



# Behind the Veil of a Public Health Crisis: HIV/AIDS in the Muslim World

LAURA M. KELLEY and NICHOLAS EBERSTADT

LAURA M. KELLEY was the principal author of the U.S. National Intelligence Council study, “The Next Wave of HIV/AIDS: Nigeria, Ethiopia, Russia, India and China.” She can be reached at <lmk\_4651@hotmail.com>.

NICHOLAS EBERSTADT holds the Henry Wendt Chair in Political Economy at the American Enterprise Institute and is Senior Adviser to The National Bureau of Asian Research. He can be reached at <Eberstadt@AEI.org>.



## FOREWORD

This report by Laura Kelley and Nicholas Eberstadt strikes a very timely and welcome note in two respects.

First, their pioneering research looks at the horribly familiar problem of HIV/AIDS from a unique perspective by focusing on a region and culture which we have not traditionally associated with HIV/AIDS—the Muslim world. What is especially troubling to behold is the reluctance to admit that Muslims engage in exactly those same dangerous behaviors that support the transmission and spread of HIV/AIDS elsewhere. This attitude of denial is deeply rooted in the cultural and religious attitudes of Islam and supported by the many authoritarian regimes that populate the Muslim world. This reluctance even to recognize the problem will only accelerate the epidemic and make it more difficult for the international community to provide meaningful support and treatment. Another sobering implication is that HIV/AIDS is now truly a global crisis in terms of both geography and impact.

Second, the publication of this NBR Special Report coincides with the inaugural Pacific Health Summit to be held in Seattle on June 8–10, 2005. The Summit will bring together the best minds in science, policy, medical practice, public health, and industry to launch a transformation of healthcare focused on the early detection and treatment of disease through emerging science and technologies. To accomplish this important but challenging task, we will need to create fundamentally new levels of organization, collaboration, and teamwork. This effort—whether aimed at infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS or chronic diseases such as cancer and diabetes—must cut across lines of socioeconomic, culture, religion, and nationality. Our hope is that informed and effective health policies—based on insightful research such as that provided here by Kelley and Eberstadt—can be joined with powerful new science and technologies to shift emphasis toward a preventive model for global healthcare.

The National Bureau of Asian Research is grateful to the Henry M. Jackson Foundation for its support of the NBR Special Report series. As with all issues of the NBR Special Report, the authors are solely responsible for the content and recommendations of this paper.

Michael P. Birt  
Director, NBR Center for Health and Aging  
Executive Director, Pacific Health Summit

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### *Topic:*

This report examines the ever-growing HIV/AIDS crisis in the Muslim world, a heretofore largely unexplored problem that poses potentially serious dangers at the national, regional, and international levels.

### *Main Arguments:*

- Despite the fact that the Muslim world is home to many of the behaviors—such as premarital sex, adultery, prostitution, homosexuality, and intravenous drug use—which have helped spread the HIV virus in other countries and regions around the world, many governments in the Muslim world have been slow to respond to the rapidly spreading disease.
- Two characteristics of the Muslim world in particular are resulting in both a denial of the problem and a lack of pro-active organized efforts for infection control: 1) the fusion of faith and statecraft in many Islamic countries and 2) weak or absent democratic practices.
- Government response has varied: some countries like Iran and Bangladesh have been relatively proactive in admitting to and beginning work on the problem, while others have been much more passive.

### *Policy Implications:*

- The successes of Thailand's aggressive anti-HIV campaign contrasts starkly with the dramatic mushrooming of the crisis brought on by South Africa's reluctance to tackle the problem—a difference which clearly demonstrates the need for countries in the Muslim world to tackle these problems now.
- If leaders continue to ignore the problem, AIDS could debilitate or even destabilize some of these societies by killing large numbers of people in the 15 to 49-year age group, thereby depriving these countries of some of their best, brightest, and most economically productive members.
- One immediate need is to make good faith efforts to survey for infection all commercial sex workers, drug abusers, and those with alternative sexual lifestyles—not simply those who identify themselves as being either infected or possibly infected.
- Sweeping legislative and social changes—such as protecting the legal rights of the infected, promoting safer alternative behaviors among high-risk groups, and spreading the message that being a good Muslim can include taking care of those infected by the disease—would be helpful in combating the spread of HIV. HIV/AIDS education and control efforts could also become part of each citizen's *zakat* (charity duty).
- The international community can also assist by helping poorer countries establish social programs, advising on the public health infrastructure required to support successful treatment, or simply sharing experience in drug treatment and behavioral change efforts—all steps which would be most effective if tailored to local needs.

## Introduction

The newest phase of the global AIDS pandemic is the unfolding of the contagion across the great Islamic expanse. In the years immediately ahead, the HIV/AIDS pandemic threatens to wash through the Muslim world. The disease will exact a grim toll in a number of vulnerable populations living within volatile polities—places unlikely to cope well with the significant new social stresses and economic burdens brought on by HIV/AIDS.

The Muslim world consists of more than fifty countries in which forty percent or more of the populace practices some form of Islam. It stretches across three continents and encompasses many hundreds of cultures. From Albania and Turkey in Europe, across countries bordering the Sahara in Northern Africa, and through the Persian Gulf and South Asia to Malaysia and Indonesia in the east, the Muslim world is home to over one billion people [see **Figure I**].

Although no official confederation of states exists, Islamic inhabitants in the Muslim world are bound together as a community of believers called the *umma*. Muslims everywhere are joined by faith in the one god and Muhammad as his prophet. The Qur'an says "The believers are a band of brothers," and opposition movements in some places call themselves "Islamic brotherhoods." Evidence of the influence of the *umma* was seen in the insurgent warriors who came in from all over the Muslim world to defend Islamic Afghanistan from foreign invaders in the 1980s, and again to defend Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s.

While the inhabitants of this *Dar-al Islam*, or House of Islam, share similar religious beliefs, their social and economic backgrounds vary widely. They cannot be cast in the mold of a single ethnic group or a single political system. In recent years, the term "Muslim" has increasingly connoted violent extremism to Western audiences. Of course, most Muslims are not fanatics or revolutionaries seeking to opt out of the world system any more than most are sheiks luxuriating in vast oil wealth. In fact, the majority of Muslims today are non-Arabs, and most live outside the Middle East—nearly 400 hundred million reside in the three countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Bangladesh alone.

However, for all the diversity within the Muslim world, there are still common features. First, there is no prescribed separation of faith and state in many Islamic countries today: the Qur'an is consulted not only as a religious text but also often as a source of law, a guide to statecraft, and an arbiter of social behavior. A second feature is the relative absence of firmly rooted democratic systems. Autocratic rule is much more characteristic within the Muslim world than outside it; in many Muslim settings today "democracy" means ascertaining and

