month), but strictly prohibited after. Other Shafi'i jurists only allow abortion up to eighty days, and the Hanbali School allows abortion up to forty days. According to the Maliki School, the Imami Shi'is, and the Ibadi¹⁷ Muslims, abortion is prohibited (*haram*) at any point in the pregnancy, for it is the killing of a potential person. Virtually all scholars make an exception when the health or life of the mother is endangered. Since the mother is the source of life for the fetus, her life takes precedence. In this case, abortion is regarded as a lesser evil, following a general principle in *shari'a* law of choosing the least damaging option (or “the lesser of two evils”), even though it may be undesirable.¹⁸

Because the Qur'an is even less clear on family planning than on abortion, there is an even greater diversity of opinion on its permissibility. Historically, Muslim scholars have said that contraception is permissible if the wife consents.¹⁹ In classical Islamic law, eight of the nine legal schools permit contraception. Ibn Hazm, a medieval theologian and jurist, adopted an extremely restrictive position on contraception, arguing that it is a form of hidden infanticide. The Qur'an's prohibition of parents killing their children for “fear of poverty” (17:31) has prompted some to extend this teaching to family planning methods. Muslim opponents of family planning believe it denotes a lack of trust in the providence of God, citing the Qur'an's reminder that God provides for all his creatures: “There is not a creature on

¹⁴ The Qur'an is clear about the sanctity of life, saying: “Whosoever has spared the life of a soul, it is as though he has spared the life of all people. Whosoever has killed a soul, it is as though he has murdered all of mankind” (5:32).

¹⁵ The schools of Islamic jurisprudence (called *madh'hab*) represent different interpretations of Islam. All consider the Qur'an and *hadith* to be sacred texts and the primary source of consultation. There are four major Sunni legal schools are: Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali. The Zaydi school is the predominant Shi'a school.

¹⁶ Donna Lee Bowen, “Reproduction: Abortion and Islam (Overview)” *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, ed. Suad Joseph. Leiden and Boston: Brill. Volume 3: 313-15, 313.

¹⁷ Ibadi is the dominant form of Islam in Oman, where abortion is only legal to save the life of the mother.

¹⁸ Bowen, “Abortion, Islam, and the 1994 Cairo Population Conference,” 164-165.

¹⁹ While any form of temporary sterilization is generally permitted, tubal-ligation and vasectomy are more controversial because of their permanent effect. Iran, Turkey, and Tunisia allow both tubal-ligation and vasectomy, but Jordan and Egypt do not.

earth whose provision is not guaranteed by God” (11:6). Yet others note that the Prophet Muhammad permitted the practice of *al-‘azl* (*coitus interruptus*, or withdrawal), and, by analogy, other mechanical contraceptive methods, for example condoms and diaphragms, should also be permitted. All five legal schools permit *al-‘azl*, four of them insisting that the wife’s consent must be given.

How Theology Becomes Law: The Legal Status of Abortion in the Muslim World

Next, we examine the status of abortion in countries that are predominantly Muslim. Leila Hessini, Senior Policy Advisor for Ipas,²⁰ notes that thirteen of the 21 countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have “very restrictive” abortion laws, only allowing abortion if the woman’s life is threatened.²¹ It is important to note that, even with a liberalizing trend, the laws in the Muslim world are relatively strict compared with much of Western Europe and the United States. Still, Hessini notes that “reform efforts, *including progressive interpretations of Islam*,”²² have resulted in a liberalization of abortion laws in the MENA region.

When examining the laws, it is important to note the differences in the composition of the government. Some countries are Islamic states, while others are secular states. The two Muslim countries with the most liberal abortion laws are Tunisia and Turkey. In both Turkey and Tunisia, the dominant legal school is the Hanafi School, which, as already noted, allows abortion up to 120 days after conception. In 1965, Tunisia became the first MENA country to liberalize its abortion law. Spousal consent is not required, and women do not have to be married to obtain an abortion. Abortions may be sought during the first trimester, and, in the event of fetal abnormalities or a threat to the mother’s life, after 12 weeks. Turkey is the only predominantly Muslim country that is also fully secular²³, and liberalized its abortion laws in 1983 with the Population Policy Law No. 2827, which authorizes abortion on request up to ten weeks of pregnancy and up to 24 weeks for medical indications.²⁴

The remaining Muslim countries that permit abortion without restriction as to reason are former Soviet republics: Albania, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Abortion was made legal in the Soviet Union in 1920, and it has remained legal in these six Central Asian states that broke with the Soviet Union in the 1990s. Seven countries do not permit abortion in the first four months in the case of fetal deformity: Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Iran, Kuwait, and Qatar. Iran is the most recent to allow this, having passed the Therapeutic Abortion Act in 2005. While abortion has always been permitted to save the mother’s life, this type of legislation broadens the reasons to include fetal viability and economic or social hardships. Some speculate that the number of fetuses that are falsely diagnosed with “fatal” conditions may increase.

A 2008 report from the International Planned Parenthood Foundation (IPPF) suggests that despite both the legal and religious restrictions against abortion in most of the Muslim world, both social values

²⁰ Ipas, an abortion advocacy organization, is a manufacturer and distributor of manual vacuum aspiration (MVA) instruments.

²¹ Leila Hessini, “Abortion and Islam: Policies and Practice in the Middle East and North Africa.” *Reproductive Health Matters* (May 2007, 15(29):75-84), 75.

²² Hessini, 75.

²³ Turkey is a representative democracy.

²⁴ Hessini, 79.

and economic situations have changed, resulting in an increase in the number of abortions that take place in the MENA region. Mohammed Graigaa, executive director of the Moroccan Association for Family Planning, agrees: “There’s definitely an increase compared to 10 to 15 years ago. [...] Abortion is much less of a taboo. It’s much more visible. Doctors talk about it. Women talk about it. The moral values of people have changed.”²⁵ While it is impossible to know just how many abortions take place because illegal abortion is not typically documented, the UNFPA reports that one in ten pregnancies in the 21 predominantly Muslim countries of the region ends in abortion.²⁶

Abdel Moati Bayoumi, a professor at Al-Azhar Univeristy in Cairo, sees the increased practice of abortion and its acceptability²⁷ in the Muslim world as a sign of “how much people are drifting away from the teachings of Islam.”²⁸ In many cases, religious leaders have also issued *fatwas* (non-binding religious edicts), making allowances for abortions under certain circumstances. A prominent Shi’ite cleric in Iran recently issued a *fatwa* permitting abortion in the first trimester if the woman’s health is endangered or if the fetus is deformed. Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has also issued a *fatwa* that permits abortion in the first ten weeks if the fetus tests positive for thalassemia, a genetic blood disorder.²⁹ In Saudi Arabia, where a similar *fatwa* was issued, a study revealed that nearly half of those asked, who had initially rejected the permissibility of abortion, changed their mind when informed of the *fatwa*.³⁰

Still, *fatwas* are not bona fide legal policy and generate much controversy. In 2004, when the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar University in Cairo supported a *fatwa* that permitted abortion in the case of rape, the mufti of Egypt, Ali Gomaa, chastised him, saying his decision violated the Qur’an’s command that “forbids killing innocent souls.”³¹ Nonetheless, some of the liberalization in attitude can be attributed to a more progressive understanding of Islam, one that sees *ijtihad* (the equivalent of the Catholic concept of conscience) as a way to reconcile religion with cultural preference and personal desire.

In 2005, Pakistan’s Ministry of Population Welfare, with support from the UNFPA, sponsored the International Ulama Conference on Population and Development. The conference, which took place in Islamabad in 2005, explored the role of family planning and reproductive health programs within Islam. Pakistan’s prime minister emphasized the importance of *ijtihad* in Islam, especially when dealing with these issues. Chaudhry Shahbaz Husain, the Federal Minister for Population Welfare, echoed this sentiment, asserting that, while classical Islam does not prohibit family planning or population control, even if it did, through the development of *ijtihad*, scholars should look for newer theories of jurisprudence in order to justify birth control and family regulation in civil society.³²

²⁵ Borzou Daragahi, “Abortions on the rise in Mideast.”

²⁶ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The Gap Exists Between Hopes and Realities. New York: UNFPA. <http://www.unfpa.org/intercenter/hopes/gap.html>.

²⁷ The IPPF report notes that 53 percent of Egyptians and 55 percent of Iranians disagree with their government’s ban on abortion.

²⁸ Borzou Daragahi, “Abortions on the rise in Mideast.”

²⁹ Sa’diyya Shaikh, “Family planning, contraception and abortion in Islam: Understanding Hilafah: Moral Agency, Justice and Compassion.” Published in *Sacred Choices: The Case for Contraception and Abortion in World Religions*, ed. By Daniel Maguire. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 122.

³⁰ Hessini, 81.

³¹ BBC – Religions – Islam: Abortion. http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/islamethics/abortion_1.shtml.

³² Farooq Hassan, “Muslim Ulama & Implementing Restrictive Family and Population Policies.” IslamOnline.net. 18 May 2005. http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1158658475746&pagename=Zone-English-Living-Shariah%2FLSELayout.

Ms. Hong Ping, of the Chinese chapter of IPPF, presented a paper at the Ulama Conference, entitled “Promotion of Reproductive Health Through Religious Leaders Among the Muslim Population.” Ping explained that there existed “misunderstanding and misperception” among Muslims, regarding the permissibility of reproductive health services, such as “abortion is life-killing.” IPPF’s initiative, which Ping speaks of, is just one example of how pro-abortion groups have targeted religious leaders to promote their population control agenda. Ping encouraged leaders to use “relevant statements” in the Qur’an and *hadith* to explain, “reproductive health was necessary and feasible,” thus “integrating the doctrines from the Qur’an and *hadith* with reproductive health and family planning.”³³

While traditionally abortion even before 120 days was still discouraged (*makruh*), many Muslims have moved towards what the renowned Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman calls a “general acceptance of abortion within 120 days of pregnancy”³⁴—that is, abortion without restriction as to reason, to use the legal terminology.

Population and Development: UNFPA

To understand how UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a role in popularizing abortion and family planning in Muslim countries, one should begin in Cairo in 1994, at the UN’s International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). Leading up to the conference, many Muslim communities expressed suspicion towards the UN initiatives for family planning and population control. Religious leaders in Saudi Arabia condemned the conference as a “ferocious assault on Islamic society,”³⁵ forbidding Muslims from attending. Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon did not send delegates to the conference, with the hope of disassociating themselves from endorsing abortion, and Islamic fundamentalists called it the “conference of licentiousness.”³⁶

Yet in recent years, the flexible nature of Islamic law has made Islamic countries vulnerable to progressive readings, as well as intervention from outside sources. Pro-abortion NGOs, such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), the International Women’s Health Coalition, and the International Reproductive Rights Research Action Group, put pressure on policymakers to liberalize their abortion laws, promising a decrease in maternal mortality and an improvement in the status of women. Former executive director of the UNFPA, Thoraya Ahmed Obaid of Saudi Arabia, describes herself as a product of Islam interpreted as a religion of moderation. Obaid, who led UNFPA for a decade and stepped down in 2010, is a strong advocate for women’s access to reproductive health services. And, while the UNFPA says that it takes a “neutral stance” on abortion, it works closely with NGOs who promote and advocate for abortion.³⁷

One of the strategies used by the UNFPA, and likeminded advocates, is to take advantage of UN language that is euphemistic and often leads to confusion. Population control advocates talk about

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Fazlur Rahman, *Health and Medicine in the Islamic Tradition* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 118.

³⁵ Shaikh, 105.

³⁶ Alan Cowell, “Vatican Says Gore is Misrepresenting Population Talks,” *New York Times*, 1 September 1994, A1.

³⁷ Between 1990-1994, UNFPA gave \$57 million to China, to fund their “one-child policy.” As a result, the United States, under the Bush administration, withheld funding from the UNFPA. UNFPA has also funded the International Planned Parenthood Foundation (IPPF), one of the leading abortion advocacy groups in the world, and the Center for Reproductive Rights (CRR), a New York-based pro-abortion law firm. In 2006, UNFPA lobbied the Nicaraguan government to reconsider its ban on abortion.

the earth's "carrying capacity," and family planning activists promote "fertility regulation." Abortion advocates intentionally leave vague and misleading the term "sexual and reproductive health services," causing conservative countries to qualify their support for "reproductive health" by noting that it does not include abortion.

A push for legal abortion also comes under the banner of improving women's health, or the maternal mortality rate by reducing the incidence of unsafe abortions.^{38,39} Indicators demonstrating the social status of women reveal that women enjoy fewer public privileges in Muslim countries compared with North and South America, Western and Eastern Europe, and East Asia. Unfortunately, those who call for gender equality and the empowerment of women go much further than educational and economic opportunities, and often extend empowerment to include a woman's "right" to abortion. Even though research shows that access to safe and legal abortion does not lower the maternal mortality ratio,⁴⁰ this has not stopped many from claiming a new "right" to maternal health under the Millennium Development Goals and calling for an end to unsafe, defined as illegal, abortion.

For example, in the case of Turkey, Hessini notes that three interrelated strategies were successfully used to bring about a reform of Turkish abortion laws:

- 1) Research on the undesired consequences of unsafe abortion, its link to maternal mortality and a high rate of unwanted pregnancy;
- 2) The introduction of simpler and safer methods for treating post-abortion complications such as manual vacuum aspiration (MVA); and
- 3) A cohort of trained providers of MVA.⁴¹

Unsafe abortion was acknowledged as a major public health concern in Turkey in the late 1970s. But, according to some World Health Organization staff, any abortion that is performed in a country where abortion is illegal is considered "unsafe."⁴² In countries where abortion is illegal, a large number of maternal deaths will be attributed to "unsafe" abortions, and, at the UN, the countries will be pressured to legalize abortion.

³⁸ The final report from the ICPD in Cairo stated: "In no case should abortion be promoted as a method of family planning." But, "in circumstances where abortion is legal, such abortion should be safe."

³⁹ The term "safe motherhood," coined by Fred Sai, M.D., a Ghanaian physician, is another term used to advocate for abortion-on-demand. Sai founded Family Care International (FCI), an abortion advocacy group that is responsible for the Women Deliver Conference—itsself claiming to be focused on maternal health, but overtly dedicated to "reproductive rights" and the pro-abortion agenda. Sai served as the chairman for the Main Committee of the ICPD in Cairo in 1994, and was the former president of the International Planned Parenthood Foundation (IPPF). One of the top priorities of the Safe Mother Initiative (SMI) is to "Prevent Unwanted Pregnancy and Address Unsafe Abortion." But SMI goes further than Cairo's "where legal, safe," calling for the legalization of abortion: "What can be done? Reform laws and policies to support women's reproductive health and improve access to family planning, health and *abortion-related services*" (*italics mine*).

⁴⁰ A recent study done by the British medical journal *The Lancet*, in conjunction with the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), refutes the claim, made by those who promote abortion in maternal health policy, that 500,000 maternal deaths occur annually. [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(10\)60518-1/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(10)60518-1/fulltext).

⁴¹ Hessini, 79.

⁴² See Donna Harrison, "Removing the Roadblocks from Achieving MDG 5 by Improving the Data on Maternal Mortality," *International Organizations Research Group Briefing Paper No. 5*, C-FAM, May, 2009). http://www.c-fam.org/docLib/20090514-Removing_the_Roadblocksfinal.pdf.

Summary

As the Muslim delegations began to present their views at the ICPD in Cairo, it became clear that there was a greater degree of latitude in the Muslim religious position on abortion than originally represented by the media, who linked the Muslim position with that of the Holy See's total condemnation. Though Islam, on the whole, forbids abortion, Muslim scholars reject a full prohibition of abortion, taking a more nuanced approach that acknowledges the intricacies of the issue. Along with attention to national policies, a crucial part of understanding abortion in the Muslim world is an comprehending the diversity of beliefs and practices among Muslims, as well as the variety of ways in which the relationship between the religious and legal plays out. While it is evident that Islam plays a major role in informing legal and social policy in the Muslim world, a lack of clarity and consensus on Islam's position on abortion has made many Muslim nations vulnerable to outside intervention and subsequent liberalization.



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