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Assisted reproduction and Middle East kinship: a regional and religious comparison


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Abstract This article compares the use of assisted reproductive technology (ART) and resultant kinship formations in four Middle Eastern settings: the Sunni Muslim Arab world, the Sunni Muslim but officially 'secular' country of Turkey, Shia Muslim Iran and Jewish Israel. This four-way comparison reveals considerable similarities, as well as stark differences, in matters of Middle Eastern kinship and assisted reproduction. The permissions and restrictions on ART, often determined by religious decrees, may lead to counter-intuitive outcomes, many of which defy prevailing stereotypes about which parts of the Middle East are more 'progressive' or 'conservative'. Local considerations – be they social, cultural, economic, religious or political – have shaped the ways in which ART treatments are offered to, and received by, infertile couples in different parts of the Middle East. Yet, across the region, clerics, in dialogue with clinicians and patients, have paved the way for ART practices that have had significant implications for Middle Eastern kinship and family life. 

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Introduction

Around the world, assisted reproductive technology (ART) has been used primarily by heterosexual married couples to

overcome the problem of infertility. However, these technologies have also created numerous options for non-traditional kinship and family formations, including genetically related gay families, postmenopausal motherhood, and posthumous reproduction using the cryopreserved gametes

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(sperm or eggs) of a dead mother or father (Inhorn and Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2008). As such, ART presents epistemological and ethical challenges, creating new dilemmas for regulators and religious leaders, as well as for practitioners and people facing infertility problems. Religious authorities have been especially assertive in some parts of the world, attempting to influence the contemporary understanding and shaping of ART-created families. Even though religious rulings can be extremely deterministic, they are sometimes surprisingly adaptable.

In this article, we compare the various modes of ART application, religious intervention and resultant kinship formations in four Middle Eastern settings: the Sunni Muslim Arab world, the Sunni Muslim but officially 'secular' country of Turkey, Shia Muslim Iran and Jewish Israel. This four-way comparison reveals considerable similarities, as well as stark differences, in matters of kinship and assisted reproduction in the Middle East. The permissions and restrictions on ART, often determined by religious decrees, may lead to counter-intuitive outcomes, many of which defy prevailing stereotypes about which parts of the Middle East are more 'progressive' or 'conservative' (Gürtin et al., 2015; Inhorn, 2012). Indeed, as ART has travelled to regions such as the Middle East, local considerations – be they social, cultural, economic, ethical or political – have shaped the ways in which ART treatments are offered to, and received by, infertile couples in different parts of the Middle East. Yet, across the region, clerics, in dialogue with clinicians and patients, have paved the way for ART practices that have had significant implications for Middle Eastern kinship and family life (Inhorn, 2003).

We begin this article with an outline of the major family features that are common to all of these Middle Eastern settings, as well as a description of significant local diversity. We then move on to explore how specific reproductive technologies are applied in each setting, focusing on third-party assisted reproduction (i.e. the use of donor sperm, donor eggs, donor embryos or gestational surrogacy). As we will argue, it is the use of third-party reproductive assistance – allowed in both Israel and Iran, but disallowed in the Arab countries and Turkey – that has highlighted and cemented profound regional differences in attitudes towards 'biological' versus 'social' parenthood and kinship. Indeed, in the Middle East, as elsewhere, ART has had both reinforcing and destabilizing impacts on the meanings of parenthood and family life. By means of their very existence and availability, these new technologies have expanded the limits of acceptable kinship and family formations in some parts of the Middle East, while re-entrenching and solidifying traditional family structures in others. In the Sunni Muslim world in particular, ART has re-inscribed religious and cultural mandates regarding the primacy of biogenetic inheritance and the social sanctity of patrilineal kinship structures.

Middle East kinship: regional similarities and differences

From Morocco to Iran, Middle Eastern societies can be described as family oriented, with a high value placed on marriage and childbearing (Inhorn, 1996, 2012). Across the Middle East, reproduction comprises a major organizing principle, the significance of which goes well beyond

individuals' emotional desires for children. Indeed, on a cultural level, reproduction within marriage is deemed a social obligation – a way to perpetuate the family lineage, as well as a vehicle for parents to receive support in their old age and help with family labour. Contrary to popular stereotypes, reproduction is not the sole remit of women in the Middle East; both Muslim and Jewish Middle Eastern men often desire children and want to experience parenthood as active fathers (Birenbaum-Carmeli et al., 2014; Gürtin, 2014; Inhorn, 2012, 2014). Thus, they are often fully involved in reproductive decision-making (Inhorn, 2017) and child rearing. In other words, common to all of these settings is a strong social desire for children among both men and women; a desire that is first and foremost based on affection and love towards children, rather than on instrumental values. Given this, the Middle East can be described as 'pronatalist'; in other words, aspirations for childbearing occur at the individual, social, religious and political levels (Inhorn, 1996; Kahn, 2000). Yet, having said this, the number of children desired within each family has declined dramatically over the past 40 years. As shown in Table 1, total fertility rates in the Arab countries have plummeted since the late 1970s, from an average of more than five children per family in most countries, to an average of two children per family today (Eberstadt and Shah, 2012; Inhorn, 2017). In Iran, the average annual population growth rate has fallen to 1.2%, well below replacement level, with many young Iranians having only one child or no children at all. However, as in other parts of the Middle East, this has not diminished the deep-seated values attached to reproduction and its importance *per se* (Tremayne and Akhondi, 2016). In Turkey, despite the overtly pronatalist rhetoric of the government, the total fertility rate for 2015 was 2.14, remaining just above replacement level (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2016). In comparison, Israel continues to have one of the highest total fertility rates in the region, with all segments of the Israeli population (i.e. Palestinians and Jews, both secular and orthodox) maintaining fertility rates well above replacement level (i.e. more than two children per family).

In addition to positive attitudes towards childbearing, another shared feature of these Middle Eastern settings is

Table 1 Arab nations in the top 15 countries for global fertility decline between the years 1975–1980 and 2005–2010.

Country	Total fertility rate ^a		Difference	Percentage decline
	1975–1980	2005–2010		
Libya	7.94	2.67	–4.39	69.9
United Arab Emirates	5.66	1.97	–3.69	65.2
Oman	8.10	2.89	–5.21	64.3
Tunisia	5.69	2.05	–3.64	63.9
Qatar	6.11	2.21	–3.90	63.8
Lebanon	4.23	1.58	–2.66	62.8
Algeria	7.18	2.72	–4.45	62.0

Source: Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, 2013 (United Nations, 2013). World Populations Prospects: the 2012 Revision. United Nations, New York.

^a Number of children born per woman.

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