

when it gives the impression that it comes from members of the target group itself.<sup>20</sup>

The use of clandestine communications to influence attitudes toward birth prevention is a risky, expensive, and logistically complicated business. Messages must be carefully and scientifically prepared before dissemination, so as to maximize the use of cultural symbolism and exploit the vulnerabilities of target groups. Often the process entails the most meticulous sort of sociological intelligence gathering; the recruitment of "in-place operatives" within the target population to assist in the development of themes; and a drawn-out process of audience pre-testing by which the reactions of targets are evaluated and analyzed and messages are revised again and again until they provoke just the right response. Furthermore, the opinions of local people must be tested continuously in order to identify changes in attitudes and behavior among specific groups (and sub-groups) who have been exposed to various aspects of the propaganda campaign.

Even with such sophisticated precautions in place, however, mistakes can—and do—happen. A message may lack subtlety and arouse misgivings among intellectuals. A local recruit may grow suspicious of the activities in which he or she is involved. Or, a public dispute about hiring or payment can erupt, jeopardizing the anonymity of the sponsor. For this reason, contacts are usually kept several steps away from the government or institution carrying out the action, with dummy corporations and front groups often serving as barriers to detection.

Despite these precautions, scores of incidents have been reported in which secretive family planning "persuasion" tactics have backfired. For example, Jordanian newspapers aired charges of "western subversion" of religious institutions in the Middle East during a U.N. regional population conference in Amman in April 1993.<sup>21</sup> A few months later, a state senator in the Philippines blasted an American population "aid" package which, he claimed, came padded with a \$1 million "slush fund" intended to pay bribes to journalists, editors, and broadcasters in exchange for positive coverage of the population control program.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most politically explosive incidents involved a project designed to plant fake Islamic teaching manuals in religious institutions in northern Nigeria.

Several U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) population contractors were involved, along with a Nigerian public official and a U.S.-based consultant with ties to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Bank.<sup>23</sup>

According to newspaper reports appearing in several Nigerian cities in 1991 and early 1992,<sup>24</sup> the texts were prepared by an "Islamic theologian" with funds from UNFPA. Additional money was provided by at least three U.S. government contractors. The teaching manuals, says a memorandum sent to one of the contractors, were part of a larger program to

"explore the feasibility of working with organizations involved in family planning where Islamic attitude and opinion are important to program development and operation."<sup>25</sup>

The program was to have been publicly linked to the Nigerian government through a series of secret payments to one Dr. A.B. Sulaiman, then an official of the Ministry of Health, who was given responsibility for coordinating a series of seminars and workshops intended to undermine religious opposition to birth control. The overall goal of the campaign, according to a written contract, was to launch an "active explanatory effort to dispel the existing misconceptions about inconsistencies between Islamic teachings and population policy and family planning goals."<sup>26</sup>

Despite all the carefully laid plans, of which the "Islamic" teaching manual was to be the cornerstone, the manual itself was never distributed. Local journalists and religious leaders learned from contacts in the United States about the plot, and a barrage of negative publicity forced the cancellation of further activities. Among other things, it was revealed:

- The author of the text, *A Resource Manual on Islam*

## The notorious 'imam project'

An alarming story about the infiltration of Muslim leadership in West Africa appears in the December 1992 edition of the U.S. journal *International Family Planning Perspectives*. The report is a factual account of a program run by two American foreign aid contractors—the Population Council and Save the Children Federation (SCF)—with the help of a local family planning agency.

According to the journal, residents of Gambia had shown themselves overwhelmingly opposed to the use of western-style birth control, believing, in the words of the article, that such interference with procreation is "discouraged by Islamic teachings." The response of the aid groups, it says, was to start a special project "to involve imams willing to teach about the connections between Islam, health, and family planning."

The report quotes a Population Council worker, Placide Tapsoba, who helped organize the campaign. "The spiritual head of each village is the imam. The people rely on him more than anyone else in the village; what the imam preaches is what they believe. If he preaches against family planning, they trust him. That is why we chose to go through the imam to reach the people."

With nearly U.S.\$100,000 to spend on the "imam project," its planners attempted to recruit religious leaders who would be willing to "stress the compatibility of Islam-

and *Family Planning with Special Reference to the Maliki School*, was one Abdel Rahim Omran, an Egyptian residing in the United States who had worked as an occasional adviser to the World Bank and who also conducted frequent missions abroad to promote birth control among Muslims on behalf of the United Nations Population Fund.

Worse, at the time of the revelation, Omran was the administrative head of a pro-Israel "think-tank" based at the University of Maryland. A 1989 newsletter from that institution's Center for Development and Conflict Management described a recent trip by Omran to Africa and Asia, where Omran "coordinated and took part in a series of conferences on family planning in the Muslim world" and helped to engineer "a shift in attitudes from stiff resistance to acceptance of family planning."<sup>27</sup>

Worse of all, Omran was working as a special consultant to the Department of Defense in 1988, when a series of studies was commissioned to examine dangers to U.S. national security posed by population trends. The studies, published in summary form by the Georgetown Center for Strategic

and International Studies a year later, warned of dwindling NATO troop strength and increased competition for government funds between military and social programs—this the result of low birthrates and the aging of the population.

The summary report concluded that current demographic events are so potentially devastating to U.S. interests abroad, that population control activities should be given equal status with the development of new weapon systems. The report concluded, "Instead of relying on the canard that the threat dictates one's posture, [U.S. policymakers] must attempt to influence the form that threat assumes."<sup>28</sup>

● Also participating in the Pentagon's 1988 demographic threat assessment project was Thomas Goliber of the Futures Group, a Washington-based research center that specializes in government contracts in the fields of development and military research. It was the Futures Group that initiated the contract with Omran to write the theological source documents that were to be distributed in Nigeria. A United Nations directory of firms and organizations working on population

ic teaching with the prevention of unwanted births," the journal states. Initially, the crew managed to enlist the support of a single imam. The article reveals that in June of 1990, this imam was taken to the initial "project area" for the express purpose of holding meetings with other religious authorities. Acting on behalf of the foreign agents, he "emphasized the sizable maternal and child health problems in Gambia, and attempted to dispel misconceptions about contraceptive methods, point out ways in which Islam supports the use of family planning, and seek the imams' participation in similar meetings in their villages," says the journal.

Eventually, with the help of that first collaborator, the family planning promoters were able to convince a total of 22 imams to take part in the indoctrination process. As the journal adds, "Many said they had not been aware that family planning and Islamic teachings were compatible."

Between the fall of 1990 and late summer 1991, a series of public meetings took place in 26 villages throughout Gambia. The *International Family Planning Perspectives* report includes a detailed description of these gatherings: "They were conducted by family planning motivators, two imams and an Islamic singer and drummer. At 4:30 p.m. on the day of the meeting, music called villagers to the site. The proceedings began with a prayer. The local imam then discussed Islam and family planning, backing up his argument—that family planning benefits maternal and child welfare and brings husbands and wives closer—with quotes from the Quran. After the national imam was introduced, he preached his support for family

planning. SCF staff spoke about the benefits of their program; Department of Health and Gambia Family Planning Association staff discussed specific methods (although no particular method was emphasized) and how to obtain them in the village, and questions were asked by the audience."

### Profiling the villages

According to the publication, the campaign was accompanied by sophisticated research to evaluate changes in belief as a result of the "imam project." Surveys were done in several villages after the first round of meetings, three months after the start of the project, and again at its conclusion. Similar studies were done in villages not involved in the scheme. The findings, according to the family planning journal, revealed that the project had indeed produced a profound change in thinking, as well as a "large increase" in acceptance of modern birth control methods.

But project organizers acknowledge that they encountered significant obstacles in implementing the plan. "The main source of difficulty the project coordinators faced," the report advises, "was convincing religious leaders to participate."

Indeed, it adds, the program appears to have succeeded because of some younger imams who had undergone prior orientation at western-funded institutions. Says the Population Council's Tapsoba, "Some of them are young people who went to study in Cairo. These people are more open to this kind of discussion."