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Islamic Charitable NGOs

On 14 June 2007, ISIM, co-sponsored by HIVOS, organized the conference "Islamic Charitable NGOs: Between Patronage and Empowerment." The event provided a forum for scholars and practitioners to address the perception held among Western development agencies that Islamic NGOs engage in charitable work primarily as a means of *da'wa*, and that they reinforce dependence, rather than promote empowerment.

In his presentation, Egbert Harmsen discussed if and how Islamist NGOs empower their beneficiaries. Drawing on a case study of Islamist NGOs in Jordan he suggested that although the Islamic discourse of these NGOs carries the message of individual and collective empowerment, they fail to actually challenge existing systems of patronage and dependency. Rather, Islamist NGOs seem to hold on to the (rather romantic) notion that empowerment will be realized through the harmonization of Muslim society.

Focusing on social activism in Egypt and Jordan, Sara Lei Sparre and Marie Juul Petersen discussed the role of youth in bringing about social change in Middle Eastern civil society. They questioned whether the empowerment the new movement claims to deliver is accomplished through encouragement of political participation of the underprivileged and challenging patronage patterns and gender stereotypes.

Sheila Carapico shifted the focus of the debate to the relationship between Western donors and Islamic charitable NGOs. Exploring why only a few religiously oriented NGOs in the Middle East have succeeded in obtaining funds from Western donors, she suggested that a main reason for the reluctance of Western players is the perceived risk of sponsoring terrorism. In addition, Islamic NGOs are reluctant to accept "Western" money, as they do not wish to be (seen as) tools in spreading resented Western influence. Barriers set by Arab governments and the failure of Muslim NGOs to meet Western requirements further limit co-

operation. Nevertheless, she noted in her conclusion, cooperation between Islamic NGOs and Western based donors exist through indirect channels, even if the parties involved are not always aware of it.

Attitudes to Islamic charities should be understood within the broader framework of international politics, as Jonathan Benthall showed in his presentation. He argued that global changes after 9/11 have had negative repercussions on the functioning of Islamic charities. At the same time, the international community increasingly recognizes that Islamic NGOs are important grass root players with access to broad layers of the population. A possible way out of this deadlock would be to promote dialogue between various humanitarian cultures and to improve the accountability of Islamic NGOs.

Khaled Hroub discussed links between the rise of Hamas in Palestine and its decade long welfare activities. He noted that the drive to empower Palestinians against the occupation succeeded in building a horizontal network among Palestinians, thus freeing them from dependence on the occupiers. On the other hand, the by-product of Islamic empowerment and welfare is a deep rupture between the religious and the secular part of society.

Nigel Dower in his concluding remarks commented on some of the most debated issues of the conference. Do Islamic charities facilitate empowerment or dependency? Do they motivate social change or reinforce gender stereotypes and patronage? What is the impact of global changes after 9/11 on the functioning of Islamic charities? He suggested that charity as a means of *da'wa* does not necessarily prevent empowerment of the underprivileged and that thus the goals of Islamic charities and Western donors do not need to be mutually exclusive.

Maria Kekeliouva was an intern at ISIM from April through July 2007.

MARIA KEKELIOVA

Redefining Boundaries

NATHAL M. DESSING

"We are doing innovation and not *ijtihad*," said Nasr Abou Zayd in the discussion in the morning session, meaning by *ijtihad* something that is limited to *fiqh* only.¹ However, people striving for equal rights for women may wish to go beyond this. This may vary from endorsing a historical critical approach to tradition, as Abu Zayd does, to raising the question of whether taking human rights conventions as a point of departure is strategically more effective in advancing women's rights than the reinterpretation of religious texts.

This and similar issues were addressed at the ISIM Conference on "Redefining Boundaries: Muslim Women and Religious Authority in Practice," organized in cooperation with the Amsterdam School of Social Science Research in Amsterdam on Sunday 24 June 2007. The purpose of the conference was to bring together some leading female Muslim intellectuals and activists to explore the theme of Muslim women and religious authority. The speakers were Asma Barlas (Ithaca College, New York, USA), Amel Grami (University of Manouba, Tunis, Tunisia), Qudsiya Mirza (University of East London, UK), Lily Zakiyah Munir (Centre for Pesantren and Democracy Studies, Indonesia), Ceylan Pektaş-Weber (Al Nisa organization for Muslim women and youngsters, The Netherlands), and Nayereh Tohidi (California State University Northridge, USA). The conference formed part of the ISIM research programme "Individualization, Fragmentation of Authority, and New Organizational Forms among Muslims in Europe," which is funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research NWO.

The Quran is "what God has chosen to give us" and constitutes for Asma Barlas the basis of her academic and spiritual endeavours. Lily Munir considered *ijtihad*, "free and independent thinking to arrive at a juristic ruling on issues over which the Quran and Hadith are silent," as a strategically important tool for women's empowerment and change of Muslim society in general. Similarly, according to Amel Grami, women's

emancipation in Muslim societies can be achieved only by changing the terms of the theological-juridical debates and developing "fresh" interpretations of the Quran. She emphasized, however, that in her experience voices calling for legal reform in favour of women are often silenced and she wondered if the time was ripe for cooperation of secular women and Islamic feminists. Qudsiya Mirza also recognized the importance of "feminist interpreters of the scripture." However, she pointed out, among others by equating Islamic feminists to Islamists, that it is important to realize that the strategy of locating gender equality within Islam has its limitations and may not result in equality for all women in the Muslim world. Ceylan Pektaş-Weber, approaching the theme of the conference from a different angle, explored the meaning of *khilafa* (vicegerency or agency) for women from a theological perspective. Religious authority is for her an important tool in the fight against inequality and injustice, but acquiring it should not become a goal in itself. This, she argued, would do no justice to Islamic views of agency. Nayereh Tohidi exemplified all of the above views very clearly in her warning against sectarianism: she emphasized the importance of openness towards, and cooperation between, women activists of various ideological inclinations.

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Notes

1. A shortened version of Asma Barlas' paper appears on page 32 in this issue. In conjunction with the conference, the Dutch Muslim Broadcasting Company NMO produced a series of television documentaries on Asma Barlas, Amel Grami, Lily Zakiyah Munir, and Nayereh Tohidi. A master class on the theme of the conference led by Asma Barlas and Nayereh Tohidi was held in Leiden on Monday 25 June 2007.