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Editors' Note to Inaugural Issue of the Muslim World Journal of Human Rights

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Today the Muslim world finds itself at the center of tremendous, perhaps unprecedented, global turmoil and uncertainty. Post-September 11th developments have multiplied the spectrum and complexities of a variety of issues relating to the human condition in the Muslim world and beyond. Now, more than ever, scholars and practitioners grappling with a wide range of questions pertaining to human rights -whether their work incorporates or poses new challenges to the framework- must take on the increasingly complex and arduous task of illuminating the various angles, dimensions, and conundrums of human rights theory and practice vis-à-vis the Muslim world. We hope that the *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* (MWJHR) can make a humble contribution to such an effort by providing a long-overdue forum for a rigorous debate on various questions intersecting with notions of human rights in the contemporary Muslim world.

We bring to this endeavor a strong commitment to providing a space for the voicing of a spectrum of perspectives, particularly those traditionally marginalized in Western and global contexts- the voices of Muslim academics and practitioners themselves. In this spirit, we have dedicated a special section of the journal to select reader submissions commenting on published articles. We also have a strong commitment to bridging the gap between human rights scholarship and practice. Accordingly, we have included a special "From the Field" section dedicated to the presentation of field research by scholars and researchers as well as the accounts, reflections and experiences of human rights lawyers and practitioners such as those working with non-governmental organizations. Finally, we realize that in order for the MWJHR to serve an effective and inclusive forum for debate and dialogue, we must facilitate its widespread accessibility. Thus, we have made provisions for free subscriptions for institutions based in the developing world and are investigating the prospects of providing Arabic and other translations in the future.

Although we see the depths of the types of inquiries that will appear in the virtual pages of our journal as limitless, there are a number of questions and themes we anticipate will be recurring in the MWJHR. An important line of inquiry will entail the documentation of and elaboration on both the known and lesser known forms of human rights violations occurring in the Muslim world today. A related focus will likely be found in studies of the extent to which the dynamics surrounding the human rights challenges in the Muslim world conform to or diverge from such dynamics in other parts of the world. In other words, to what extent are the contours or underlying social, economic and political roots of human rights violations in the Muslim world unique to the Muslim world and conversely, to what extent is the popular portrayal of such uniqueness an

overstated product of contemporary manifestations of Orientalism and Islamophobia?

Another line of inquiry we see as particularly relevant for discussion in the MWJHR relates to the appropriateness and desirability of applying the international human rights framework in the Muslim world. What does the international human rights framework offer the Muslim world? In what ways does it aid and strengthen local efforts to improve human flourishing in the Muslim world and in what ways does its baggage of imperialism, neo-imperialisms, power relations, and appropriations of human rights discourses by governments pursuing their own geo-political interests, damage such local efforts? Is an Islamic social, political and legal framework compatible with the notion of human rights? We hope that in addressing such questions, some of our contributors will take on the task of interrogating the human rights project, proposing reforms of the human rights regime, or making the case for the promise of employing the human rights framework in spite of its possible trappings.

Further, we hope the debates featured in the pages of the MWJHR will highlight potential contributions to the international human rights project originating from the Islamic tradition. Thus, in addition to inquiries about how international human rights norms have impacted the consciousness and behavior of Muslim world actors, we are interested in learning about how Muslim actors have, and potentially can contribute to the development of international human rights norms. We suspect, in this regard, a good deal of discussion will surround the barriers of transcending the uni-directional application of human rights vis-à-vis the Muslim world.

Finally, given the state of contemporary international affairs, few discussions of human rights in the Muslim world can take place without at least some reference to the relationship between the Muslim world and the West, particularly the world's current sole superpower, its policies, geopolitical ambitions, and human rights practices and discourses. We hope that contributing authors will help to illuminate the complexities of this relationship and the impact of its discourses and counter-discourses on human rights, in a way which transcends existing scholarship.

The articles in this issue address a number of these questions. In the first article featured in our inaugural issue, Professor Abdullahi An-Na'im, one of the foremost scholars of Islam and Human Rights, provides thought-provoking insight into how "the best of times" can materialize from the "worst of times" currently being experienced by the Muslim world in relation to human rights

norms and practice. He argues that this is possible through the pragmatic application of our human agency. Next, in an insightful contribution on Malaysia, Nazish Ansari analyses the limitations of human rights discourse and the deployment of “rights” in a religious identity debate, which, Nazish argues, has compromised the possibility for meaningful changes with respect to ethnic, economic and social stratifications in Malaysia. In the third article featured, Natasha Bakht offers a comprehensive legal analysis of the potential women’s rights concerns stemming from the proposed use of Islamic law in family law disputes through Ontario’s Arbitration Act. Her contribution touches upon many of the difficult challenges faced by Western societies with significant Muslim populations and a commitment to upholding notions of women’s rights and gender equality on the one hand, and religious freedom and multiculturalism on the other. Finally, Heidi Morrison’s article underscores the importance of how the meaning of the modern concept of human rights is constructed in regards to the choice in words, structure, and style. The key issue, she argues, is how the content of rights is shaped. The genesis, legitimacy, and relevancy of human rights, she emphasizes, tend to be oriented toward local audiences. Both preambles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Cairo Declaration of Islamic Human Rights exclude references to many people’s experiences and cultural traditions. The central focus, Morrison notes, should be on the question of what it means to be human.

The “From the Field” Section of our inaugural issue features the significant findings of field research conducted by two academics. Irum Shiek’s piece presents accounts of abuse and torture by Muslims detained in American prisons following September 11th. Through her research she makes the point that contrary to some portrayals, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal that rocked the world last year can hardly be considered an isolated aberration. In the second piece featured in this section, Carrie Rosefsky Wichham presents the views of Arab Islamists on democratization and human rights amidst the backdrop of contemporary world affairs. Her fascinating findings reveal that in many instances it is not so much that Islamists reject the substance of the human rights and democratic principles, but that they are suspicious of the motives and agendas behind various democratization and human rights initiatives sponsored by the US government. Finally in our “Book Reviews” section, Ally Abdel-hack argues that Geraldine Brook’s book, “Nine Parts of Desire,” fails to debunk many myths surrounding Islam. According to Abdel-Hack, the author presents Islam solely as “male-controlled political ideology,” not as a foundation of ethical construct subject to human interpretations and experiences. Still, the reviewer finds that the book’s failure, attacking Islam as the cause of inequalities of Middle Eastern civilizations, should not detract from the value of revealing some aspects of the

contemporary Muslim civilizations. We thank all of this issue's authors for their valuable contributions.

Finally, we would like to take this opportunity to invite all of the scholars and practitioners working in this field to take part in this exciting new project. The Muslim World Journal of Human Rights can be a catalyst for fresh and innovative thinking on some of the most pressing issues of our times only with your contributions and engagement. We look forward to the challenge ahead.

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