

Gambling and Islam: Clashing and Co-existing

The religion of Islam forbids all types of gambling including lotteries, wagering, and casinos. However gambling often continues as an important part of life of some Muslims. The way Muslims approach gambling is based on a number of factors, including religious devotion, cultural influences, government policy, and economic status. Though Islam and gambling are incompatible on the surface, in many situations the two co-exist in varying and surprising ways. Consequently, there are currently many dialogues between advocates of gambling and advocates of Islam. These dialogues are numerous, varied, and dynamic. The wide array of reactions toward gambling from Muslims demonstrates the heterogeneity of value systems of Muslims and of various “styles” of Islam. The history of Islam and gambling from before Mohammed to gives a sense of why the reaction to gambling in the Islamic world is so varied. A number of case studies demonstrate the dynamicism and distinctiveness of the many interactions between Islam and gambling throughout the world.

History, Doctrine, and Practice

Before the advent of Islam, the Arab people lived in present-day Saudi Arabia. Their culture was characterized by tribal warfare and idol worship, called a time of ignorance (*jahiliyya*) by Muslims. Gambling (*Qimar*) was very common among this people, and continued, though subdued, after the advent of Islam. Gambling among the Arabs was usually betting on events and contests. In one record, two men bet whether they could make a certain slave lie (Rosenthal, 30). Additionally, early Arabs bet on

dice, chess games, backgammon, horse racing, and cock fights (34-57). *Maysir* was a type of lottery in pre-Islamic Arabia (32). Some people believe that playing cards, which were found in Islamic Egypt, were also involved in gambling (24). Participants in these games may have wagered money, food, clothes, animals, slaves, and even family members (Rosenthal, 28, 30).

The prophet Mohammed was born into this culture in the Arabian Peninsula during the sixth century. Throughout his life he received many revelations that were recorded in the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. He initiated the formation of Islam as a religious movement, and began the expansion of Islam to nearby areas. Through the teachings of Islam, he worked to bring people out the chaos, violence, and un-belief of the *jahiliyya*.

During the course of his life, followers asked him about the place of gambling in Islam. In response to the problem of gambling, he received two revelations, now recorded in the Qur'an, which specifically forbade gambling. The first reads: "They ask you about intoxicants and games of chance. Say: In both of them there is a great sin and means of profit for men, and their sin is greater than their profit" (Shakir, 2:219). The other scripture says: "The Shaitan [Satan] only desires to cause enmity and hatred to spring in your midst by means of intoxicants and games of chance, and to keep you off from the remembrance of Allah and from prayer. Will you [not] then desist?" (Shakir, 5:91). In both of these scriptures, games of chance are associated with alcohol, a forbidden substance. The Qur'an also forbade gambling because it leads men to hate each other, forget God, and neglect prayer. In one ambiguous phrase, gambling is also forbidden because its "profit" does not outweigh its "sin." One scholar, Islahi, suggested

that gambling may have been a charitable event—drawing lots of pieces of meat that would be given to the poor—but that the drinking and immorality associated with this practice canceled out its positive benefits (Mir, 216).

In a non-Qur’anic account of the prophet (hadith), Mohammed once said that one of the reasons that gambling is forbidden is because there is an exchange of goods involving risk (*Hadith* from Malik's Muwatta, Book 31, No. 31.13.25). As a result today, any kind of financial transaction with financial uncertainty and risk is forbidden. Currently, strict Muslims avoid stock-market speculation and variable interest rates because they do not know how much money they will gain or lose. Also, Islamic banks have been set up that do not use variable rates. Muslim proselytizers say that another reason that gambling and other transactions are forbidden is because the value of the goods exchanged is not known. This leads to unrealistic fantasies of wealth, eliminates the benefits of hard work, and harms the gambler, his family, and society (El Sayed).

However, it was not always clear to scholars and religious interpreters how to define gambling. In early Islamic times religious leaders debated the permissibility of children’s game involving hard-boiled eggs. One child would throw or roll his egg at the other child's egg, trying to break it. The child whose egg was not broken was the winner, and the prize was the broken egg. One early Islamic scholar, al-Hasan al-Basri, permitted the game because the participants were children, and not as accountable to Islamic law to the same degree as adults. A different scholar, Ibn Taymiyah forbade the game because children would buy and sell these eggs with others, thus involving adults in the situation, to these egg vendor's profit (Rosenthal, 61, 62). Although this situation may seem trivial today, it was an important issue to Muslims who zealously wanted to establish a society

that followed the word of God as closely as possible.

Today, in response to Qur'anic passages and *hadith* (prophetic anecdotes), observant Muslims consider casino betting, lottery participation, and sports betting to be particularly un-Islamic. Yet gambling is still found in most of the Muslim world. Some gambling traditions were introduced by colonial conquerors--for example, casinos in Lebanon and Egypt are from the French and English (Glass). Other gambling practices seem to be the result of Islam's contact with other cultures during its expansion, such as wagering on quail fights in Afghanistan. As Islam spread from Arabia to other areas, it mixed with other cultures, sometimes producing a less rigorous form of Islam, and consequently, different views on the permissibility of gambling. Gambling practice have continued today in possibly every Muslim nation. Even the definition of gambling is differs among Muslims—some Muslims today have argued that the lottery is not gambling (Brenner, 175). Currently, modern communication and trade have brought additional gambling venues such as internet gambling to a bigger sector of the world. And informal wagering is possible for any Muslim.

In reaction to western and secular trends such as gambling, Islamic activism has increased throughout the world. Many Muslims have grown dissatisfied with nationalistic governments and Western influences, which have not brought the needed increase in economic prosperity, education, human rights, or understanding from the West. Because of this frustration, many Muslims have adopted the banner-cry "Islam is the solution," or "*Islam, huwwa al hall.*" Many Muslims believe that a return to Islam is the key to social, economic, and intellectual superiority which Muslims enjoyed during the life of Mohammed. This Islamic movement, though varied and not unified, has led to

the Iranian revolution in 1979, the strict Islam of Saudi Arabia, and Muslim proselitizing in America. With this return to Islam, Muslims around the world are re-examining the role of gambling in their lives, asking themselves questions addressing the definition of gambling, who can gamble, what governments should do about gambling, and reconciling culture with Islam.

Indonesia

Indonesia is one Muslim nation that has had legalized gambling in the past but now forbids it. In the past, Indonesia had a state-run lottery. As Islamic activism grew in Indonesia, Muslim activists and students protested the lottery. Critics condemned the lottery because it increased poverty among poor uneducated Indonesians, whose gambling behavior was their only hope of getting out of poverty. Many people also believed that the lottery revenues were channeled to the corrupt President's family. Because of increasing pressure, the government decided to discontinue the lottery. Now gambling is illegal throughout Indonesia ("Indonesia's Pig of a Lottery" and "Indonesia: Lottery Lament").

The lottery was established by the government partially as a philanthropic program. Once known as the “*Sumbangan Dana Sosial Berhadiah*”, or Philanthropic Donation With Prizes, it tried to justify its existence by appealing to charity. However, it was soon apparent to Muslim leaders that the lottery was doing more harm than good. Lottery tickets cost about the same as the daily wage. Rumors circulate throughout Indonesia about men who have gained a small fortune through the lottery, and a large number of Indonesians have developed gambling addictions from their quest to get out of poverty. It was believed that winning the lottery was gift of God, and so many

Indonesians consulted mystics or try to summon spirits to determine which numbers they would play. (At one time many mystics all predicted the winning number, and the government was forced to pay out 150 billion rupiahs—the lottery continued so the government could re-collected their losses.) Anti-gambling advocates argued that theft often funded compulsive gamblers. And Islamic critics complained that the "unclean" proceeds of the lottery had been used to finance Islamic banks, schools, and cultural events (Cohen). Sociologically and morally, it seemed that the lottery was not good for Indonesia, and under pressure from Muslim students and others, the lottery was banned ("Indonesia: Lottery Lament.")

However, illegal gambling is prevalent throughout Indonesia. Dense population and police corruption have allowed illegal casinos to operate without regards to the Islamic ban on gambling. Some fundamentalist Muslims have tried to enforce the ban themselves. For example, students and members of the Islam Defenders Front have raided gambling establishments themselves in their crusade against gambling ("Gambling Talks" and "Bogor Students").

Now the government has tried to re-legalize gambling. There have been attempts to legalize local gambling and to open casinos aimed at foreigners ("Gambling Talks" and McBeth). The economic benefits of gambling are always touted by Indonesian officials who are not as strict Islamically and may be looking for a extra cash. In justification of gambling before the demise of the lottery, one Indonesian official begged, “please consider it [gambling] a pig. It may be *haram* [forbidden] for Muslims to eat it, but that doesn't mean you have to kill it” ("Indonesia's Pig of a Lottery"). Another official claimed that over 200 billion Rupiahs (more than 22 million U.S. dollars) are circulated

daily in illegal gambling ventures that could alternatively circulate through government sponsored casinos and lotteries. By taking control of these ventures, government would be better funded ("Gambling Talks").

Islam in Indonesia has been highly influenced by mysticism, folk religions, Hinduism, and ethnic influences, creating a much less stringent form of Islam. Resultantly, Muslims in Indonesia are far less likely to be concerned about the lottery. But the revival of Islam throughout Indonesia has brought a new group of students and activists who are working to establish a more conservative type of Islam among the people. The result is a wide spread of Islamic interpretations, and more conservative views against gambling.

Afghanistan

One traditional Afghani past time, especially in the capital, Kabul, is quail and partridge fighting. Two birds are placed in a circle by their owners, and attack each other. Usually the quail are not hurt, and the fight ends when the more cowardly bird runs away. Bets are always placed during the fights. Bird owners may invest hundreds of dollars and thousands of hours in buying and training the birds. Afghans bet on other fights as well, such as dog fights and hard-boiled egg fights (like the children game of early Muslim children). Paper kites, strung with glass and kites, are fought also. Having fights and betting on these matches seems to be an integral part of Afghani culture ("Quail Fighting" and Dixon).

When the Taliban, an ultra-conservative group, came to power in Afghanistan, all activities that not deemed Islamic were banned, such as television watching and drinking alcohol. Fights and betting were strictly forbidden though bird fighting continued

underground. After the United States removed the Taliban, a new U.S.-sponsored government was established. Gambling is still illegal in Afghanistan, but the new police force does not enforce it. Now, on the streets of Kabul, it is again possible to see quail fights and to wager on them. Sometimes the Islamic leaders (*mullahs*) are also there, participating and betting on the matches ("Quail Fighting" and Dixon). From this, it is obvious that although Afghanistan is predominantly Muslim, it does not traditionally hold to Islamic standards as tightly as other countries. Though the Taliban had implemented a conservative return to Islam, the people have chosen to abide by their traditional style of Islam.

Iran

In 1979 the Shah of Iran was deposed and Ayatollah Khomeini established a new government by Islamic clerics. Like the Taliban, Khomeini and his fellow clerics began to enforce a no-nonsense style of Islam (Kepel, 106-118). Because of the limited access the press has to Iran, little is known about gambling practices there. However, recently a new government-sponsored lottery has appeared in Iran. In accord with the Islamic state, the lottery is billed as a charitable institution, similar to the lottery in Indonesia. The lottery is administered by the Welfare Organization of Iran. Tickets, however, are cheap, approximately 25 cents in America, but winnings can be as large as \$6,000, a sizeable fortune in an increasingly poverty-ridden country. In defense of this questionable development, the leader of the Welfare Organization claims that those who participate "really want to help others. They are not gambling. It is not some sort of match or race. . . There is no win or lose." However, because of Iran's tight government, it is impossible to know how many participants are motivated by non-philanthropic desires, and if there

are any people who have become addicted to the Iranian charitable lottery (Schneider). In Iran, the appearance of the lottery is an amazing event—the clerics, who interpret the Qur'an and make laws based in Islam, have permitted a lottery and have justified it with Islam.

America

Many Muslims have come to America, both as emigrants and students. Most American Muslims encounter gambling of some form in America, whether casinos or state lottos, which is much more commonplace and open than in Muslim countries. Many Muslims, holding strongly to their faith, have actively campaigned against gambling. In some places, such as in Kentucky, Muslims have banded with leaders of Christian faiths to ban the lottery ("Interfaith Effort"). In Maryland, the Muslim American Society has actively worked to eliminate gambling in a number of ways. It sponsors talks in mosques throughout Maryland that encourage Muslims to petition legislatures to ban slot machines. The Muslim American Society is the founding member of a Maryland anti-gambling coalition. Neither the Muslim American Society nor the gambling coalition use only Islamic reasons to condemn gambling, but rather both cite sociological and criminal data to validate the ill effects of gambling ("Maryland Muslims and "NOcasiNO Maryland").

However, some American Muslims are faced with a conflict between moral and economic interests. For example, some Muslim convenience store owners must decide whether to sell lottery tickets. A strict Islamic interpretation would dictate that selling lottery tickets is wrong, because it provides an outlet for sin. However, many of the shop owners have decided to continue to sell the tickets because they fear the potential

financial consequences of not selling lottery tickets. Yet they may be criticized by other Muslims, who wish to portray Islam in a the most positive light possible in terms of devotion and integrity (Fay).

Faced with greater anti-Islamic attitudes and general ignorance about Muslims, American Muslims have worked to demonstrate true Islam to their neighbors. Trying to counteract misunderstanding and remain true to their faith, many Muslims in America endeavor to be examples of true Islam. This desire to correct misunderstandings, as personally devotion to Islam, has led to anti-gambling movements from Muslims. Yet Muslims face quandaries related to gambling as they adapt to American society and continue to live Islamically.

Other Case Studies

Poorer, less-educated Muslims tend to not be as strict in their personal prohibition of gambling. For example, in Senegal, Islam is the dominant religion, yet there is a substantial gambling problem. Many Muslims there do not consider gambling to be morally wrong or socially unacceptable because in Senegal, the tenets of Islam seems to be much more poorly understood, and dedication to religious observance is less important (Brenner, 168). One Indonesian mystic explained why Muslims gamble, noting that some Muslims may even gamble in trying to gain blessings from God. He said that "people don't want to win; they just want some good fortune from God by means of [the Lottery]" (Cohen). In these cases, Islam is understood in a much different way than conservative educated Muslims understand Islam.

Sometimes, the reasons for gambling is cultural. Afghani quail fighting is an example of culture taking precedence over the rules of Islam. Another example is in

Sudan. When extremist Muslims took over the government, they allowed traditional horse racing to continue. However, wagering on the horses was strictly banned, and authorities began to patrol the arena to enforce the gambling ban. Yet cautious bookies and betters have surreptitiously continued their gambling traditions in spite of possible harsh punishments. One participant explained that wagering on horses is part of Sudanese culture, and an element that the government would never destroy ("In Sudan"). To many people, traditional gambling practices are more important than specific tenets of religion.

At other times, gambling exists among Muslims because it is new or popular, and little regard is paid to religious leaders who condemn it. In Kuwait, where conservative Islam characterizes most of the people, banks and other commercial organizations have recently begun to organize lotteries. These lotteries have become very popular, especially after the stories of a number of winners were published in the press ("All Eyes Set On Lotteries"). In a more bizarre case, a popular quiz show, based on the American television program "Who wants to Be a Millionaire?", has appeared in Egypt. In this Egyptian spin-off, a host presents trivia questions and viewers call in with their answers, hoping to win a small fortune. However, they must pay a high phone-bill as they wait to state their answer. Because of the financial loss and the low chance of winning, some Egyptian religious authorities have condemned the quiz show as gambling and call Egyptians to avoid the show. Yet this program has remained intensely popular among Egyptians, whether they call in or not (El Deeb). Influenced by popular culture, many Muslims participate in gambling despite their otherwise devout dedication to Islam.

In some Muslim nations, gambling has been permitted but is intended for tourists,

not for Muslims. Beirut Lebanon, a tourist-attraction for Europeans, was once famed for its ritzy casino (Dudley). Malaysia has long provided casinos designed for Asian tourists on vacation (Holland). Even Jericho, in the Palestinian West Bank, has opened a casino that caters to Israelis and other tourists. This casino is expressly off-limits to Palestinians. However, in spite of restrictions against local gambling, it is not difficult for the affluent and well-connected to enter casinos ("Fun and Games"). Interestingly enough, the Palestinian and Lebanese casinos have spread unusual ripples into Israel. Israeli government leaders, perhaps envious of the casino's economic boost and the loss of Israeli tourism, have decided to allow small number of casinos in Israel itself (Battersby). And wealthy Lebanese and Palestinians through their influence, are able to enter the casinos anyway.

Many Muslims in areas that allow gambling actively lobby to prohibit gambling. This happens in such countries as Indonesia and America. Additionally, some governments in countries that aim to establish Islamic precedence have actively worked to restrict gambling. In Saudi Arabia, where religiously-based law is strictly enforced, participating in gambling is nearly impossible. For example, all forms of gambling are forbidden in Saudi Arabia, and the Saudi officials have even instituted a nation-wide internet-blocking program that screens online-gambling sites. Though Westerners may be shocked at the license Saudi Arabia takes in the private lives of its citizens, advocates of Saudi censoring may claim it is a moral duty (Lee). I have heard rumors that some wealthy Saudis, unable to gamble in their own country, travel to casinos in Egypt and elsewhere. However, to the devout, God's commandment forbidding gambling is not negotiable—therefore in countries such as Saudi Arabia there are no demands to

legalized gambling.

Conclusion

Muslims are influenced by a number of important factors that help determine how they react to gambling issues. These factors include religious devotion, cultural influences, government policy, and economic status. Those who are not as devoted to Islam are more likely to gamble, such as the wealthy Lebanese. Higher religious devotion may lead some to strongly oppose gambling, whether through propaganda, legislation, or even violence. Some Muslims gamble because gambling is a part of their culture. Often times the form of Islam has been influenced by other cultures or religions, and thus the Islamic prohibition against gambling is less obvious. In some cases citizens in countries that forbid gambling find other ways to gamble. In other places, gambling is allowed, and Muslims must cope with gambling issues around them. And at least one nation, Iran, has legalized a form of gambling that has been justified through Islamic sources. Finally, economic status is an important factor because some Muslims must decide whether to support gambling as part of their livelihood.

Although gambling is a minor issue in light of more violent problems throughout the Muslim world, the dialogue between Islam and gambling portrays the heterogeneity of Islam throughout the Muslim world. The debates about gambling in the Muslim world are small samples of the complexity of issues that Muslims face as they re-examine the role of Islam in society, and the variety of answers they have produced.

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