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Islamic Law Enforcement

In the Islamic culture, the Qur’an is considered to be the actual word of God which Muhammad received from God himself. In the Qur’an, the idea of *sharia*, or Islamic law, is laid out for Muslims to follow. When Muhammad died, many Islamic scholars attempted to interpret the *sharia* and adapt it to growing Islamic culture. Many scholars did not interpret *sharia* the same way as the others. As a result, not all Muslims believe in and follow the same interpretation of their religious law. Outlined in the Qur’an through *sharia* law are ideas and rules just like a country’s normal law system. Described are laws about family, criminal laws, and procedures about how to handle said offenses.

Before 1932, there was no specific task force responsible for the enforcement of Islamic Law. There was the doctrine of *hisba*, which is the duty of Muslims to intervene when another Muslim is acting wrong. The legal implementation of *hisba* was bestowed upon public officials called the *muhtasibs*. These individuals were tasked with preventing the disturbance of public order and infractions against public morality. In the third Saudi state, the most zealous and devoted followers of Ibn Sa’ud were appointed as *muhtasibs*. However, because these followers acted so severely, they often caused conflict with the local population as well as foreigners. To regulate these *muhtasibs*, committees were formed in the major cities in 1932 to track the excess of these individuals. In 1976, these individual committees were brought together to create the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.

Each country in the Middle East has its own form of religious law enforcement. The purpose of each country’s religious enforcement group is to enforce religious observance and public morality based on that country’s interpretation of the *sharia*. Not all countries have the same exact interpretation of the *sharia*. Because of this, each task force enforces different laws. However, there are some main laws that are commonly enforced in all interpretations. A common rule amongst Islamic communities is the idea of a dress code. Women especially are required to wear certain attire during the day. Another enforced rule is the required prayer attendance as explained in the Qur’an. Many interpretations of sharia consider the consumption of alcohol to be against religious law. The final belief that countries agree upon is the unlawfulness of infringing on sexual norms. Many Islamic countries still have gender segregation and is upheld by the religious laws of the country. These concepts are seen as illegal under religious law.

Iran inserted *hisba* into its constitution after the 1979 revolution. Its implementation has been carried out by official committees as well as volunteer forces. Iran’s current form of “morality police” is called the Gasht-e Ershad, or the Guidance Patrol. Their main task is to enforce Iran’s Islamic code of conduct in public. Iran’s interpretation of the Sharia has a large focus on the observance of the hijab. The Guidance Patrols enforce the mandatory rules that require women to cover their hair and bodies and discourage them from wearing any cosmetics. The morality police used to have the power to make arrests and impose fines, but changes were made to take away those powers. Guidance Patrol agents can now only report transgressions to the Iranian police, who will decide whether or not to take action.

Saudi Arabia formed its religious police in 1940. Their version of religious law enforcement is called the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, or *mutawa*. Saudi Arabia’s *sharia* interpretation focuses largely on the interactions between men and women in public. In Saudi Arabia, it is forbidden for unrelated men and women to socialize in public. It is also encouraged that women cover everything but their eyes. The majority of the Islamic followers in Saudi Arabia are of the conservative Sunni Islam. This provides a great support for the *mutawa*. However, like the Guidance Patrol in Iran, the powers of the *mutawa* have been reduced. The Committee can no longer pursue or arrest people but can only report them to the regular law enforcement officers.

Afghanistan’s morality police, the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, was instituted in 1992 by the Rabbani regime. When the Taliban took over in 1996, the Ministry took a stricter approach to enforcing *sharia* law. American style haircuts were banned as well as sorcery. Extreme laws like these were later removed when the Taliban was removed from power. In Afghanistan, their interpretation of *sharia* law tends to focus on the idea of a dress code for women. Ministry officers would take to the streets and arrest women who were not fully covered.

Sudan’s religious law enforcement, known as the Public Order Police, was established in 1993 by the President at the time, Omar al-Bashir. The Public Order Police was established with the purpose of enforcing *sharia* law for Muslims in Sudan. This includes shutting down mixed-sex events, punishing women for dressing immodestly, and raiding businesses that are seen as breaching *sharia*. The Public Order Police still maintain powers similar to regular Sudanese law enforcement officers. They can make arrests and people can be tried in a special Public Order court.

Nigeria, although not in the Middle East, has a very large Muslim population and therefore has its own version of morality police. The Nigerian morality police, called the Kano State Hisbah Corps, was established in 2003 by the state government. The Hisbah Corps do not have the authority to make arrests and officers are armed with only non-lethal weapons. When officers of the Corps encounter an individual who has violated *sharia*, they must report this to the Nigerian Police Force. They may, however, verbally chastise any violators of *sharia*.

There are various names for the morality police of Malaysia. Collectively, officials are known as religious officers. These groups of officers are run by Malaysia’s federal government to enforce their interpretation of *sharia*. The religious officers are given the power to arrest people suspected of breaking *sharia*. In Malaysia, this range from people who eat during the day during Ramadan to men and women that are “too close together.” The individuals arrested by religious officers are then tried by Sharia courts, separate from the ordinary court system.

In conclusion, the interpretations of *sharia* law have been molded and changed ever since Muhammad himself. This split in interpretation has led to a division in the way *sharia* law is upheld in Islamic countries. Every country has its own version of religious law enforcement, but the amount of power the officers have varies in each country. Despite this difference, the fact that each country has some form of religious law enforcement shows the importance of *sharia* law in the Islamic faith.

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