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HONOR KILLING IN TEXAS

By: **Robert Spencer**

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Amina Said, 18, and her sister Sarah, 17, smile happily in one widely circulating photo, and Amina is wearing what looks like a sweatshirt bearing the name “AMERICAN.” But their fate may have been the herald of a new, disquieting feature of the American landscape: honor killing. Amina and Sarah were shot dead in Irving, Texas, on New Year’s Day. Police are searching for their father, Yaser Abdel Said, on a warrant for capital murder.

The girls’ great aunt, Gail Gartrell, told reporters, “This was an honor killing.” She explained that Yaser Said had long abused the girls, and after discovering that they had boyfriends, had threatened to kill them — whereupon their mother fled with them. “She ran with them,” said Gartrell, “because she knew he would carry out the threat.” But Said found them, and apparently did carry it out.

Honor killing, the practice of murdering a female family member who is believed to have sullied the family honor, enjoys widespread acceptance in some areas of the Islamic world. However, Islam Said, the brother of Amina and Sarah, has denied that the murders had anything to do with Islam at all. “It’s not religion,” he insisted. “It’s something else. Religion has nothing to do with it.”

And to be sure, the Qur’an or Islamic tradition does not sanction honor killing. Muslim spokesmen have hastened, after the recent killing in Canada of another teenage Muslim girl, Aqsa Parvez, by her father to tell the public that honor killing has nothing to do with Islam, but is merely a feature of Islamic culture in some areas. Aqsa Parvez was sixteen years old; her father, Muhammad Parvez, has been charged with strangling her to death because she refused to wear the hijab. Shahina Siddiqui, president of the Islamic Social Services Association, declared: “The strangulation death of Ms. Parvez was the result of domestic violence, a problem that cuts across Canadian society and is blind to colour or creed.” Sheikh Alaa El-Sayyed, imam of the Islamic Society of North America in Mississauga, Ontario, agreed: “The bottom line is, it’s a domestic violence issue.”

But these dismissals are too easy, principally because they fail to take into account important evidence. In some areas, honor killing is assumed to be an Islamic practice. There is evidence that Islamic culture inculcates attitudes that could lead directly to the murders of these two girls in Texas. In 2003, the Jordanian Parliament voted down on Islamic grounds a provision designed to stiffen penalties for honor killings. In a sadly typical consequence of this early last year, a Jordanian man who murdered his sister because he thought she had a lover was given a three-month sentence, which was suspended for time served, allowing him to walk free. The *Yemen Times* just last week published an article insisting that violence against women is necessary for the

stability of the family and the society, and invoking Islam to support this view.

Since Islam is used as the justification for such barbarities, it becomes incumbent upon Muslim spokesmen to confront this directly, and to work for positive change, rather than simply to consign it all to culture, as if that absolves Islam from all responsibility. For this is the culture that apparently gave Yaser Said and Muhammad Parvez the idea that they had to kill their daughters. It is a culture suffused with its religion, thoroughly dominated by it — such that a clear distinction between the two is not so easy to find.

The killings of Amina and Sarah Said raises uncomfortable questions for the Islamic community in the United States, questions about the culture and mindset that people like Yaser Said bring to this country. Now that honor killing has come to Texas, Muslim spokesmen in the U.S. have an all the more urgent responsibility to end their denial and confront these cultural attitudes. If they don't, and instead continue to glibly insist that religion has nothing to do with what happened to these poor girls, the murders of the Said sisters will only be the beginning of a new American phenomenon.

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