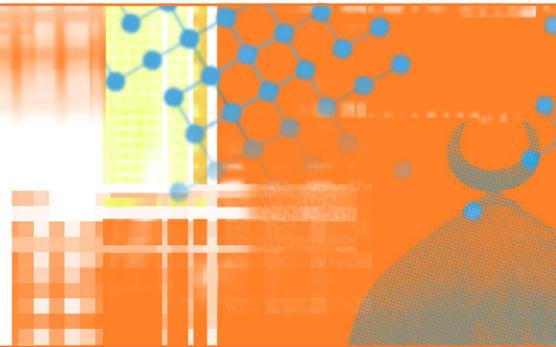


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# IN THE NAME OF GOD:

FAITH-BASED INTERNET CENSORSHIP  
IN MAJORITY MUSLIM COUNTRIES

BY HELMI NOMAN | OPENNET INITIATIVE | AUGUST 1, 2011



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## ABOUT THE OPENNET INITIATIVE

The OpenNet Initiative is a collaborative partnership of three institutions: the Citizen Lab at the Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto; the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University; and the SecDev Group (Ottawa). The ONI's mission is to investigate, expose and analyze Internet filtering and surveillance practices in a credible and non-partisan fashion. We intend to uncover the potential pitfalls and unintended consequences of these practices, and thus help to inform better public policy and advocacy work in this area. For more information about ONI, please visit <http://opennet.net>.

Religion-based Internet censorship bars the free flow of information in many majority Muslim countries by means of regulatory restrictions and ISP-level technical filtering that blocks objectionable web content. When regimes implement and enforce faith-based censorship they create borders around certain content. Such boundaries can produce a peculiar Internet culture among users whose browsing behaviour is confined within these limits. The flow of information in cyberspace in majority Muslim countries mirrors, to a large extent, the flow of information in “real” space in these nations. For example, many majority Muslim countries criminalize the promotion of non-Islamic faiths among their Muslim citizens offline. Thus, we see technical filtering and legal restrictions on the same activity online. Similarly, because homosexual relationships are considered taboo in most of the majority Muslim countries, online homosexual content is also banned in many of these countries.

While a number of rationales for censoring objectionable online content are put forward by non-Muslim states, the censorship policies of majority Muslim countries are primarily based on the Islamic faith and interpretations of its instructions. Majority Muslim countries collectively adhere to a legal framework that is heavily based on religious concepts the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, which in many ways is in conflict with the religion-neutral Universal Declaration of Human Rights that was adopted in 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations as a common standard for rights such as freedom of expression and belief. Moreover, the constitutions of many majority Muslim countries sanction the Islamic faith one way or another, which constitutes a built-in limitation on freedom of speech. For some, that limitation is holy and unquestionable.

Faith-based censorship is a by-product of a Qur’anic concept known as the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice. It is practiced in some countries under that explicit religious term, but in other countries under broad religious mandates. Thus, state religious authorities in some countries play a direct role in developing censorship policies. Some civic groups even promote the culture

of censorship, pressuring political authorities and using the court system to enforce it. In fact, a number of religious scholars have a dogmatic approach to the Internet and have produced research and opinions concluding that the Internet is detrimental to the Islamic faith and society— they propose different measures to combat access to and dissemination of questionable content. While some of these scholars recommend that users avoid “un-Islamic” content, others take a more aggressive stand and recommend compromising websites with content deemed blasphemous. There is no local consensus on faith-based censorship; some groups oppose it and question the legitimacy of the practice and the censors’ agendas.

## FAITH-BASED CENSORSHIP: THE LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

In August 1990 the fifty-seven member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) adopted the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (CDHRI), which diverted from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) on key issues.<sup>1</sup> The CDHRI provides an overview of human rights in Islam and serves as a general guidance for member states of the OIC, an intergovernmental organization which describes itself as “the collective voice of the Muslim world and ensuring to safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world.”<sup>2</sup>

Unlike the UDHR, the CDHRI makes significant references to God and faith as part of the legal framework for human rights in Islam. It stipulates that all rights and freedoms in the CDHRI are subject to the Muslim code of religious law known as *Sharia*, and that *Sharia* is the only source of reference to explain or clarify any of the CDHRI articles. In addition, the CDHRI affirms in its

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- 1 The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam was adopted by the Nineteenth Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers in Cairo, Arab Republic of Egypt, which took place between July 31 and August 5, 1990. English translation of the full Arabic text is available on the website of the Islamic Conference Organization at [www.oic-oci.org/....](http://www.oic-oci.org/....)
  - 2 Organization of the Islamic Conference, [www.oic-oci.org](http://www.oic-oci.org).

preamble that “fundamental rights and universal freedoms in Islam are an integral part of the Islamic religion and that no one as a matter of principle has the right to suspend them in whole or in part or violate or ignore them in as much as they are binding divine commandments.” Rather than a secular approach to human rights, the CDHRI derives the rights from the “revealed books of God” and the messages that were sent through “the last of His Prophets” (i.e., Mohammed).

On the issue of freedom of expression, the CDHRI says that everyone shall have the right to express his opinion freely but only if the opinions are not contrary to the principles of Islamic Sharia. Although the CDHRI recognizes that information is a vital necessity to society, it says in Article 22 that information “may not be exploited or misused in such a way as may violate sanctities and the dignity of Prophets, undermine moral and ethical values or disintegrate, corrupt or harm society or weaken its faith.” Although the CDHRI gives everyone the right to enjoy the fruits of their scientific, literary, artistic, or technical production and the right to protect the moral and material interests stemming from it, the document stipulates that such content should not be contrary to the principles of Islamic Sharia.

With this heavy emphasis on religion, majority Muslim countries have criticized the UDHR for not taking into consideration the cultural and religious context of non-Western countries.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the CDHRI has been criticized by international legal experts for falling short of international human rights standards by recognizing human rights in accordance with Islamic Sharia only, and for restricting freedom of speech to the limits of Islamic principles.<sup>4</sup>

Later efforts to enhance and reform human rights frameworks in majority Muslim countries have also been criticized by legal experts for not conforming to the UDHR. The League of Arab States adopted the Arab Charter on

Human Rights, which came into force in March 2008 and was ratified by ten of the twenty-two League of Arab States members (Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Libya, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen).<sup>5</sup> Though the charter recognizes key rights that are in line with international human rights law as reflected in treaties, jurisprudence, and opinions of UN expert bodies, “it also allows for the imposition of restrictions on the exercise of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion far beyond international human rights law” and it leaves many important rights to national legislation.<sup>6</sup>

These national legislations include the constitutions themselves. The constitutions of almost all of the Arab countries mention Islam as the official religion of the state.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Islamic law influences the legal code in most Muslim countries, or is a source for laws.<sup>8</sup> As a result, questioning Islamic beliefs is not constitutionally accommodated or legally tolerated across most of the Muslim world, and most of the states have strict laws that censor objectionable religious content.<sup>9</sup> These laws include press and publications acts and penal codes that criminalize making references to Islam that are considered insulting.<sup>10</sup>

Legal boundaries on permissible religious content have been extended to legislation beyond regional regulatory frameworks, constitutions, and media laws, and have

3 “Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam—Diverges from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Key Respects,” *Europe News*, December 1, 2007, [europenews.dk/en/](http://europenews.dk/en/).

4 Ibid.

5 Arab Charter on Human Rights, adopted by The League of Arab States Summit at its Sixteenth Session, Tunis—May 2004, translated by United Nations, full text available on The League of Arab States Summit at [www.arableagueonline.org](http://www.arableagueonline.org) (PDF).

6 Mervat Rishmawi, “The Arab Charter on Human Rights,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 6, 2009, [www.carnegieendowment.org](http://www.carnegieendowment.org).

7 Adel Latify, “Ikhtilaf mawqi alislam fi aldasatir alarabiya” [Arabic], (The Various Positions of Islam in the Arabic Constitutions), August 8, 2010, accessed November 14, 2010, [www.aljazeera.net](http://www.aljazeera.net).

8 Toni Johnson, “Islam: Governing under Sharia,” Council on Foreign Relations, November 10, 2010, accessed November 14, 2010, [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

9 See ONI Country Reports available at ONI Web site, [www.opennet.net](http://www.opennet.net).

10 Helmi Noman, “Overview of Internet Censorship in the Middle East and North Africa,” OpenNet Initiative, August 6, 2009, [opennet.net/....](http://opennet.net/....)

been incorporated into recently introduced Internet laws that were crafted to criminalize “abusing” holy shrines, the Islamic faith, and religious values (e.g., UAE’s 2007 federal cyber law and Saudi Arabia’s 2008 law on the use of technology).<sup>11</sup> Even Internet service providers’ terms and conditions mandate that users shall not use Internet services to contradict the religious values of the pertinent countries (e.g., Oman’s Omantel and Yemen’s Y.net).<sup>12</sup> Hence, faith-based restrictions on freedom of expression in majority Muslim countries have been long practised on traditional media and have been applied to online activities. States have imprisoned citizens who express views critical of Islam in print media or online. For example, in January 2007, a court in Morocco shut down a monthly magazine for two months and gave a reporter and an editor a three-year suspended prison sentence each for publishing jokes about Islam.<sup>13</sup> In Yemen, a journalist was convicted in December 2006 for reprinting the Danish cartoons of Prophet Mohammed. The newspaper’s license was revoked and it was closed down for three months.<sup>14</sup> In Egypt, a blogger was sentenced in February 2007 to four years in prison for “incitement to hatred of Islam” and for insulting the president on his blog.<sup>15</sup>

## FAITH-BASED CENSORSHIP: THE RELIGIOUS ROOT

Faith-based regulation and censorship of the Internet is rooted in the Islamic religious concept known as *Hisbah* in Arabic. Sharia-oriented political scientists define *Hisbah* as “the duty of enjoining good when it is neglected and forbidding evil when it is prevalent in society.”<sup>16</sup> The role of a *Muhtasib*, the one who practises *Hisbah*, can

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 “Journalists fined over Islam joke”, BBC News, January 15, 2007, [news.bbc.co.uk/...](http://news.bbc.co.uk/...)

14 OpenNet Initiative, “Internet Filtering in Yemen in 2006-2007,” [opennet.net/...](http://opennet.net/...)

15 OpenNet Initiative, “Egypt,” August 6, 2009, [opennet.net/...](http://opennet.net/...)

16 Ali al-Halawani, *Hisbah* (Islamic Duty of Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil), Islam Online, December 29, 2009, accessed November 14, 2010, [www.islamonline.net/...](http://www.islamonline.net/...)

be assigned by the political leadership or a volunteer can perform *Hisbah* duties without political assignment. The individual who practises *Hisbah* “serves as the eye of the law on both state and society. In other words, this person supervises the application of the law in society.”<sup>17</sup> The majority of Muslim countries collectively subscribe to the concept of *Hisbah*. The Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam refers to the concept of *Hisbah* in Article 22b, which reads: “Everyone shall have the right to advocate what is right, and propagate what is good, and warn against what is wrong and evil according to the norms of Islamic Sharia.”<sup>18</sup>

Some countries have institutionalized the concept of *Hisbah*. For example, in Saudi Arabia, *Hisbah* is a state-sponsored institutionalized operation called the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, a religious police in charge of enforcing Sharia law.<sup>19</sup> The group has published on its website a lengthy study in Arabic entitled “The Moral Vice of the Internet and How to Practise *Hisbah*” which establishes a link between censorship in general and faith-based censorship in particular and the Qur’anic concept of *Hisbah*. The paper proposes the following broad *Hisbah* practices for both states and individuals to exert in *Hisbah* efforts: implementing state-level and family-level faith-based censorship; developing awareness programs to educate the public about the danger and potential threat of “immoral” websites; providing religious advice to the operators of these websites; compromising and eliminating websites that contain objectionable content; and, increasing the quantity of beneficial web content.<sup>20</sup>

Faith-based censorship in the form of practising *Hisbah* has also been extended to social-networking websites. Three hundred *Hisbah* volunteers from Saudi Arabia’s Committee for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of

17 Ibid.

18 <http://www.oic-oci.org/english/article/human.htm>.

19 See their site at [www.pv.gov.sa](http://www.pv.gov.sa) [in Arabic].

20 The study is published on the website of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, under the title “The Moral Vice of the Internet and How to Practise *Hisbah*” [Arabic], accessed November 14, 2010, [www.pv.gov.sa/...](http://www.pv.gov.sa/...)

Vice have been trained in exercising *Hisbah* on Facebook and in chat rooms, and more program volunteers from around the country are expected to receive the same type of training.<sup>21</sup>

State Internet censors in Sudan explicitly refer to the concept of *Hisbah* as the rationale for filtering Internet content in the country. The censorship body, the National Telecommunication Corporation (NTC) publicly acknowledges filtering the Internet and explains that its Internet censorship regime is not a violation of personal rights or a form of religious fanaticism, but rather an implementation of the religious Qur'anic duty of "promotion of virtue and prevention of vice." NTC argues that it censors the Internet "to protect the doctrine of the 'Ummah' [Islamic nation] and its moral values, and to strengthen the principles of virtue and chastity."<sup>22</sup>

Individual citizens have also invoked *Hisbah* to push for the implementation of Internet censorship in some countries. In Egypt, for example, a lawyer filed a suit in a Cairo court in May 2009 demanding the government block access to pornographic websites because they are offensive to religion and society. Though the court ruled in favour of his case, ONI testing conducted afterwards found no evidence that the court order had been enforced.<sup>23</sup> User groups around the theme of virtual *Hisbah* emerged on the Internet in the past few years. For example, Hisbah Net (<http://hesbahnet.com>) is a discussion forum dedicated to the "promotion of virtue and prevention of vice" online. The forum makes available user-developed recommendations on how to best fight "immorality" and anti-Islam content online. Also on the same theme, a group of Egyptian antipornography activists organized an online campaign demanding the government block access to pornography— they had

reportedly written in 2008 to the then prime minister of Egypt seeking his support and "reminding" him that Egypt is an Islamic country.<sup>24</sup> User-organized campaigns in Egypt emerged in 2011 after the January 25 revolution. Examples include the "Campaign to Block Pornographic Content Online" at <http://www.no-xsite.com>. Other less-organized campaigns are also found in other countries such as Algeria<sup>25</sup> where ONI found no evidence of technical filtering of social sites.

Although the concept of promoting virtue and preventing vice takes different forms and has different features when applied to Internet censorship, demands for Internet censorship in the Muslim world have also emerged under different pretexts and are not always faith driven.<sup>26</sup>

## ROLE OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES ON ENFORCING FAITH-BASED CENSORSHIP

Given the religious nature of this type of censorship, it is not surprising that religious authorities in several majority Muslim countries have been playing key roles in developing and enforcing faith-based censorship, sometimes directly as part of a government initiative to control access to the Internet, and sometimes as independent individual or group efforts. In Iran, the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance has served as part of a government body whose responsibility is to rid the web of "illicit and immoral" content.<sup>27</sup> In Kuwait, the minister of Communications, who was also the minister of Religious Endowment and Islamic Affairs, took part in a February 2008 government plan to monitor and regulate Internet content.<sup>28</sup> In Pakistan, the Ministry of Religious Affairs is part of a committee set up by the Ministry of

21 "Saudi Arabia to Monitor Facebook Chatting," Emirates 24/7, October 10, 2010, [www.emirates247.com/....](http://www.emirates247.com/)

22 Censorship policy published in Arabic on the website of National Telecommunication Corporation, accessed November 14, 2010, [ntc.gov.sd/....](http://ntc.gov.sd/)

23 "Mahkama misriyah taqdi bi hajb almawaqi alibahiyah" [Arabic], (A Court in Egypt Issues a Verdict to Block Pornographic Web Sites), Islam Online, May 12, 2009, accessed November 14, 2010, [www.islamonline.net/....](http://www.islamonline.net/)

24 Mohammed Ismael Shall, "Misr bila mawaqi jinsiyah" [Arabic], (Egypt without Pornography Websites), Islam Online, November 4, 2008, accessed November 14, 2010, [www.islamonline.net/....](http://www.islamonline.net/)

25 See, for example, the web forum 4 Algeria, accessed March 25, 2011, [www.4algeria.com/....](http://www.4algeria.com/)

26 ONI individual country studies cover some of these issues. See ONI Country Studies at [opennet.net/....](http://opennet.net/)

27 Iran Country Study, OpenNet Initiative, [opennet.net/....](http://opennet.net/)

28 Kuwait Country Study, OpenNet Initiative, [opennet.net/....](http://opennet.net/)

Information Technology to enforce blocking policy of content perceived as anti-state or anti-Islam.<sup>29</sup> And in Indonesia, Islamic parties heavily backed an anti-pornography law that was passed in 2008 and upheld by the constitutional court in 2010.<sup>30</sup> The controversial law was used to develop Internet filtering policy,<sup>31</sup> and as a result the government ordered ISPs to start blocking access to pornography websites on August 11, 2010, the start of the holy month of Ramadan,<sup>32</sup> a timing that stresses the religious dimension of the policy. Also in Indonesia, a group of Muslim clerics from the country's largest Islamic organization recommended creating rules to govern how Muslims use Facebook out of concern that the site could facilitate illicit affairs.<sup>33</sup> In Saudi Arabia, the religious police (Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) have started to receive training on monitoring social-networking and chat sites.<sup>34</sup> They also have expressed interest in accessing blocked websites so that they can practise surveillance on online discussion that takes place on those sites. The chairman of the Saudi Shura (Consultative) Council however rejected their demand.<sup>35</sup> A Saudi-based religious scholar once demanded that ISPs in Saudi Arabia place Qur'anic verses prohibiting consumption of pornography on block pages,<sup>36</sup> apparently

as a religious warning to those who try to access banned content and encounter a block page instead. An April 2011 Saudi telecom regulatory proposal recommended that anyone who produces, sends, receives, or stores web content that contradicts Islamic values should be publicly defamed.<sup>37</sup> The proposal, developed by a committee that included religious authorities, also recommended that the Saudi government should work with international search engines to introduce mechanisms that would de-list pornographic results for Internet users in Saudi Arabia.

## THE INTERNET AS A DESTRUCTIVE FORCE

Although Muslim religious establishments acknowledge the many positive aspects of the Internet and have used it to disseminate their own content and promote their agendas, some Islamic authorities and research circles consider it a destructive force that can potentially erode religious values, moral systems, and the fabric of social and family life. The Internet's presumed detrimental impact on faith and society is partly behind the religious demands to regulate it and to implement technical barriers and draw legal dividing lines. Interestingly, some apprehensive attitudes go as far as suggesting that the Internet was developed to distort Muslim identity and that Muslims manage to use it to fire back at the "enemies of God."<sup>38</sup> Others hold a pragmatic approach and see the Internet as a parallel world with positive opportunities that should be explored to advance the interests of Muslims. The two groups however agree that creating an "Islamic" Internet is a religious mandate.<sup>39</sup>

Religiously oriented research papers and articles tend to have a negative attitude towards the Internet. An Islamabad-based think tank paper that discusses *Hisbah* in Pakistan and the demand for its revival says: "the

29 Huma Imtiaz, "Hate on the Internet," Dawn.com, October 8, 2010, [archives.dawn.com/...](http://archives.dawn.com/...)

30 Karishma Vaswani, "Indonesia Upholds Anti-pornography Bill," BBC News, March 25, 2011, accessed November 14, 2010, [news.bbc.co.uk/...](http://news.bbc.co.uk/...)

31 "Indonesia To Ask Internet Providers To Block Porn," Reuters, July 14, 2010, accessed November 14, 2010, [www.reuters.com/...](http://www.reuters.com/...)

32 "Government Orders ISPs To Start Anti-porn Filtering," Reporters Without Borders, August 11, 2010, accessed November 14, 2010, [en.rsf.org/...](http://en.rsf.org/...)

33 Peter Gelling, "Does Facebook Lead to Adultery?" *Global Post*, May 28, 2009, accessed November 14, 2010, [www.globalpost.com/...](http://www.globalpost.com/...)

34 "Saudi Arabia To Monitor Facebook Chatting," Emirates 24/7, October 10, 2010, [www.emirates247.com/...](http://www.emirates247.com/...)

35 Saudi Arabia Country Study, OpenNet Initiative, [opennet.net/...](http://opennet.net/...)

36 "Da'ia yotalib ibdal safahat hajb mawaqi alinternet biayat quraniyah" [in Arabic], (A [religious] Preacher Demands Replacing the Text on the Internet Blockpages with Verses from the Qur'an), Al-Arabiya.net, October 24, 2008, accessed January 9, 2011, [www.alarabiya.net/...](http://www.alarabiya.net/...)

37 The full text of the telecom regulatory proposal was published in April 2011 by several Saudi newspapers including *al-Madina* at [www.al-madina.com/...](http://www.al-madina.com/...) [Arabic].

38 Mutaz al-Khatib, "alinternet alislami, ayna alkhala" (Islamic Internet: Where Is the problem?), *al-Jazeera.net*, October 3, 2004, [www.aljazeera.net/...](http://www.aljazeera.net/...)

39 Ibid.

culture of dish antenna and unchecked Internet services promoted liberal and sometimes quite immoral attitude [sic] from Islamic perspectives that started to reflect in society through different means from national media to roadside billboards.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, an article published by a Saudi-based religious media institution endorses government implementation of technical filtering because it concludes that the Internet can destroy moral values, the individual, the economy, and the entire society, and that the Internet is “destructive to our religion, especially after the appearance of websites that threaten and defame our faith.”<sup>41</sup> The presence of Christian evangelist websites has also fuelled calls to regulate and censor the Internet. An article published on several Arabic websites warned of foreign efforts to Christianize Muslims through the use of “thousands” of websites, which have allegedly increased by 1,200 percent recently.<sup>42</sup> Other articles encourage Muslims to “combat” online Christianization efforts, especially after the establishment of the Internet Evangelism Coalition,<sup>43</sup> an initiative set up by the Billy Graham Center in 1999, to “stimulate and accelerate web-evangelism within the worldwide Body of Christ.”<sup>44</sup> Different religious scholars and establishments propose different means to “combat” such online Christian evangelical efforts. While some demand that governments block access to these websites, others go as far as issuing fatwas (religious edicts) that permit attacking and compromis-

ing these sites.<sup>45</sup> Radical groups have tried not just to implement Internet filtering regimes, but also to ban the Internet all together. The Taliban, for example, banned the Internet in July 2001 when they were the ruling body in Afghanistan because they believed that the Internet disseminates obscene, immoral, and anti-Islam material.<sup>46</sup> Religious extremists have attacked Internet cafés in Gaza under the pretext that the Internet corrupts the moral values of Palestinian youth.<sup>47</sup>

## FATWAS AS RELIGIOUS DIVIDING LINES ON WEB ACTIVITIES

Since the introduction of the Internet in many majority Muslim countries, a number of Internet-specific fatwas, mostly restrictive, have added a layer to the regulatory boundaries on acceptable web activities at the end-user level. For example, one fatwa stated that browsing YouTube is forbidden by Islam because of the objectionable material found on the site,<sup>48</sup> while another fatwa allowed accessing YouTube on the condition that the user self-censors his/her browsing behaviour.<sup>49</sup> No matter how virtual, online activities have been subject to scrutiny and fatwas, and questions about the Islamic legality or religious permissibility of different aspects of the Internet have emerged in the past few years from both Internet users and entrepreneurs. For example, Saudi Arabia’s Standing Committee for Issuing Fatwas was asked a question about whether operating Internet cafés is Islamically acceptable “knowing that there are some harmful and *haraam* [Islamically forbidden] things” in these venues.

40 “The Institution of Hisbah and Demand for Its Revival,” The Institute of Policy Studies, accessed November 14, 2010, [www.ips.org.pk/...](http://www.ips.org.pk/...)

41 Fawziyah al-Mohammed, “Indama yakhdish alinternet haya almojtama” [Arabic] (When the Internet Damages the Shyness of Society), Islamic Promotion Media Foundation, accessed November 14, 2010, [www.aldaawah.com/...](http://www.aldaawah.com/...)

42 Mamdouh Ismael, “Tasallul waba altanseer ala alwatan alarabi” [Arabic], (The Infiltration of the Epidemic of Christianization to the Arabic World), Islam Way, November 11, 2008, accessed November 14, 2010, [www.islamway.com/...](http://www.islamway.com/...)

43 Ahmed Abu Zaid, “Altanseer abr alinternet” [Arabic], (Christianization over the Internet), Sulaiman al-Majed, accessed November 14, 2010, [www.salmajed.com/...](http://www.salmajed.com/...)

44 See Internet Evangelism Coalition, Billy Graham Center, [www.webevangelism.com](http://www.webevangelism.com).

45 Khabbab al-Hamad, “Aldawa alislamiyah ala alinternet: Tikrar amibtikar?” (Promotion of Islam via the Internet: Repetition or Innovation?), Islam Today, February 23, 2010, accessed November 14, 2010, [islamtoday.net/...](http://islamtoday.net/...)

46 Afghanistan Country Study, OpenNet Initiative, May 8, 2007, [opennet.net/...](http://opennet.net/...)

47 Gaza and West Bank Country Study, OpenNet Initiative, August 10, 2009, [opennet.net/...](http://opennet.net/...)

48 Fatwa issued by Sheikh Khalid bin Ali al-Mashaikih, available on his website [Arabic], August 23, 2009, accessed January 9, 2011, [www.islamlight.net/...](http://www.islamlight.net/...)

49 Fatwa issued by the Islamic Web Fatwa Center [Arabic], May 16, 2009, accessed January 1, 2011, [www.islamweb.net/...](http://www.islamweb.net/...)

The answer was, “if this equipment can be used for false and evil ends, which will harm Islamic beliefs or enable people to look at permissive pictures and movies, or news of immoral entertainment, or to have dubious conversations and play *haraam* games, and the owner of the café cannot prevent these evils or control the machines, then in that case it is *haraam* for him to deal in that, because this is helping in sin and *haraam* things.”<sup>50</sup>

Some scholars even object to women using emoticons—the facial expressions pictorially represented by punctuation and letters (e.g., :-), and :D), when chatting with male users who are not their *mahram*, a legal terminology used for an unmarried kin with whom sexual intercourse would be considered incestuous. One Saudi religious scholar said “a woman should not use these images when speaking to a man who is not her *mahram* because these faces are used to express how she is feeling, so it is as if she is smiling, laughing, acting shy and so on, and a woman should not do that with a non-*mahram* man. It is only permissible for a woman to speak to men in cases of necessity, so long as that is in a public chat room and not in private correspondence.”<sup>51</sup> The development and sale of circumvention software was also deemed *haraam* by a religious fatwa issued in March 2011 by the Islamic Web Fatwa Center which is run by Qatar’s Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs. The fatwa said that it is Islamically forbidden to code and sell proxy software and tools that enable users to access objectionable content—this applies even if the coders and sellers put conditions on the use of such tools.<sup>52</sup>

In addition, there are religious fatwas objecting to engaging in online intellectual discourse that discusses freedom from religious rules and teachings. For instance, the Grand Mufti of Dubai demanded that state authorities should prevent the spread of secular and atheistic content

online, which he labeled a ruinous phenomenon. The Grand Mufti argued that secular and atheist content is destructive, and does not fall within freedom of opinion. He argued that freedom of expression and human rights are compatible with Islamic Sharia, however, “man is capable of discussing ordinarily worldly matters, but faith is beyond the limited capacity of man, because he does not know the unknown, neither does he know the beneficial from the harmful (author’s translation).”<sup>53</sup>

## THE ISLAMIC INTERNET

The religious calls to create Islamic content, concern about objectionable online material, and religious fatwas against browsing forbidden websites have prompted some individuals and groups to develop websites that would presumably make the user’s online experience compatible with Islamic Sharia. As a result, the “Islamic Internet” has emerged in the past few years in the form of faith-based censored and Islam-friendly, or “Sharia-compliant” websites that imitate popular video-sharing sites, search engines, and social-networking websites. For example, video-sharing website NaqaTube.com (Naqa is Arabic for “pure”) promises its users a Sharia-compatible YouTube surfing experience. The site takes religiously “pure” video clips from YouTube and posts them to NaqaTube. Other examples of video-sharing websites include Islamic Tube (<http://www.islamictube.com>), Muslim Video (<http://www.muslimvideo.com>), Halal Tube (<http://www.halal-tube.com>), and Faith Tube (<http://www.faithtube.com>). There are also Islamic search engines such as “I’m Halal” (<http://www.imhalal.com>) and Taqwa (<http://www.taqwa.me>), both of which censor objectionable keywords and results. In addition, a Facebook-style social-networking website called “Ikhwan Book” (<http://ikhwanbook.com>) was developed by the Egypt-based Muslim Brotherhood. “Islamic” erotica has also emerged on the Internet as an alternative to the “non-Islamic” variety. For example, there is a “Sharia-compliant” online store that sells

50 “He Has an Internet Café and Is Asking about His Income,” Islamic Question and Answer, accessed November 14, 2010, [www.islam-qa.com/...](http://www.islam-qa.com/)

51 “Ruling on Drawing Smiley Faces When Chatting on the Internet,” Islamic Question and Answer, [www.islam-qa.com/...](http://www.islam-qa.com/)

52 Full text of fatwa is available at Islam Web Fatwa Center [Arabic], [www.islamweb.net/...](http://www.islamweb.net/)

53 Author’s translation. See Husam Tokan, CNN Arabic, “al-Ilhad yaghzo al-Internet al-Arabi wa yothir ghadab rijal al-deen” [Atheism Invades the Arabic Internet and Angers Religious Scholars], August 22, 2008, accessed November 14, 2010, [arabic.cnn.com/...](http://arabic.cnn.com/)

erotica items and care products and information (<http://www.elasira.eu>). In addition, there are “Islamic” Google gadgets, browser toolbars, and plug-ins that are meant to return, and facilitate access to, preapproved and preselected Islamic content.

A radical form of faith-based content and technical censorship can potentially materialize if Iran goes ahead with its plan to create Halal Internet. In April 2011, Iran’s head of economic affairs with the Iranian presidency announced that Iran would develop an “Islamic Internet” that will conform to Islamic principles. The official said this planned Internet will operate parallel to the present World Wide Web, but will eventually replace the Internet in Muslim countries. If this project is indeed developed and widely used, it could potentially be an extreme manifestation of faith-based censorship because it would likely be a network or an Intranet of preapproved content and closely monitor online user behaviour.

## FAITH-BASED TECHNICAL FILTERING

OpenNet Initiative research and empirical test results reveal that Internet censorship in general has been on the rise in many majority Muslim countries as part of a worldwide trend. Censorship regimes in several majority Muslim countries, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, are found to pervasively filter online political dissidence, but also to target content deemed offensive for religious, moral, and cultural reasons.

Government-mandated Internet filtering in many majority Muslim countries is implemented at the ISP level, giving citizens no option to exercise their own judgment on what is appropriate to access. Technical filtering is made even more intrusive because the filtering regimes also target Internet tools that can be used to bypass ISP-level filtering.

State-imposed censorship is made possible by filtering technology built by Western companies that provide the technology infrastructure as well as access to millions

of URLs in various potentially undesirable categories.<sup>54</sup> Governments then mass block websites by activating which categories they deem offensive, but they also create their own categories and manually add more objectionable websites.

Content categories typically provided by the commercial filtering-software providers include: art and culture, dating, entertainment, fashion, gambling, history, humour, incidental nudity, advocacy groups, nudity, online shopping, politics, pornography, portal sites, profanity, provocative attire, proxies, recreation, religion and ideology, sexual materials, software, sports, travel, and violence. Based on ONI in-field research and technical testing conducted since 2006, we can categorize faith-based Internet censorship targeted content into the following key categories: content perceived blasphemous, offensive or contrary to the Islamic faith; websites with content considered prohibited by Islamic Sharia; websites belonging to religious groups whose ideologies are not in line with the official state-sanctioned religion or specific sect of religion; liberal, secular, and atheism content (see figure 1, page 10). Each are discussed in turn:

### Content perceived blasphemous, offensive or contrary to the Islamic faith

This category includes websites containing “blasphemous” content, that is, content providing unfavourable or critical reviews of Islam, or that attempts to convert Muslims to other religions, mostly Christianity. Examples include the websites [www.thekoran.com](http://www.thekoran.com), [www.islamreview.com](http://www.islamreview.com), and [www.islameyat.com](http://www.islameyat.com). Also in this category are sites such as the “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day” page on Facebook, and YouTube clips that contain “un-Islamic” content. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen, Qatar, Oman, the UAE, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Sudan, and Tunisia are among the countries that block content in this category, though to various degrees.

54 Helmi Noman and Jillian C. York, “West Censoring East: The Use of Western Technologies by Middle East Censors, 2010-2011,” OpenNet Initiative, April 2011, [opennet.net/...](http://opennet.net/...)

**FIGURE 1 - FAITH BASED TECHNICAL FILTERING IN MAJORITY MUSLIM STATES**

**Blocked Content Categories**

	Considered prohibited by Islamic Sharia	Perceived as blasphemous, offensive, or contrary to the Islamic faith	Websites belonging to non-state sanctioned religions or sects	Liberal, secular and atheistic content
Bahrain	×	×	×	×
Bangladesh		×		
Gaza Strip	×			
Indonesia	×	×		
Iran	×	×	×	×
Kuwait	×	×	×	×
Morocco	×			
Oman	×	×		
Pakistan	×	×	×	
Qatar	×	×		
Saudi Arabia	×	×	×	×
Sudan	×	×		
Tunisia	×	×		
United Arab Emirates	×	×		×
Yemen	×	×		

### Websites with content considered prohibited by Islamic Sharia

This content category includes pornography, nudity, photos of women in provocative attire, homosexuality, dating, gambling, and alcohol-related websites. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen, Qatar, Oman, the UAE, Gaza Strip, Iran, Tunisia, Morocco, Sudan, Pakistan, and Indonesia have been found to block content in this category, also to various degrees.

### Websites belonging to religious groups whose ideologies are not in line with the official state-sanctioned religion or specific sect of religion

This category includes websites of minority faith groups such as Shiite Muslims, Baha'is, and Hindus. Countries that block selected websites in this category include Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Pakistan. The Sunni regimes of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain block Shiite content, and the Shiite regime of Iran blocks Sunni content. It is also worth noting that some of the websites in this category are also related to political activism (e.g., Shiite sites in Bahrain), so content in this category can also be considered political.

### Liberal, secular, and atheist content

This category includes websites containing leftist literature, secular ideologies, and atheist groups and bloggers. Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE are among the countries that target this content category at varying degrees.

## INTRICACIES SURROUNDING FAITH-BASED CENSORSHIP

There are a number of intricacies surrounding faith-based censorship as it is implemented in many majority Muslim countries. First, the policies are wholesale regulations imposed on a supposed community of the faithful, but such national-level unified policies do not accommodate the not-so-faithful, let alone the faithless. Second, the censorship policies target not only what is perceived un-Islamic, but also what does not conform to the state-sponsored

version of Islam.

Third, there are inconsistencies between policies that regulate cyberspace and those that tolerate similar activities in real space. For example, an Internet user in Dubai cannot access escort websites, but the same person can easily solicit a prostitute from some of the notorious bars and streets of the city. This inconsistency suggests that social considerations such as appeasing conservative families browsing the Internet at home, and economic factors like keeping the money-generating hotel rooms and bars busy, play a role in developing those policies. Thus, censorship regulations are likely to change as authorities weigh the multiple political and socioeconomic factors that shape the policies. Fourth, technical censorship is unevenly implemented by different regimes and there is no region-wide unified policy. For example, a traditionally socially liberal country like Tunisia implemented pervasive ISP-level social filtering during the regime of Ben Ali, and some local groups have been pressing the interim government to continue to filter such content, while other less liberal countries or at least equally liberal countries such as Jordan have no ISP-level social filtering.

## FAITH-BASED CENSORSHIP CONTESTED

Faith-based censorship in majority Muslim countries is such a contentious issue that it has become part of the identity politics and the debate on the role of religion in public life, the limits of free speech, and non-Muslim minority groups' rights. The culture of faith-based censorship, the restrictive laws, and the pretexts used by regimes and religious authorities have been fiercely criticized by various intellectual groups, especially those that embrace and promote liberal or secular ideologies. A 2009 book in Arabic entitled *Censorship: Its various faces and disguises* is one of the recent notable intellectual arguments against religious and political censorship. Written by mostly liberal Arab writers, the book exposes, denounces, and resists censorship because, as contributor Omar Kadour puts it, "censorship rapes our intellect" in the name of God and society (author's translation). Another

contributor, Hamid Zannar, notes that regimes in the Arab world have indeed succeeded in forming and enforcing a culture of political and religious censorship. “When the regimes say that Islam is the religion of the state, then faith-based censorship eradicates one’s free and individualistic identity. One then lives in exhausting secrecy” (author’s translation).<sup>55</sup>

Faith-based censorship has been blamed by Kuwaiti intellectuals for the deterioration of once-vital intellectual life in their country. The intellectuals reject the “increasing oppressive religious guardianship” on freedom of creativity that amounts to “intellectual terrorism” (author’s translation).<sup>56</sup> In Egypt, a group of anticensorship intellectuals describe efforts by the religious authorities to confiscate objectionable literary and artistic works as a fierce attack on the mind, intellect, and art, and say such efforts resemble the work of the medieval inquisition tribunals. They also criticize the religious establishment’s attempts to have the final word on intellectual freedom.<sup>57</sup> In April 2011, the Cairo-based advocacy group called the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information condemned the first post-January 25 Revolution *Hisbah* case filed by lawyers against a storybook entitled *Where is Allah?* for allegedly insulting religious beliefs.<sup>58</sup> The advocacy group expressed deep concern about the return of religious and political *Hisbah* cases to Egypt after the January 25 revolution that aimed to advance freedom of

expression in Egypt. The group said that making artwork subject to religious assessment is an assault on freedom of expression, and that dragging artwork into courtrooms is not acceptable.<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, free-speech advocates have argued that faith-based censorship has been used by regimes to disguise political filtering. In Bahrain for example, rights groups maintain that the regime has introduced faith-based Internet censorship supposed to target pornographic content as a pretext to block local political and human rights websites, and that in practice the regime has treated oppositional content and pornographic websites as equivalent.<sup>60</sup>

Opposition to faith-based censorship takes other shapes and forms that range from bloggers individually or in groups organizing online campaigns to free political prisoners, activists demanding political and legal reform, free-speech groups advocating adopting internationally accepted human rights standards, to politically minded-individuals with technical skills developing or promoting Internet circumvention tools to help users bypass state Internet filtering regimes.

## CONCLUSION

There is an ongoing struggle between state and nonstate actors who want to regulate the Internet to protect and even strengthen the Islamicity of their countries, and those who see the Internet as an alternative information tool to bypass the undesirable guardianship of the religious authorities—those who see the Internet as a potential threat to religious identity, and those who strive to bring to censored real space some of the qualities of the Internet: openness, freedom, and neutrality. Opponents of faith-based censorship seem to have the tougher task because some of the authorities derive their legitimacy from implementing Islamic Sharia and acting as the

55 Omar Kadour, “Censorship: The Other that Rapes Our Intellect,” in *Alrkabah boujouhha wa’kna’tha almkhltfah* (Censorship: Its Various Faces and Disguises), Samir Buaziz et al. (Damascus: Petra, 2009); Hamid Zannar, “No Censorship Without Freedom.”

56 Lafi al-Shimiri, “Muthaqafoon: narfod wisayat aljamaat aldiniyah wa royataha alohadiya almota’sifah” [Arabic], (Intellectuals: We Reject the Guardianship of the Religious Groups and Their Oppressive One-sided Vision), Aafaq Center for Research and Studies, August 26, 2010, accessed January 1, 2011, [aafaqcenter.com/...](http://aafaqcenter.com/)

57 “Anter al-Sayed, alarabiya.net Muthaqafo masr dhida ashorta alazhariya” [Arabic], (Egypt’s Intellectuals Are Against the al-Azhar’s Police), June 17, 2004, accessed December 2, 2010, [www.alarabiya.net/...](http://www.alarabiya.net/)

58 “First Hesba Case after the Glorious Revolution of January 25th: The Arabic Network Condemns the Communiqué Submitted by the Neo Actio Popularis against the Storybook ‘Where is Allah,’” The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, April 28, 2011, [www.anhri.net/...](http://www.anhri.net/)

59 Ibid.

60 Alexandra Sandels, “Almoaradat tosawa bilebahiyah fi albahrain” [Arabic], (Oppositional and Pornographic [Content] Are Treated as Equal in Bahrain), Menassat, March 24, 2009, accessed November 14, 2010, [www.menassat.com/...](http://www.menassat.com/)

guardians of Islamic values. The debate about faith-based censorship is therefore part of the much-talked-about larger issue: Internet censorship and human rights. But when it comes to faith-based censorship, there is another problematic dimension to the argument. Because proponents of faith-based censorship consider it a nonnegotiable divine policy, violators are labeled sinners rather than rights advocates, which leaves little room for democratic debate. The assassination of Pakistan's Punjab Governor Salman Taseer by one of his own bodyguards in January 2011 shed light on the extent to which some people will go to silence those who have different opinions on faith-based issues. While some considered the slain governor a true promoter of Islamic tolerance for his calling for amendments to Pakistan's stringent blasphemy laws that discriminated against non-Muslim citizens, others hailed the assassin as a hero and true protector of Islamic values, and even questioned the legitimacy of the laws — considered secular— that criminalized the assassination.<sup>61</sup>

The climate of intimidation imposed by radical elements and movements, and fear of serious repercussions, are likely to keep liberal voice's demands so soft that they cannot make significant policy shifts in the near future. Moreover, if conservative religious authorities and their political allies continue to have the upper hand in developing and enforcing Internet regulatory policies, we are more likely to see a fractured Internet that is physically part of the global network, but increasingly bordered by religiously driven regulatory boundaries and technical filtering blockades that confine the user's online experience. The chilling effect of censorship can further thicken these boundaries as users will be more likely to self-censor their online behaviour and avoid the use of Internet circumvention tools for fear of penalization. Faith-based filtering reflects not only rejection of certain websites, but also ideological intolerance towards issues such as alternative views on Islam, non-Islamic faiths, secular content, and sexual orientation. It remains to be seen whether the recent popular uprisings and revolutions in the region

will ultimately produce Internet governance dynamics that will reverse, lighten, or just tighten the current Internet restrictions.

On the other hand, faith-based censorship as practised in many majority Muslim countries will continue to be legally problematic because there are compatibility issues between two conceptually different frameworks: the collectively adopted religious approach to human rights and the internationally accepted secular human rights standards. The tension between the two frameworks will continue as long as international human rights norms are not reflected in national legislations.

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61 See details on *The Express Tribune* at [http://tribune.com.pk/...](http://tribune.com.pk/) and on BBC News [www.bbc.co.uk/.....](http://www.bbc.co.uk/.....)