New Islamic Media

February 10, 2017
Contents

New Islamic Media ................................................................. 3

Islamic Legal Authority in a Cacophonous Age ........................................... 6
Nathan J. Brown, George Washington University

Defining the Media Du‘ā and Their Call to Action .......................................... 9
Tuve Floden, Georgetown University

An Age of Mass Revival: Islamic Media and Religious Change in 1970s Egypt .......... 14
Aaron Rock-Singer, University of Pennsylvania

The Moral Economy of Islamic Television: Panic and its Perils ...................... 18
Yasmin Moll, University of Michigan

The Politics of Sheikh Awesome: Quietism in Transnational Media ................. 22
Thomas E.R. Maguire, University of Chicago

Transformation of Islamic television in Turkey from the era of secularist state monopoly to family-focused programming under the conservative-Muslim AKP government ........... 27
Hikmet Kocamaner, Harvard University

Sincerity, Scandal, and the State: Islam and Media in Post-authoritarian Indonesia .......... 32
James B. Hoesterey, Emory University

Islamists and Cultural Politics ...................................................... 37
Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, University of Copenhagen

The Preacher: A Backstage Islamic Media Drama ......................................... 42
Walter Armbrust, University of Oxford

The role of traditional and new media in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s internal power struggle .......... 48
Mokhtar Awad, George Washington University

Viral Pulpits: Clerics and the Sectarianization of the Gulf Online Sphere .......... 54
Alexandra Siegel, New York University

Does the Islamic State have a Media Doctrine? ........................................... 59
Marwan M. Kraidy, University of Pennsylvania
The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.
New Islamic Media

In years past, Islamist televangelists like Amr Khaled, Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Tareq Suwaidan seemed like the future of Arab media. Advancing a form of “soft Islam” focused on personal betterment and religiosity, these preachers were seen by some as a potential counterweight to extremist voices and by others as a sinister leading edge of radicalization. The contretemps between Amr Khaled and Yusuf al-Qaradawi over the Danish Cartoons Crisis of 2006 inspired numerous academic articles (and several of my own blog posts).

Today, such figures have become far more marginalized in both political life and in academic research. But as this new collection of essays published by the Project on Middle East Political Science makes clear, they have not disappeared. Their emergence was rooted in the liberalization of media, the appeal of multimedia celebrity, the multiple social movements keen to promote religiosity, and the demands of the marketplace.

Islamic media has been developing since the 1970s, notes Aaron Rock Singer. From the cheap Islamic pamphlets, which flooded Egypt's bookstands to the circulation of cassette sermons, Islamic media has rapidly taken advantage of each new technological development. The general impulse to use available media for proselytization has deep roots in the Islamist project of outreach and persuasion. Contributions by Thomas Maguire, Yasmin Moll, Hikmet Kocamaner and James Hoestery show how the neoliberal privatization of the media market produced a similar boom in religious programming from Egypt to Turkey and from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia. The proliferation of special interest television stations, both domestic and transnational, and the unlimited scope for religious activity online ensure that such Islamic programming will continue to expand.

These changes in the political economy of the mass media mattered enormously in shaping these Islamic media preachers. Islamic multimedia personalities gained prominence across many Arab and Muslim countries simultaneously – sometimes with a national focus and sometimes spanning a transnational audience. Al-Jazeera’s Yusuf al-Qaradawi pioneered the genre in the late 1990s from a politicized Muslim Brotherhood-style direction with his popular program “Sharia and Life.” His success sparked a legion of imitators across the hyper-competitive Arab media. Egypt’s Islamist personalities such as Amr Khaled pushed the genre towards personal lifestyles and social issues, while various Salafi television stations emerged in the years leading up to the 2011 revolution. Islamist figures of all varieties took full advantage of the hyper-competitive media markets of the Gulf, with figures such as Ahmad al-Shugairi, Aid al-Qarni, Tareq al-Suwaidan, Mohamed al-Arefe and Nabil al-Awadhy emerging as multimedia megastars.

While there is a clear family resemblance among the different personalities, finding the right term for this group of media personalities proves more difficult than it appears. As Tuve Floden demonstrates, each term is problematic in its own way. “Televangelist” as a term has difficulty escaping its Christian roots. He quotes the Egyptian Moez Massoud: “Televangelists in the States are all about making money in the name of Christianity.... I like to think of myself as a Muslim
The reception of these Islamic multimedia stars prior to the Arab uprisings was decidedly mixed. Many liberals and secularists simply rolled their eyes at the endless profusion of television preachers. Others viewed them as the face of a broader Islamist project, and viscerally objected to their agenda of inserting religion into all facets of public and private life. Meanwhile, more traditional Islamists and jihadist trends scoffed at the depoliticized and often scripturally diffuse forms of Islam being promoted. That relatively nonpolitical quality in turn attracted those seeking to promote alternatives to radical Islam, with several influential counter-terrorism reports suggesting partnering with Islamic media stars like Amr Khaled to promote “moderate” Islam.

However, since the Arab spring, these multimedia Islamic preachers have faced several key challenges. Their model of promoting religious observance and personal development through broadcast and online media seemed hopelessly inadequate to many during a revolutionary moment. This eclipse was short lived, as most managed to find their way back to relevance and widespread popularity as the moment faded. Three challenges have been particularly difficult for them to navigate:

**Polarization**: preachers who had successfully walked a centrist path between political Islamism and secular entrepreneurship now found themselves caught up in the intense polarization on the question of Islamism. Many Egyptians swept up in the anti-Muslim Brotherhood moment extended their disdain to all forms of public Islam. Egypt’s military coup and the Rabaa massacre made it difficult for any Islamically-oriented media figure to avoid taking sides. Those aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood suffered severe repression, while other Islamic programming had to steer far clear of politics. The same challenges could be seen in the Gulf, where the Saudi owner of al-Risala station, Walid bin Talal abruptly fired Kuwaiti Tareq al-Suwaydan following his criticism of Rabaa.
**Sectarianism:** Other preachers, especially in the Gulf, became active promoters of a hardline anti-Shi’ite sectarianism. As Alexandra Siegel demonstrates in her study of Gulf Twitter accounts, many of these multimedia Islamic personalities become leading promoters of sectarianism. Their massive campaign of support for the Syrian insurgency evolved from positive appeals to raise charitable funds and moral support into harder edge calls for sectarian jihad. This placed the preachers at the cutting edge of Gulf politics, pushing the mainstream towards sectarian and even jihadist views abroad even while remaining largely politically quiescent at home.

**Democracy:** Few soft Islam preachers ever quite figured out how to bridge their support for popular aspirations to democracy and their need to please regime elites. During the early Arab spring, when revolution seemed possible, many Islamic figures jumped on the democratic bandwagon. Khaled embraced the revolutionary youth, arguing for religious faith as a driver of economic development. However, he remained largely silent during the July 2013 military coup, moving back into the safer space of promoting personal and economic development. As politics bogged down or reversed, many other multimedia preachers retreated back into the safer space of personal lifestyle and anti-politics. Some Egyptian television preachers sought, as Yasmin Moll put it, to recast the revolution as a “narrative of personal redemption.”

This collection brings together more than a dozen leading scholars to discuss the many dimensions of Islamic media. Nathan Brown places these media personalities within broader transformations in the Islamic public sphere. Tuve Floden carefully explores the conceptualization as a category, while Aaron Rock Singer places them within a broader historical arc of Islamic media activism. Walter Armbrust and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen offer close readings of films and television programs about the preachers in question, showing the interpretive struggle to define their social meaning. Yasmin Moll, Thomas Maguire, and James B. Hoesterey look closely at specific programs and personalities across different arenas. Alexandra Siegel looks at the online behavior of Gulf media Islamists, while Mokhtar Awad shows in depth how online and broadcast media platforms have become critical to a repressed and scattered Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Marwan Kraidy examines the media doctrine of the Islamic State. Hikmet Kocamaner and James Hoesterey offer vital comparative perspective from Turkey and Indonesia.

Collectively, POMEPS Studies 23 offers an exceptionally rich, interdisciplinary look at the evolution of Islamic media.

*Marc Lynch*
*POMEPS Director*
Let me begin with a familiar pair of authorities: the mufti and the judge. A mufti, we learn in most efforts to explain authority in Islamic law, is a learned scholar who answers questions interpreting religious law; a judge issues rulings based on application of the law. They are often paired in accounts explicating the elaboration and reproduction of Islamic legal thought over time: the judge’s rulings are held to be ephemeral reactions to particular circumstances; the mufti’s fatwas are learned interpretations based on knowledge of the sources. The first is held to be authoritative for the litigants because it is enforced by the state; the second is held to be authoritative in a more profound and sustained (if less political) sense—it is an interpretation which, whether or not it is deployed in a particular case, bears the prestige of the mufti and participates in the discourse among scholars that reproduces the Islamic shari`a over time.

I want to argue in this short essay that while the mufti and judge survive, they have now been joined by many other figures who make religious arguments and that all kinds of new settings are friendly to religious arguments. Standing alone, this is an unexceptional claim. But I also want to claim that the ways in which authority and arguments are linked has changed, that arguments travel far more easily but do not always bring the authority of their inventors with them. This is an abbreviated version of the argument more fully developed my book, *Arguing Islam after the Revival of Arab Politics*.

As part of the research for the book, I sought to meet some popular muftis and observed others who issue their interpretations not in scholarly writings but on television call-in shows. When I watched this new mode of consulting muftis, I was puzzled by the fact that so many smile. Perhaps this is a phenomenon restricted to the Arab world — even their Salafi broadcasters are often an exception. But the avuncular expression is quite striking. It is often similar to that on the expression on the face of the da’i, the preacher, who stays away from legal rulings to focus on moral and ethical exhortation. The television mufti’s message seems to be one that his learning is deployed with compassion and understanding; God’s law is helpful not harmful.

By strong contrast, when I have seen judges in courts, their faces seem largely devoid of expression, betraying at most a dispassionate scowl. The message seemed to be that law is serious and even severe.

In his recent book *Questioning Secularism*, Hussein Agrama compares his conversations with Egyptians who deliver fatwas with his observation of personal status courts. He notes a puzzling phenomenon: those who deliver fatwas are often pressed by their questioners for more demanding interpretations and become frustrated if the muftis seemed to be making things too easy for them. In court, however, litigants tailor their appeals in such a way as to obtain the most favorable ruling. Those who fail to get a favorable court ruling might appeal; those who seek a second fatwa (not a common occurrence) do so in the precise opposite circumstances: “if people ask different muftis the same question, it is often not because they are seeking advantage, but because they are uncomfortable with a past decision that is to their advantage.”

In my own conversations with those who deliver fatwas in the Arab world, I have asked about this phenomenon noted by Agrama and been told similar stories, with muftis often feeling forced to teach the questioner that the Islamic path is rarely the more difficult one but instead designed to meet the needs of the believers. Judges I speak with, by contrast, are more likely to be suspicious of litigants and insist that they need to question carefully and each for signs of shaving the truth and deception.

The reason is clear, going back to the familiar image of the pair of legal specialists: mufti and judge have two
very different kinds of authority. The faithful go to muftis voluntarily for moral guidance on how to live their lives; litigants go to judges to have their rights enforced. The religious authority of the mufti does not carry easily into the political realm; the finding of a civil court judge does not generally sway a religious scholar. Neither arguments nor authority are fungible.

The proliferation of new media and the revival of some older ones have led to many new entrants into religious arguments besides mufti and judge. A more subtle, but just as consequential, effect of the proliferation of religious talk in so many media, new and old, is not simply to create new publics but also to make for an environment in which arguments can pass easily from one sphere to the next, unlike the classical image of the mufti and the judge. When arguments move — or, to be more accurate, when actors move them, since there is agency involved — they are often shorn of the original speaker’s authority.

Religious authorities — whether new preacher, learned scholar, salafi shaykh, television talk show host, web-based mufti, pamphleteer, newspaper columnist movement leader — operate on different playing fields. They have different modes of communication, contrasting styles of persuasion, and various forms of relationship with followers. There is no single public square in the Arab world but a whole host of arenas of contest and argument, many of which are difficult to follow.

What is remarkable about the multiplication of spheres is not that they can throw off the shackles of authoritarianism (some can to a degree, but to much less an extent than was sometimes hoped by enthusiasts), but that they greatly increase the portability of arguments.

Sometimes it is quite literally as easy as clicking on “copy” and “paste.” Indeed, newer social media are uniquely suited to just such a purpose: there is nothing new about a preacher giving a sermon and word of that sermon circulating through conversation. Over the course of the twentieth century words spoken in the sphere of the mosque might spread to other sympathetic spheres, generally ones receptive to the message through a steady accretion of technologies (press, followed by broadcast media, and then cassette tapes). Now in the twenty-first century, such sermons might be tweeted; video links spread by Facebook; friends might coordinate by text message about where to gather for congregational prayer; journalists might follow such discussions; talk shows might be alerted to controversies, particularly ones that lent themselves to dramatic confrontations. Satellite television allowed new voices to be heard; social media allow everyone to echo those voices and insinuate their arguments into personal interactions. The audience participates quite publicly in constituting religious authority.

What is happening is partly that the boundaries among the multiplying spheres have become permeable, so that arguments can travel by osmosis from one sphere to the next. Just as significant, the new spheres seem tailor made not simply for osmosis but for active transport: individuals or groups who wish to move arguments from sphere to sphere can do so with more ease and much more speed; the phrase “viral” to explain such the most extreme form of this phenomenon is hardly unique to the Arab world but perhaps well exemplified the potentialities of the new environment for giving birth rapidly to widespread political discussion.

Such active transport has been noted before, though its significance has not always been appreciated. When it has been noted, it is the empowering aspects of the tendency for opposition groups drew the lion’s share of attention, especially after the uprisings of 2011. But the new linkages among the spheres have some other underappreciated but politically significant characteristics.

First, speakers often lose control of their arguments as those engaged in active transport use them for their own purposes.

Second, emotion, symbol, and drama are more transportable than sustained reasoned argument. Those who use such devices in a persuasive way make their
arguments quite transportable. But it should also be noted those who deploy feelings shorn of learned argumentation can pay a reputational price by doing so among their peers—sometimes seeming to crave attention for core audiences, losing a bit of the respect of colleagues (for individual scholars) or being seen as too politically ambitions (for movements).

Third, much of the trafficking in religious arguments is used less for gentle persuasion than for ridicule. Fatwas can be a particularly potent weapon when grasped by unintended audiences: when a prominent salafi leader in Egypt declared the symbol for Chevrolet forbidden for Muslims because it represented a cross, the effect was to inspire derision mixed with fear among non-salafis more than pious practice among the faithful.

In sum, we are dealing now with a period in which the fatwa has been transformed from a private scholarly ruling to a very public form of argumentation, in which emotion and symbol are mixed with reasoned verbal argument in new ways, in which arguments move with far greater speed and force than they did earlier and in a manner which governments and speakers can influence but not control the shape and direction of debate.

The ways in which arguments move, then, are not simply limited to building bridges; it is also easy in the new environment to burn them. And the political effects can be pernicious. This is most notable in the growing polarization notable in Arab politics in recent years; as arguments increase in force, scope, and publicity, citizens have become aware of how deeply they differ. And this awareness is often expressed in aggressive terms; it is also disconnected from structures for resolving or managing them.

Indeed, while the boundaries among public spheres have grown more permeable, structures of policymaking have not. They have been as closed as they have always been. Governing political structures seem to be designed to keep much of the public out of politics in this sense and the mechanisms that might be seen to link politics in the argumentative sense to politics in the policy-oriented sense are (or have been kept) weak. And in some countries, some of these structures exist only in name or are extremely weak.

The issue is partly state structures themselves — elections skewed, parliaments deprived of the tools of oversight, presidents who serve for life, other state institutions insulated from politics in almost any sense of the term — even in those systems that have liberalized sufficiently so as not to appear fully authoritarian. The issue is partly in what is sometimes called “political society”— those organizations and institutions outside of the state that organize constituencies, press for programs, ideologies, or policies, organize for campaigns or demonstrations. As Vickie Langhor aptly phrases the situation (using different terminology than we have here thus far), focusing on late Mubarak-era Egypt, the problem is “too much civil society, too little politics.”

The problem is not a dearth of politics or of ideas; the problem is a weakness of institutional mechanisms to translate public discussions into public policies. It should be no surprise that rhetoric spins out of control if it finds no traction in policy outcomes.

Nathan J. Brown is professor of political science and international affairs and director of the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington University. Brown is also a nonresident senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
Defining the Media *Duʿā* and Their Call to Action

Tuve Floden, Georgetown University

Popular preachers like Amr Khaled from Egypt, Ahmad al-Shugairi from Saudi Arabia, and Tariq al-Suwaidan from Kuwait are a prominent force on television in the Middle East, especially during Ramadan. Yet the way Western work approaches these preachers has often been mired in flawed terminology and faulty comparisons. This memo highlights two such problems – the use of the term televangelist and comparisons with Christian preacher Billy Graham – and, in doing so, provides a clearer picture of these Muslim media preachers and their influence on society.

The first point for discussion is that many works refer to these preachers as Muslim televangelists or Islamic televangelists,¹ labels that accurately reflect their prominence on television, yet do not fit them culturally or linguistically. The term televangelist has roots in Christianity. Evangelists are literally preachers of the Gospel and thus the word televangelist refers to teaching the story of Jesus and the Christian revelation. Muslim preachers agree – Egyptian preacher Moez Masoud, whose television work follows in the steps of Amr Khaled, said, “Televangelists in the States are all about making money in the name of Christianity.… I like to think of myself as a Muslim thinker. My message is to reintroduce the concepts of orthodox, classical Islam with a deep understanding of its spiritual core and allow people to merge modern life with traditional teachings.”²

In addition to these misconstruing links to Christianity and the Gospel, there are other flaws with using the term televangelist when referring to these popular Muslim preachers. First, it minimizes these preachers’ work by ignoring their broad reach outside of television, including their books, articles, public speeches, and considerable online presence. Second, the word televangelist ignores the distinction between, on the one hand, the Muslim preachers who are traditionally educated and part of the religious establishment (the ‘ulamā’) and, on the other hand, those preachers that are outside the traditional system, the popular preachers alluded to above. The broad term televangelist can describe the television work of Muslim preachers of all backgrounds – from traditional *Azhari* shaykhs and Salafi preachers, to the media-savvy ‘ālim Yusuf al-Qaradawi, to popular preachers like Amr Khaled – so to refer specifically to popular preachers requires a separate term.

Some modern studies have avoided the term televangelist, opting instead for labels like tele-‘dā’ī³ or media preacher.⁴ The word ‘dāʾī, a person who proselytizes or calls people to Islam, is an apt one in this context and is the term used in Arabic to describe these television preachers.⁵ The

---


term al-du’ā al-judud as coined by Wa’il Lutfi to describe popular preachers in Egypt, using the plural form of dā’ī, is a prominent example. Still, the word dā’ī by itself does not fully express the characteristics of the preachers whom I study here. In addition to their lack of formal religious degrees and their place outside the religious establishment, they employ a wealth of modern media to deliver their message. The term tele-dā’ī accurately reflects these preachers’ most prominent medium, television, yet fails to capture the extent of their work. These preachers produce television shows, audiocassettes, CDs, DVDs, and print publications, and are prolific users of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Thus, I prefer the term media dā’ī (pl. media du’ā),7 which better reflects the diverse output of these popular preachers.

This reflection of how modern preachers deliver information mirrors some previous attempts at new terms, such as calling Yusuf al-Qaradawi a “media sheikh” and Marcia Hermansen’s choice of the term “media preacher.”9 However, the words preacher and sheikh do not convey the informal nature and delivery of the people studied here. The term media du’ā is more precise, defining a narrow group of popular preachers, individuals characterized by their educational degrees and their place outside the religious establishment, their informal language and style, and their extensive use of modern media tools. The term media preacher does work well an overarching term, however, encompassing the media du’ā and their Azhari

term al-du’ā al-judud as coined by Wa’il Lutfi to describe popular preachers in Egypt, using the plural form of dā’ī, is a prominent example. Still, the word dā’ī by itself does not fully express the characteristics of the preachers whom I study here. In addition to their lack of formal religious degrees and their place outside the religious establishment, they employ a wealth of modern media to deliver their message. The term tele-dā’ī accurately reflects these preachers’ most prominent medium, television, yet fails to capture the extent of their work. These preachers produce television shows, audiocassettes, CDs, DVDs, and print publications, and are prolific users of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Thus, I prefer the term media dā’ī (pl. media du’ā),7 which better reflects the diverse output of these popular preachers.

This reflection of how modern preachers deliver information mirrors some previous attempts at new terms, such as calling Yusuf al-Qaradawi a “media sheikh” and Marcia Hermansen’s choice of the term “media preacher.”9 However, the words preacher and sheikh do not convey the informal nature and delivery of the people studied here. The term media du’ā is more precise, defining a narrow group of popular preachers, individuals characterized by their educational degrees and their place outside the religious establishment, their informal language and style, and their extensive use of modern media tools. The term media preacher does work well an overarching term, however, encompassing the media du’ā and their Azhari


9 Nabil Echchaibi also used this term, with the spelling media da‘as (sic) in his article “From Audio Tapes to Video Blogs: the Delocalisation of Authority in Islam,” Nations and Nationalism 17, no. 1 (2011): 36.


11 Lindsay Wise’s M.A. thesis makes this point as well, citing Bayat and adding that many articles from Egypt and abroad compare Khaled to the highest levels of political power for a long time, including particularly close relations with U.S. Presidents Johnson and Nixon.11 In this sense, Graham does not claim to be one of the people, as Khaled and others do.12 His prominent place in local and national politics is starkly...
different from how the media *du‘ā* present themselves and how local politicians treat them.

In addition, a comparison of Graham and the media *du‘ā* ignores clear differences in the political environments of these preachers. The media *du‘ā* live and work under repressive authoritarian regimes where elections are not free and fair, and political expression is not protected. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has a political environment that represses local opposition. Police continue to halt demonstrations by the country’s Shi‘a minority and in the early 1990s also quashed the Sunni-led opposition movement *al-Sahwa al-Islāmiyya* (the Islamic Awakening). Preachers who spoke out then, like Salman al-‘Awda and Safar al-Hawali, faced travel bans and were incarcerated until they agreed to support the regime. The Saudi government has been quick to stop online dissent as well, arresting prominent blogger Ra‘if Badawi, for example, and sentencing him to ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes.

Kuwait and Egypt’s political environments are similarly subject to the wills of those in power. In Kuwait, the emir and the constitutional court have the power to dissolve parliament. While opposition groups have more of a voice than in Saudi Arabia, the Kuwaiti parliament has been dissolved six times since 2006 and the regime has jailed outspoken activists and parliamentarians on several occasions. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak ruled for almost thirty years, with the public reelecting him by referendum in 1987, 1993, and 1999. The ballot included no other candidates. Although multicandidate presidential elections took place in 2005, the environment was far from free and fair. Security forces broke up political rallies and protests, arrested demonstrators and activists, and restricted media expression and the establishment of new political parties. After deposing democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi in 2013, the Egyptian military and the security state under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi continues to repress political opposition.

In the United States, Billy Graham has faced none of these problems. The American system of government is democratic, with a history of free elections and regular turnover from president to president. Since 1950, Graham has met with every sitting president, all twelve of them, and supported presidential hopefuls such as Nixon in 1960 and Romney in 2012. This involvement in politics at the highest level, and the fact that Nixon and Romney both lost, has had no consequences or political repercussions for Graham. He was not jailed, exiled, banned from politics, or fired from his role as a preacher.

Contrast this with the experience of the media *du‘ā*. As Amr Khaled’s audience grew in the early 2000s, the Egyptian authorities forced him to move his public sermons to the outskirts of Cairo, hoping to stifle the young preacher’s success. Khaled’s popularity continued to grow however and when he left Egypt in exile in 2002, blame fell on the government as well. In another case, Tariq al-Suwaidan openly supported Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, criticizing the military government who had deposed him. This culminated in a 2013 speech in Yemen where al-Suwaidan described himself as one of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. Within days, the preacher had lost his job as General Director of the television channel *al-Risala*, a station funded by Saudi businessman Prince Al-Walid Bin Talal. As the prince explained, the Brotherhood was a terrorist movement and he had repeatedly warned al-Suwaidan not to declare his activities...
political affiliations. In both al-Suwaidan and Khaled’s cases, their public discourse and overt action brought immediate repercussions.

Still, these experiences do not mean that the media duā have become apolitical or afraid to make political statements. The duā frequently comment on social and political issues inside and outside their respective nations. Take, for instance, Ahmad al-Shugairi’s remarks about public infrastructure. One of his television episodes focuses entirely on London’s sewers, a system that was built 150 years ago, yet employed extra large pipes to accommodate future usage. Al-Shugairi did not choose this topic at random. In 2009, the Saudi city of Jeddah witnessed devastating floods. A day’s worth of rain inundated streets and homes, resulting in over one hundred people dead, and many more homeless. Much of this could have been avoided if the city had had better sewer and drainage systems.

This lack of public services highlights a lack of political responsibility. Who is thinking of the future? While al-Shugairi does not call out any Arab leaders in particular, he does point out the importance of long-term planning. Today’s leaders are not responsible for the current drainage problems, he says. Those fall on the shoulders of previous administrations. Yet the sewer system for 2020 is the responsibility of leaders today. They need to think of future generations.

Khaled’s television series Life Makers presents a similar message, pushing his audience to work on health education, literacy, and the environment, implying that the government is not doing enough on these issues or, at least, that it cannot handle them alone. Khaled’s programming resulted in independent Life Makers organizations springing up across the Arab world and beyond, each pursuing a range of projects including anti-drug campaigns, food distribution to the poor, urban agriculture, recycling, and courses on first aid, history, and Qur’anic recitation.

In terms of more explicit political issues, we have already discussed al-Suwaidan’s vocal support of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt and his opposition to the subsequent military regime. Amr Khaled has also been active in politics, although he demonstrates a vacillating approach that shifts with the changing realities on the ground. Khaled originally shunned overt politics, as President Mubarak and the Egyptian state tightly controlled the political sphere. After the Egyptian Revolution, the preacher jumped into the political arena though and founded his own party. He reversed himself just ten months later, however, stepping down as head of the party and explaining how “his messages of reform and preaching [did] not fit with the requirements of political life.” The timing was not coincidental. Khaled resigned just two weeks after the army removed President Mohamed Morsi from office. And one month later, the preacher was part of a video supporting the army, telling soldiers that they have a religious duty to obey orders, even if it means using deadly force against protestors. In the end, Khaled thus chose to stay in the political realm, yet presented views in line with those of the regime, perhaps fearing another crackdown on his preaching.

---

19 Ibid.
The media duʿā also comment on regional conflicts. On Twitter, al-Shugairi mourned those killed in Syria and called on his audience to donate money for Syrian refugees. For his part, al-Suwaidan blamed increased sectarianism not on Shiites as a whole, but rather on Iran and Hezbollah, who he said have supported the Houthi coup in Yemen and the Baathist regime of Bashar al-Assad, leading to the death of many innocent people. The duʿā are in stark contrast to some Saudi preachers who spread anti-Shia rhetoric and encourage support for militant action, an important group studied by Alexandra Siegel in this volume.

In many ways, the media duʿā’s political commentary mimics the definition that I established earlier – as duʿā or callers to Islam, they are also calling people to take action. They promote social projects and community development, and ask people to be engaged in both local and international affairs. Al-Suwaidan urges his audience not to settle for an average life, but to leave a lasting legacy that others will remember. As Khaled explains, God gave everyone a particular talent or skill. It is your duty to discover that talent, develop it, and then use it to benefit yourself and your community.

Tuve Floden recently received his PhD in Islamic Studies from Georgetown University.
An Age of Mass Revival: 
Islamic Media and Religious Change in 1970s Egypt

Aaron Rock-Singer, University of Pennsylvania

In the mid-1990s, satellite television and the Internet began to spread in the Middle East, permanently altering the previous hierarchy of political and religious authority. While longstanding institutions were not necessarily irrelevant if they used their financial might to acquire a high-tech bully pulpit, they were joined by a broad array of individuals and organizations that carried distinct religious messages and spoke to a mass audience. In tandem, these masses now challenged political and religious elites, whether by asking pointed questions or by taking advantage of an increasingly pluralistic religious marketplace to “shop” for religious rulings. This is the basic narrative that defines scholarship on religious satellite television.

The goal of this essay is not to question the premise that communication technology can transform the balance among claimants to authority within the public sphere, nor does it seek to understate the importance of satellite television and the Internet to contestations over Islam today. Rather, this essay uses the rise of the Islamic Revival in 1970s Egypt as a case study to trace the precedents for the changes in authority, public debate, and interactivity that we associate with satellite television and the Internet.

A substantive question that forms the starting point of this essay is: what were the media dynamics of 1970s Egypt? To quote one influential study, “In the 1970s and 1980s, Arab states asserted their power over national and transnational publics alike, shutting down public debate beneath a stifling hand of censorship and repression.”

While this study makes the claim to ruptures in the 1990s in explicit fashion, it is hardly alone as previous studies of Islam and contemporary media in Egypt say little about this period, implicitly affirming the claim that there is little of significance that occurred.

This narrative, however, confronts us with a seeming paradox, as Islamic media played a crucial role in the rise of an Islamic Revival in Egypt. While the period of Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir’s rule (1954-1970) saw mass repression of alternative religious viewpoints—fully in line with the narrative of stifling control proposed by the existing literature—the reign of Anwar al-Sadat (1970-81) involved a veritable flowering of Islamic media. Among print producers, the Muslim Brotherhood published al-Da’wa, leading elites within the Salafi-Islamist Jam‘iyya Shar‘iyya produced al-‘I’tisam, and quietist Salafis within Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhamadiyya published al-Tawhid.


1 Though al-Da’wa had previously served as the mouthpiece of the Brotherhood between 1951 and 1954, it returned to publication in 1976. For more details on this development, see Muhammad Mansur Hayba, al-Sihafa al-Islamiyya fi Misr: Bayna ‘Abd al-Nasir wa-l-Sadat (Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Waf’a‘il-il-Tiba‘a wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi‘, 1990), 230-7.

2 Al-‘I’tisam was first published in 1939 as a mouthpiece of the Salafi charitable society, Aḥl al-Sunnah, before becoming the official journal of the Jam‘iyya Shar‘iyya in 1952. Tensions over how politically engaged the periodical should be, however, led to its official split from the JS in 1961, even as each issue noted that the periodical “Follows the principles of the Jam‘iyya Shar‘iyya. The mid-1970s, in turn, saw the transformation of this periodical from a journal with long articles to a fast-paced magazine with increasingly prominent figures. For more on the history of this periodical, see Aaron Rock-Singer, “Guiding the Pious to Practice: Islamic Magazines and Revival in Egypt” (unpublished dissertation, Princeton University, 2016), 42-7.

3 Al-Tawhid published as the mouthpiece of Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhamadiyya between 1973 and 1981.

---


2. For example, see Nabil Echchaibi, “From audio tapes to video blogs:
State competitors joined these independent Islamist and Salafi organizations, as the Islamic Research Academy published *al-Azhar* and the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, published *Minbar al-Islam*. While many of these periodicals—or their sponsoring organizations—had published during the ‘Abd al-Nasir period, Sadat’s self-conscious claim to piety opened up new opportunities for those who had previously published to tackle new topics, and for the Muslim Brotherhood to reemerge on the national stage. Neither was the media battle limited to print: audiocassette sermons by prominent Islamist preachers echoed across Egypt’s urban landscapes, questioning not only the al-Sadat regime’s vision of religion and politics, but also it’s very claim to public space, while state-aligned preachers such as Muhammad Mutwalli al-Sha’rawi spoke to mass audience through terrestrial television.

The question, though, is not merely whether the 1970s saw significant religious speech, but whether this opportunity opened up contemporary Islamic thought to new audiences. This question has two components: how did Islamic print media in the 1970s broaden networks of religious knowledge (often described as “democratizing” religious knowledge) and to what extent was this transmission process interactive? The importance of this question extends beyond the 1970s insofar as it stands as a central, if often unspoken, assumption of claims to the significance of satellite television and the Internet. Under al-Sadat, Islamist and state-aligned elites used media—particularly magazines—to speak to an audience both within and beyond Egypt. Whether at newspaper sellers in Cairo and Alexandria, urban centers through the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt—or even the traveling religious caravans that distributed the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs’ religious vision throughout Egypt’s countryside—proponents of alternate religious visions sought to cultivate a mass audience and to mobilize their growing constituencies to carry out particular projects of piety.

At the intersection of increasing literacy and urbanization, a broad textual world of contemporary religious thought became accessible to Egypt’s economically heterogeneous yet literate middle class.

Just as importantly, this was hardly a unidirectional intellectual network—a crucial point that echoes contemporary interest in the popular participation enabled by satellite television and the Internet. In the face of restricted access to television, radio and daily newspapers, Islamic magazines were the sole means by which religious elites, particularly Muslim Brothers and Salafis, could speak to a national audience while also receiving feedback on their efforts. Specifically, the letters to the editor and *fatwa* sections of Islamic magazines allowed scholars and religious intellectuals alike to gauge the impact of their particular programmatic visions and enabled readers to question the broad ambitions of these claims and to identify obstacles to their implementation on a local level. Ultimately, editors exercised control over which letters were published and, in the absence of an unfiltered roll of editorial correspondence, it is not possible to identify which types of letters editors would exclude. At the same time, though, one should not dismiss the ways in which satellite television producers and website owners, too, exercise a gateway keeping function.

The significance of reach and interactivity, however, is dependent on impact. Observers and producers of Islamic media often struggle with this very question: how can one translate media-based proposals for change into either explicit campaigns of religion-political mobilization, or cultivate a mass audience and to mobilize their growing constituencies to carry out particular projects of piety?


9 For a discussion of this issue as it pertained to activism during the Arab Spring, see Zeynep Tufekci and Christopher Wilson, “Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations from Tahrir Square,” *Journal of Communication* 62:2 (2012), 363–79.
in much more quotidian yet potentially more significant fashion, alternative models of social practice? During the second half of al-Sadat’s rule (1976-1981), leaders of Egypt’s Islamic opposition sought to guide readers to three distinct practices that aimed to redefine the role of religion in Egyptian public life: an expanded vision of religious education and literacy, a renewed emphasis on veiling and gender segregation, and the increased performance of the early afternoon ‘uhr prayer within state controlled bureaucratic institutions and schools.

For reasons of time and space, I want to focus in on what the last of these practices –daily performance of the ‘uhr prayer –can reveal about the opportunities and limitations of media-based efforts to cultivate piety and to transform social practice. Very briefly, the ‘uhr is one of Islam’s five daily prayers, and as such, a central component of one of the five pillars of Islam. The challenge for Muslim Brothers and Salafis, however, was that, up until the mid-1970s, school schedules in Egypt –and to a lesser extent, bureaucratic schedules–did not set aside time for it during the school and work day. In the mid-1970s, activists within the Islamic student movement (al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya), alongside religious elites within the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi-Islamist Jam‘iyya Shar‘iyya, used the temporality of prayer as a means of sidestepping the illicit language of national politics. In the face of a state that trumpeted the congruence of science and faith (al-‘ilm wa-l-iman) and sought to coopt Islamist claims to authenticity, these movements sought to entrench prayer in the clocks (and heart) of state institutions. Once the ministry of education acceded to this demand, the next demand, less successful than the call for timely performance of daily prayer, was for the provision of prayer space for collective performance –and socialization –within schools and workplaces. Islamic magazines were central to this effort, whether by broadcasting the original programmatic vision, elucidating specific details of performance, or enabling elites to amend these programs in accordance with reader correspondence regarding on-the-ground realities.

This is, on the surface, a story of the power of print media to shape social practice and to expand the ranks of potential supporters of Islamist organizations. Put simply, media enabled Islamist elites to launch an interactive campaign, which targeted the core of state institutions and subverted state models of order, spatial and temporal, to the point that this key cultural institution quietly adopted this project as their own. At the same time, though, limitations abound: media did not allow Islamist elites, rank and file members, or potential supporters to overturn existing institutions, or to build their own mosques adjacent to schools. Instead, they had to lobby sympathetic government employees to facilitate daily prayer within state-controlled spaces. If the transmission from Islamist elites to their audience had been relatively smooth and feedback between elites and their constituencies comparatively direct, the challenge of implementing these programs on the ground level –and acquiring the necessary resources within the state to do so –remained.

There are similarities and differences between Islamic media today and Islamic media in 1970s Egypt. The intervening decades have seen a range of significant technological advances, most notably satellite television and the Internet, and even before that, the proliferation of cassette tape players and increased popularization of televisions that receive terrestrial signals. These new mediums joined, rather than replaced, previous modes of communications. What can the history of Islamic media, particularly the media-based activism of 1970s Egypt, reveal about the distinctiveness of Islamic satellite television as a project of religious transmission and pious change?

The first difference is who can produce Islamic media. Prior to the rise of satellite television and the Internet, alternative voices could speak with the support of an independent religious organization, and such organizations tended to be Islamist. In this context, potential religious producers had a choice between state institutions (and the political quietism that they mandated) or Islamist organizations (and the political project that they

---

trumpeted). Put differently, the contrast between these two ideological camps was not merely in the realm of ideas, but also built into the media environment, thus strengthening the notion that these were the only two religious options. Today, by contrast, an individual such as Amr Khaled can rise to prominence independent of either state institutions or Islamist organizations.

The second shift is one of audience. By the 1970s, print materials were available to an unprecedented number of Egyptians due to both the increased distribution facilitated by expanding urbanization, and to significant literacy gains thanks to the expansion of public education under 'Abd al-Nasir.11 By contrast, terrestrial television, while available to an increasing number of households, hosted a narrow array of religious producers. Satellite Islamic television today, alongside the opportunities for audiovisual communication offered by YouTube, reaches a far broader audience than ever available to print media. Yet, this broad audience is not necessarily more unified; instead, the spread of media, both a product and reflection of increased ideological polarization, offers viewers greater opportunities to live within an echo chamber that stretches across the Middle East. While the use of media to build Islamic publics is not new, satellite television and the Internet have empowered established and marginal actors alike to build their own transnational communities.

Aaron Rock-Singer is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania’s Perry World House.

The Moral Economy of Islamic Television: Panic and its Perils

Yasmin Moll, University of Michigan

Within a few hours of the ouster of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi from Egypt’s presidency, security forces shut down Misr25, the Islamist organization’s newly founded satellite television channel, as well as established Islamic satellite channels openly partisan to Brotherhood rule. With unabashed glee, the domestic press framed these media closures as not only the first step in the crackdown on the Muslim Brothers and their sympathizers, but also as the beginning of the end of a phenomenon that had been derisively dubbed al-tijara bil din, literally “trading with religion.” This phrase neatly brought together two long-standing accusations against Islamic television channels and the preachers who appear on them: 1) that they are “exploiting religion” to make money, and 2) that they are “playing politics” in the guise of promoting piety. As the Arab Islamic satellite sector grew exponentially after the new millennium, so did the attributions of covert pecuniary-cum-political purposes to religious channels. The criticisms reached a crescendo following the 2011 revolution as the temporary opening of the political space led to widespread anxieties about the Islamic television viewer as voter.

The familiar storyline of illiberal “liberal” secularists irrationally fearing public religion and religious publicity would be easy to adopt in tracing the incitement to discourse around Islamic television. Here, however, I want to complicate this conventional account, with its predictable villains and victims, by foregrounding other kinds of panics over Islamic television. Overall, our scholarly accounts of religious broadcasting in the Middle East have omitted internal critiques of Islamic television by both Islamic television producers themselves and their viewers. This omission, I argue, is in part due to the recasting of normative accounts of the political economy of Islamic television as descriptive or, worse, theoretical. The peril of ignoring how producers of Islamic television themselves interrogate its moral economy is an empirical obfuscation of how moral value is made and remade through changing intersections of capital, labor, and religion. My comments will focus on Egypt, where, since 2010, I have been researching the production of Islamic television through fieldwork with the New Preacher Mustafa Hosny’s media team at Iqraa, one of the region’s oldest Islamic satellite channel.1

In the late 1990s, changes in political economies and media regulations made possible for the first time the private ownership of television channels in the satellite sector. Since then, extreme unease about transnational satellite television has been a consistent feature of Egyptian public discourses on media. Editorials and “investigative” journalism have described in deeply pessimistic, if not dystopic terms, the steady growth of privately-owned satellite channels and the ostensible effect they are having on Egyptian society: satellite channels are a tsunami or a typhoon engulfing hapless Egyptians with a surfeit of content, leading to familial dysfunction, social breakdown, national disunity, political paralysis, class warfare, depression, and even psychosis. Religious channels (al-qanawat al-diniya) are at the fore of this criticism despite being – numerically, financially, and viewership-wise – minor players in the transnational Arab satellite sector.

Between 2010 and 2012, I clipped hundreds of editorials and articles from a variety of newspapers condemning Islamic television preachers as insincere, money-grubbing charlatans who might also be treasonous collaborators working for sinister foreign agendas. In these accounts, Islamic television preachers are scorned as tujjar din, merchants of religion, who promote at best a “surface-level” religiosity where what matters most is not piety but power. Such negative depictions of the figure of the Islamic television preacher are also vividly dramatized on the small screen, as Walter Armbrust discusses in this volume.

---

1 Egypt’s “New Preachers,” or al-du’ajj al-gudud, are so named because their styles of televisual Islamic da’wa – which draw on globalized media genres such as dramatic serials, music videos and reality television – are unprecedented within the country’s Islamic Revival. Amr Khaled is undoubtedly the most famous of these television preachers.
Islamic television channels as sites of revenue and waged labor implicate religion in different regimes of value, including economic value. For critics this implication destabilizes, in some fundamental way, what religion is “really” about. Da’wa should not be for dollars. Adding insult to injury from this vantage point, dollars are being used to promote political agendas and partisan interests in the idiom of religious truth. This instrumentalized corruption of both the political and the religious is possible, critics argue, precisely because of both a regulatory environment that allows private interests and non-state organizations to own instruments of mass broadcast and an economic arrangement that makes it financially feasible to do so. The moral panics around private Islamic television channels thus pivot on two interrelated fears: that religion is being commodified and that religion is being politicized.

These moral panics around the political economy of Islamic television, whether expressed in mass media or in casual conversation, tell us a great deal about indigenous concerns about the marketization of religious authority. These concerns should, of course, be objects of academic scrutiny in their own right. Remarkably, however, these social discourses are recast as analytical tools in scholarly accounts of Islamic television preachers. In this scholarship, popular Islamic television preachers such as Amr Khaled are lambasted for promoting an “air-conditioned Islam,” an ersatz religiosity reflecting yet another iteration of nefarious neo-liberal logics at work. Academic observers express almost fervent anxieties about religion being “diluted” and “desacralized” – made “lite” or “wish-washy” or made akin to consumer goods such as “laundry detergent, cars, and cell phones” – through enmeshment in the transnational media circuits and globalized cultural imaginaries enabled by economic liberalization.3

Also echoing Egyptian social discourses on Islamic television, other scholars focus more on the covert politics behind the religious satellite sector. Islamic channels are alternatively framed as instruments of political hegemony in the region by the Saudi state and its allied Wahhabi theologians,4 or of American empire working through Saudi capital to “reform Islam” along secular-liberal lines and thus actually undermine the appeal of Wahhabi theologies,5 or of authoritarian states allying with neoliberal business elites to create an apolitical religious counterbalance to their Islamist opposition.6 The point of these accounts is to unmask Islamic media projects as instrumentalist and insincere. Religious satellite channels are, we are told, up to “dirty tricks.”7

All of these characterizations use a normative stance – religion and the market and politics should not mix – to understand what happens when they do. While we can certainly oppose television preaching as unduly commercialized or improperly politicized in our own media consumption choices, in our scholarship a better question to ask is in what ways and on what bases do religious practitioners themselves celebrate or condemn television preaching as x, y or z? This would then get at questions that matter for the social analysis of religious media, including how the mass mediation of religious discourse and its relation to politics is shaped by the different flows of capital that make private-sector television possible in the Arab region and what the uneven positioning of different media players in relation to these flows tells us about the efforts of contemporary Muslims to create religious publics.

---

To be clear, I am not arguing that ownership structures have no effect or investment in shaping media content, whether in the Islamic broadcasting sector or elsewhere, but rather that these effects and investments are invariably negotiated and sometimes subverted by the actual producers of content, whose day-to-day work involves operationalizing allocated capital. I was always amazed during my fieldwork at the extent to which a preacher’s control over “his” program effectively ceased the moment he stopped recording it as the program entered a post-production process with multiple and consequential “authors,” each with their own interests and views.

I am also not arguing that money does not matter to Islamic television producers or preachers – in fact, the single biggest complaint I heard from professionals in this sector across ideological and theological spectrums is that there is not enough money to work with, that they have to make their programs on shoe-string budgets compared to colleagues in the mainstream media industry, including colleagues working for the “racy” entertainment channels owned by the same investors who own theirs. The producers I met were frustrated that their channels’ respective owners spend more money setting up the channel – renting or buying its physical infrastructure and creating an often quite bureaucratic and costly administrative structure that can take up as much as 70 percent of the total budget – than they subsequently spend on creating what mattered most for their employees: new programs. They were also bitterly amused by analyses positing Islamic channels as get-rich-quick schemes. Such accounts belie their experiences of having to constantly cancel programs, rethink ambitious ideas, broadcast old content in lieu of producing new, rely on volunteer labor, make do with outdated technology, and even pay for office supplies out of their own pockets.

Nor am I suggesting that politics is not salient to Islamic television, whether as content or the framework for content. The Islamic media producers I worked with saw their role as deeply political, and understood how regnant political arrangements both offered them opportunities and imposed constraints. The 2011 revolution, and the extraordinary period of optimism and possibility that it briefly enabled, motivated the producers I worked with on Hosny’s team to reorient the role of Islamic media around building a “New Egypt.” This task necessarily involved rethinking the political within a deeply polarized social field.

Rather, I am arguing that no singular, totalizing vision of religion, politics, or capital holds sway within a single Islamic channel, let alone the entire Arab Islamic satellite scene with all its theological and ideological diversity. And to understand these diverse regimes of religious media – their conditions of possibility, the actions and sensibilities they authorize, their horizon of aspiration – we need fieldwork. An account of Islamic television based solely on broadcast content is a partial one; this content must be situated within its sites of production and spaces of circulation. A close viewing of programs is not enough if only because what happens off screen greatly matters for what appears on it, and knowledge of both troubles the apparent fixity of either.

The contributions to this volume by James Hoesterey, Hikmet Kocamancer and Thomas MacGuire are all excellent examples of the qualitative difference ethnographic engagement makes in understanding the complex social life of Islamic television and religious publicity across diverse contexts and questions. My own ethnographic work frames Islamic television channels as prominent sites of internal critique and contestation within the Egyptian Islamic Revival. There is a deeply entrenched misconception that Islamic television preachers are mainly concerned with countering secular media and its attendant sensibilities. What quickly became apparent during my fieldwork is that Islamic Revivalists, including television preachers, spend much more time and effort debunking each other than they do secular Egyptians. At stake in these mediated debates, none of which consider secularism religiously permissible or morally desirable, are competing forms, practices and visions of what it means to be a pious Muslim and to lead an Islamic-correctly life.

And this brings me to the most important point I want to make: taking seriously Islamic television entails paying
attention to the moral panics it engenders on the part of Islamic television producers themselves. Islamic media producers are as critical and suspicious of religious channels as their own secular detractors and frequently discuss among themselves the same anxious questions animating the nation’s opinion pages and mainstream cultural productions: What new types of false religiosity are such channels creating? Who is funding them? What is their real motive? What is the best way to counteract or mitigate their negative effects? Embedded in these questions about who is funding which channel and to what (usually nefarious) ends are deep-seated assumptions about who should be able to speak publically for Islam, on behalf of other Muslims, and on what bases.

Indeed, the producers I worked with at Iqraa’s Cairo branch made careful distinctions among different kinds of Islamic channels, distinctions that were rarely if ever made by those outside the Islamic satellite sector. Unlike the latter, for Hosny’s media team the “problem” was not Islamic television channels in general, but specifically Salafi television channels. One line of distinction they drew between themselves and Salafi television producers was their “professionalism” and care for high production values. The problem with Salafi television channels, they lamented, was that they were the equivalent of mom-and-pop shops: small, haphazardly run operations with no “five-year plans” or “strategic visions” beyond the promotion of a “narrow” and “rigid” interpretation of Islam. This narrowness, Hosny’s team opined, was reflected in the very quality of the programs these channels broadcast – this content confirmed, rather than subverted, secular stereotypes of religious media (and by extension of religiosity itself) as intolerant, irrelevant, and – perhaps most damningly for these media professionals – boring.

Another important line of distinction Iqraa media producers drew between themselves and Salafi channels was their “moderation.” For them, a central index of Iqraa’s moderation was it willingness to broadcast the entire spectrum of contemporary revivalist theological and political orientations, while Salafi channels only broadcast Salafi preachers. There is an asymmetry of recognition here, Iqraa producers complained – Iqraa gave air-time to what its producers called “moderate Salafi” positions, even if they disagreed with them, but Salafi channels did not as a matter of policy reciprocate. In this way, Salafi revivalists were seen not as participants in the tradition of debate and disagreement constituting the Islamic da‘wa movement, but as militants against that very tradition.

To conclude, concerns about the articulation of religious discourse with transnational capital, the security state, and increasingly fraught geopolitics index the wider struggles within the Islamic Revival over the constitution of the category of the “Islamic,” where participants mark certain media constellations as indicative of “real religion” and others as fraudulent, inauthentic or deviant. Our analytical frameworks should thus be attuned to both media and religion as contested social practices that render a wide variety of relations, institutions, and ideas both legible as Islamic and constitutive of Islam for some religious actors but not for others. Over the past three decades, scholars across disciplines have made important strides in understanding Islamism as a complex, internally-differentiated movement that both shapes and is responsive to wide-ranging socio-economic processes while not being reducible or epiphenomenal to them. These hard-won insights, the result of careful empirical research and increasingly sophisticated conceptual frameworks, need to be applied, not cast aside, to the study of the mass mediation of Islamic social imaginaries through television. Doing so enables a more sensitive – and thus more accurate – understanding of its stakes for the Muslims who both make and view it as well as the implications of these stakes for those outside the social world of Islamic television. This means not reproducing moral panics but analyzing them.

Yasmin Moll is an assistant professor in the department of anthropology at the University of Michigan and a member of the Michigan Society of Fellows.
The Politics of Sheikh Awesome: 
Quietism in Transnational Media

Thomas E.R. Maguire, University of Chicago

On the second night of Ramadan in fall 2005, I hosted the inaugural broadcast of Ask Huda, a live call-in “fatwa” program on Huda TV, an English-language Islamic satellite channel based in Cairo. My cohost was Assim Alhakeem, a religious scholar and imam based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. We appeared on screen every night of Ramadan to answer all manner of questions about faith, law, and contemporary issues. Sheikh Assim’s popular style combined an uncanny familiarity with American culture and a conservative Salafi perspective firmly rooted within the religious world of Saudi Arabia. Shortly after Ramadan of that year, I attended a program at the American embassy in Cairo celebrating the appointment of a new Director at the Egyptian-American Fulbright commission. One current fellow, an American journalist, recognized me from Huda TV and confessed that she and her boyfriend refer to Sheikh Assim as “Sheikh Awesome,” an apt recognition of his distinctive style. Since that time, Alhakeem’s popularity has continued to grow and he has built up a large following through Huda TV, social media, and other platforms.¹

Sheikh Awesome hews closely to the politically quietist position that characterizes the vast majority of adherents to contemporary Salafism. Indeed, across the theological and sectarian spectrum, political quietism carries strong scriptural and legal weight in Islam, but the study of quietism often takes a back seat to the more alluring phenomena of revolutionary and militant movements. Quietism is assumed, correctly in some cases, to represent either an official state effort to control religious discourse or a disinterested pietism. However, quietism is both deeply rooted in religious scholarship and actively engaged within contemporary political frameworks, discourses and institutions. Some recent scholarship examines the dynamics of quietism – i.e. quietism as active politics – within current social and political geographies.² This memo begins to explore the qualities, modes, and varieties of Salafi quietism in transnational media.

As an analytical term, quietism doesn’t precisely correspond to a specific concept or term among Muslims. From a strongly textualist Salafi position, the Quranic verses and hadith that underlie what we term quietism indicate a position of nonviolence and strong but conditional obedience to political authorities.³ This gives us a starting point to define and evaluate the ultimate analytic value of the term. However, actual modes or qualities of quietism can and do vary according to numerous contextual and ideological factors. Beyond a strictly Salafi context, quietism could potentially refer to a wide range of political activities that operate within the legal limits of political institutions or the accepted social contracts between religious and political sectors of a society. Memos by Kocamaner, Floden, and Hoesterey in this volume all describe such phenomena. The particular quality of Salafi quietism in focus here is the tension embedded in the pragmatic textualism that undergirds Salafism as a whole. In the spirit of Yasmin Moll’s intellectual leadership in the study of Islamic media (as described in this volume and elsewhere), this examination employs an engaged and empathetic methodology to complicate two-dimensional analysis of contemporary religious phenomena.

¹ As of October 2016, Alhakeem had 77,545 followers on his personal Facebook page (facebook.com/assim.alhakeem), 69,717 followers on Twitter (twitter.com/assimalhakeem), and he continues to host a weekly episode of Ask Huda. His website, assimalhakeem.net, features a wide variety of media appearances, legal verdicts, and articles.


³ For instance, see “Unlawfulness of Rebellion Against Muslim Ruler,” http://en.islamtoday.net/node/1404 (site managed by Saudi scholar Salman al-Oadah).
This memo examines how one Muslim scholar, Assim Alhakeem, enacts and realizes quietism through global media, namely satellite television and Facebook. The transnational nature of these formats connects producers and audiences across various political formations. Alhakeem resides within a particular nation state that demands a specific actualization of quietism, but he inevitably addresses issues and individuals who exist within different political frameworks. This heterogeneity of mediated politics offers a rich avenue to explore varying modes of political subjectivity.

During my time at Huda TV, Alhakeem contributed to the channel’s own brand of quietism, which in most cases simply sought to avoid sensitive political topics. As a notable example: a viewer with jihadist sympathies submitted an email to Ask Huda to chastise me for interviewing a guest (on another program) who held an official position in the Egyptian government. As a jihadist diatribe, the letter never would have been read aloud on air or responded to openly. Instead, Alhakeem wrote directly to the questioner to advise him against adopting a takfiri approach toward the Egyptian government and its officials. I argue elsewhere that the climate of self-censorship in Mubarak-era Egypt led Huda TV to create a vacuum of political discourse, an unintended consequence of which might have been to allow both official state propaganda and extremist positions to flourish unchecked.4 This earlier critique examines quietism as a passive approach to avoiding politics. It fails to consider the manner in which political quietism constitutes an active mode of expression for religious scholars. To that end, this memo turns to Assim Alhakeem’s politics after the Arab uprisings when the attendant sensitivities are both increasingly vocalized and unstable.

On February 28, 2011, Alhakeem responded to a question about the uprisings taking place across the Arab world with this response:

In his statement, Alhakeem follows a standard Salafi methodology by drawing primarily from Quran and hadith texts encouraging allegiance to the ruler while invoking pragmatism to navigate problematic or ambiguous cases. Of course, public morality is foregrounded as the paramount concern, trumping any other activist appeals to political or social reform. His quietism is also cast with a hue of wisdom, controlling against the heady optimism of rebellion and defending the virtues of stability and predictability. The ultimate verdict, guarded and concerned regarding Tunisia and Egypt, but supportive of rebellion in Libya, embodies the distinctively Salafi pragmatic textualism – acceptance

---

4 “New Media and Islamism in the Arab Winter: A case study of Huda TV in Pre-Revolutionary Egypt,” Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research, December 2011, Volume 4.2-3, 231-246.
of rulers as the default with revolt licensed only in specific circumstances and conditioned on realistic capability for success. Obviously, this framework for quietism outlined in response to the Arab uprisings does not consider other political realities in which Muslims find themselves, such as minority citizens of secular nation states, or those living in eroding or failed states, which of course are the political contexts for segments of Alhakeem’s audiences.

Alhakeem’s Salafi quietism operates most naturally within a stable nation state whose government pays some degree of lip service to Islamic legitimacy. Saudi Arabia obviously qualifies in this regard and it constitutes the primary political framework in which he situates himself. On the August 8, 2016 episode of Ask Huda, a resident of Saudi Arabia called to ask about the religious status of Al Ahli bank in Saudi Arabia. Al Ahli, also known and the National Commercial Bank (NCB), presents itself as the First Saudi Bank and is state-owned. In this case, Alhakeem clearly believes that Al Ahli bank does not operate in accordance with Islamic principles but he is careful not to issue a direct condemnation of the institution. Instead, he speaks generally of how some institutions abuse the Islamic credentialing process (“shariah board in five star hotel”), and sets forth criteria with which to judge banks. He does explicitly recommend another financial institution, Al-Rajhi Bank, nothing that they operate with a dedicated shariah department rather than simply a shariah board. His measured critique subtly intervenes in official policy and challenges a state-owned institution. This approach represents a constructive and critical deployment of quietism. The mode of critique sets a standard for religious legitimacy but does not directly challenge the state. In other situations, however, Sheikh Assim also engages in more openly loyalist, and arguably less critical, expressions of quietism.

On the August 17, 2016, Sheikh Assim jumped to the defense of Saudi Arabia on Facebook after accusations by the UN of Saudi atrocities in Yemen. He writes:

In this loyalist statement, the mode of quietism shifts from the pragmatic textualism identified above into a voice of incredulous protest – not only asserting that the UN and international community operate with egregious double standards, but also invoking conspiratorial views that the UN directly oppresses Muslims and subverts Islamic values. The Salafi quietism of Alhakeem functions logically, perhaps even productively, within the Saudi national context. Beyond the Saudi framework, he is still quietist, to be sure, in the sense that he openly condemns most forms of political violence. However, the mode of quietism as incredulous protest is more concerned with provoking sensitivities rather than managing them. In this framework, the international community does not qualify as a legitimate sovereign and doesn’t seem to offer much opportunity for constructive pragmatism. Rather, it takes on the role of distant adversary. To consider further Alhakeem’s quietism in transnational frameworks, I will examine two specific areas of his political expression that reference wider transnational power dynamics: the commemoration of the 9/11 attacks and the Syrian conflict.

On September 8, 2016, Alhakeem posted the following commentary on the 9/11 attacks:

5 Implicit is judgment of Qaddafi as an apostate from Islam, an important distinction that will continue to inform the analysis of other conflicts.
6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nuMVCQXITE
8 The bank has been under fire from religious scholars for alleged violations of shariah: http://www.reuters.com/article/national-commil-bk-saudi-islam-idUSL6N0SF07820141020
A few days later on September 11, he followed his original post with:

These statements illustrate a dramatic shift to incredulous protest as the mode of political expression. A combination of righteous indignation over the uneven valuing of human life mixes with conspiracy theory boilerplate about the 9/11 attacks. These positions constitute an ethical engagement with global politics through which Salafism adapts to recognizable expressions of protest, but Alhakeem's conspiratorial epistemology also represents a qualitative deterioration of political discourse. His approach in this regard offers a dangerous foundation upon which Muslims in Alhakeem's global audience might build their own political subjectivities.

A final example to consider is Alhakeem's engagement with the Syrian conflict. Between the discrete national context of Saudi Arabia and more alien global powers, the immediately proximate Syrian crisis yields a more conflicted quietism, fluctuating between incredulous protest, cautious pragmatism, and enthusiasm for revolutionary change. Another former employee of Huda TV, Bilal Abdul Kareem (he was Program Director at Huda TV at the time of its first broadcast in fall 2005), currently runs an organization called On The Ground News that covers the conflict in Syria through televisual journalism distributed primarily via social media. Abdul Kareem was featured in international media in December 2016 when his videos from besieged Aleppo offered one of the only direct views of life in rebel-held sections of the city as the Assad regime and its international allies advanced. Abdul Kareem represents his work as independent journalism, but his sympathetic views of various Islamist factions have drawn the ire of other journalists and observers. At a theoretical level, Abdul Kareem upholds a Salafi politics that aligns with the framework of quietism and revolution outlined by Alhakeem in his comments on the Arab uprisings. However, Abdul Kareem clearly sees the Syrian conflict as a righteous cause and legitimate, even necessary, rebellion against irredeemably corrupt leadership. If the various revolutionary groups fall short ethically in their conduct on the battlefield, according to Abdul Kareem, it is only due their lack of knowledge and the unwillingness of Muslim scholars to embrace and guide their cause. To this end, Abdul Kareem has publicly challenged Assim Alhakeem and other scholars to join the fight. In 2015, he posted on Facebook:

---

9 See: http://www.alternet.org/world/prominent-us-journalist-syria-serves-mouthpiece-violent-extremists
Alhakeem’s reply expressed skepticism towards this call to action based on several points: the groups fighting in Syria are extremists who would reject his support (in the mode of Sheikh Awesome, he declares, “I am neither Salahuddeen nor Rambo”); this conflict is driven by wishful thinking that has destroyed the lives of youth who have joined it; and Abdul Kareem lacks any real understanding of the situation on the ground. Abdul Kareem replied in turn with a further challenge to Alhakeem and emphasized his own experience as a journalist in Syria. This debate is noteworthy because both Abdul Kareem and Alhakeem operate within roughly the same Salafi framework. Alhakeem’s skepticism and Abdul Kareem’s activism are not distinguished by theory, but rather their particular methodologies of pragmatism and variant readings of current events. Their differences arise where Salafism merges with ancillary epistemologies that weigh significantly into their “religious” opinions about the conflict. Recognizing this blended methodology of religious judgement provides a novel direction for further analysis. Salafi pragmatism, in effect, must be understood not just as a doctrinal position, but perhaps more importantly as an analytical, even secular, framework with qualitatively divergent components. In the cases of Alhakeem and Abdul Kareem, Salafi quietism endures and erodes not so much within textualism but through these secondary levels of analysis.

The case of Assim Alhakeem provides a provisional, though far from exhaustive, typology of Salafi quietism. The incongruous relationship between transnational media and the particular Saudi context of Assim Alhakeem reveals the limits of his application of the textual pragmatism underling much Salafi thought. Where the ordinary reverence for state institutions is absent, the framework for textual pragmatism seems to erode and quietism itself transforms or even breaks down. A quietist orientation can allow a space of negotiated and informed dissent, and a framework for non-violent activism that crosses ideological boundaries. Conversely, conspiracy theories and facile readings of global power dynamics also take hold. These limited examples help us to identify trends and apparent patterns that may ultimately yield a richer appreciation of how Salafi quietist positions, and Salafi pragmatic textualism more broadly, operate in politically complex and disjointed spaces of global media.

Thomas E.R. Maguire is the associate director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago.

---

10 In 2013, Alhakeem declared on Huda TV that the conflict in Syria is a legitimate jihad: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCWvxFez7FM. On August 5, 2016, he wrote on Facebook, “What was taken by force must be regained by force! May Allah grant the Muslims victory over Iran, Russia and those who support them!” His position on the conflict can best be summarized as approval of the conflict as a legitimate jihad with skepticism about the intentions and conduct of various actors.

11 The entire exchange can be viewed at: http://www.bilalabdulkareem.com/shaykhassim/
Transformation of Islamic television in Turkey from the era of secularist state monopoly to family-focused programming under the conservative-Muslim AKP government*

Hikmet Kocamaner, Harvard University

It is a common belief that media representations of religion and the adoption of media by religiously inspired actors lead to increasing public visibility of religion and indicate the resurgence of religion’s influence in the public and political sphere. Yet, mass media do not merely act as prosthetic devices for extending existing religious discourses and ideologies. The narrative styles, technical formats, and infrastructures of mass media, as well as the political and economic conditions of their emergence, simultaneously transform established practices of religious mediation and “shape the specific modes by which religions go public, modes that are difficult to control by religious establishments.” The scholarship on the proliferation of Islamic media in other contexts has mostly tended to emphasize the alternative and/or oppositional character of such media in terms of how they circulate discourses, practices, and ethical sensibilities that are critical of and/or incommensurate with secular-liberal suppositions, market rationality, and secular state power.

This memo argues, however, that the discourses and sensibilities promoted on Islamic television in Turkey have mostly articulated with secular-liberal notions of “proper religion” as well as the priorities of the Turkish state and its governmental rationalities.

Islamic television in Turkey

Islam has been ever-present on Turkish television screens since the inception of broadcasting in 1968. Yet, state broadcaster TRT – which held a monopoly on broadcasting until 1990 – represented Islam only in the form of mosque sermon broadcasts on religious holidays, as well as a 15-30 minute show called The World of Faith (İnanç Dünyası), aired once a week and daily during Ramadan. On this show, worship was represented as an act that took place between God and the believer either in the private sphere of one’s home or the mosque. Thus,

---

1. This memo is a summary of my article entitled “Strengthening the Family through Television: Islamic Broadcasting, Secularism, and the Politics of Responsibility in Turkey,” which is forthcoming in Anthropological Quarterly.
4. The show mostly consisted of recitations of the Qur’an in Arabic delivered by a state-appointed and formally dressed hafız, followed by these same recitations in their Turkish translation read by a disembodied voice-over.

References


TRT sought to depict Islam as interiorized, disembodied, and privatized faith rather than a way of life structured by discursive traditions and embodied practices.\(^5\)

Following the liberalization of broadcasting in 1990, privately owned Islamic TV channels proliferated. Their programming was initially distinctly theological in character, with shows focusing on the doctrinal, scriptural, and ritualistic aspects of Islam.\(^6\) Privately owned TV broadcasting also provided opportunities for marginal religious figures and the ulema affiliated with underground religious orders to challenge the secular state’s totalistic and uniform interpretation of Islam and the hegemonic religious authority represented by state-appointed religious functionaries. However, Islamic television channels’ critical stance toward the secularist establishment and their non-hegemonic programming was rather short-lived.

Only two years after the Islamist Welfare Party won the national elections in 1995 and formed a coalition government, the National Security Council pushed the Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan out of power. As part of its operations against Islamists, the Turkish military sent an ultimatum to several media outlets, including twenty television stations, for constituting a threat to secularism.\(^7\) Such intimidation tactics have been quite effective. During my ethnographic fieldwork in 2012, when the so-called “pro-Islamist” AKP have been in power for roughly a decade, Islamic TV executives were hesitant to refer to their channels as “Islamic” or “religious.”\(^8\) Instead, they defined themselves as “non-mainstream,” “family friendly,” or “family-focused” channels with religious, moral, and nationalist sensibilities. The closure of Welfare Party forced Islamists to realize that the only way to gain ascendancy in the state was to adopt secularism-friendly and Western-oriented discourses and policies, which also involved incorporation into neoliberal capitalism. In 2001, the reformist faction of the Islamist movement formed the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under the leadership of Erdoğan, who has incorporated political Islam into the global neoliberal regime and turned Islamists and conservative Muslims toward a market-oriented and consumerist direction.\(^9\) Since then, pious Turkish Muslims have been striving to reconcile the strictures of orthodox Sunni Islam with a consumerist middle class life style, an indispensable component of which is leisurely activities including watching television.

As a result of pious Muslims’ integration into commercial mass culture, Islamic TV channels also changed. Not being able to cope with the demands of consumerist broadcasting based on advertising revenues; most Islamic channels began to appeal to a broader audience by introducing more diverse programming.\(^10\)

---

\(^5\) Several scholars have demonstrated how secularism is primarily concerned with the reformulation of religion as interiorized, disembodied, and privatized faith for the sake of curtailing its political influence. See:


\(^6\) Through their shows, these channels sought to maintain the ethical and pedagogical functions of sermons (vaaz) and religious conversations (sohbet) delivered by the ulema. This was significantly different from the state broadcaster’s approach in which the “meaning” of the Qur’an or the hadith was limited to its Turkish translation and left to the personal interpretation of audiences.

---

\(^7\) Islamic channels have also been closely regulated by the Radio and Television Supreme Council, which penalizes channels that violate the broadcasting law, according to which TV channels should not broadcast content deemed inimical to the Turkish state and its national interests.

\(^8\) They were worried that the use of this term might be seen as evidence that would affirm suspicions about their assumed ulterior motive to undermine secularism.


that chose to retain the “non-hegemonic” and “alternative” Islamic content of their programming have either disappeared or remained restricted to regional or satellite broadcasts and a niche audience. More mainstream Islamic channels, however, have been experimenting with and capitalizing on different genres and formats that transcend conventional expectations of “Islamic” programming, such as studio entertainment, dramas, game shows, reality TV, and day-time talk shows.

Mainstream Islamic broadcasters have been making a concerted effort to resolve the dilemmas of reconciling entertainment with the cultural codes of piety and Islamic modesty, as well as appropriating television to lead their audience toward a more virtuous life. To illustrate the Janus-faced nature of the medium, several of my interlocutors compared television to a knife during our conversations: in the same way a knife can be utilized either as a culinary device to feed people or as a weapon to injure or kill someone, so can TV be used either to educate and guide audiences toward the right moral path or to corrupt them through needless entertainment. It is in this context that family-focused programing is positioned as a moral and pedagogical corrective to the permissive entertainment assumed to be inherent in television as a medium.

Family-focused Islamic programming

Within roughly the last decade, “family-friendly” entertainment programs as well as family-related shows aimed at resolving domestic problems and “strengthening the family” have proliferated. Producers of such shows consider themselves moral entrepreneurs aiming to prevent what they see as the increasing corrosion of the “moral fabric of the family” and the devaluation of “family values” in contemporary Turkish society. They justify their family-focused programming as “civil initiatives” against the “moral degeneracy” caused by mainstream entertainment media as well as an “antidote” to the “toxic influence” of such media on “family values.”

During my fieldwork in 2012, there were ten family-related shows being aired on various Islamic channels. To illustrate, The Family Court (Aile Mahkemesi), a popular reality TV show aired on Samanyolu TV, tries to solve the problems of a particular family in each episode with the guidance of a judge. Unlike its American counterparts (such as Judge Judy), which deal with small claim-based disputes of a financial nature, this show focuses on familial issues and highlight the duties and responsibilities of spouses to each other and their children, the importance of respecting elders, the necessity of avoiding marital disputes, domestic violence, adultery, and so on. The Lady (Hanımefendi), is a daytime show aired on Hilal TV and hosted by Saliba Erdim, a hijab-wearing family counselor who provides her audiences with religious guidance and self-help techniques to help them cultivate skills to administer their family affairs effectively. Forty Years Sharing a Bed (Bir Yastıka Kırk Yıl) is a nighttime show aired on Kanal 7 aimed at encouraging conjugal marriage and discouraging divorce by featuring heart-warming life stories of old couples who have been married forty years or more.

Those involved in the production of family-related shows describe the rationale for such programming as a “social responsibility (sosyal sorumluluk),” which has become a buzzword in Turkish political and corporate culture over the last decade. With the neoliberal restructuring of the Turkish polity since the 1980s, but more significantly alternative is the matchmaking/marriage shows. According to Islamic TV producers and executives, such shows are inimical to the Turkish family values since they represent the “sacred” institution of marriage as some sort of a marketplace where people publicly display and advertise themselves.

12 These shows included Family Court (Aile Mahkemesi) on Samanyolu TV, Guiding the Family (Aile Rehberi) on Mehtap TV, The Happy Family (Mutlu Aile) on Ulke TV, Educating our Offspring (Nesillerin Eğitimi) on KonTV, Family Happiness in Both Worlds (Saadet-i Daireyn) on Çağrı TV, Our Children and Us (Çocuk ve Biz) on Dost TV, The Lady (Hanımefendi) on Hilal TV, Forty Years Sharing a Bed (Bir Yastıka Kırk Yıl) on Kanal 7, From Within Life with Ikbal (İkballe Hayatın İçinden) on Kanal 7, and Gate of Affection (Mubahbet Kapısı) on Kanal 7.

13 To illustrate, quoting the former CEO of a well-known corporation, televangelist Necmettin Nursaçan told me during our interview, “As the late Kadir Has mentioned in a charity event, ‘Don’t think that I am here to boast about how charitable I am. I am here to pay back my debt to the nation in which I was born.’ Likewise, we owe our nation and the state. It is our social responsibility to share our knowledge with those families in need of this knowledge.”

11 The words in quotations were commonly used by Islamic TV producers throughout my fieldwork. One of the popular genres to which Islamic TV producers conceive of their family-oriented programs as an
throughout the AKP’s incumbency, the responsibility to cope with the risks posing a threat to the Turkish nation have started to be shared by non-state actors who feel a civic sense of duty to protect the nation against “social evils.” The prevalence of Islamic TV shows aimed at “strengthening the family” coincides with the proliferation of discourses like “family crisis” and the “decline of family values” during the incumbency of the AKP government. Underlying this rationality is the belief that the social and moral orders are at risk because the family institution is deteriorating. Such discourses situate the family as the source of socio-economic problems facing the Turkish society, such as unemployment, poverty, homelessness, addiction, crime, and so on. The family is conceptualized as both the cause of an individual’s disorderly conduct and the site of its containment, as well as the building block of society because of its pedagogical function. Thus, according to this logic, the Turkish society would be facing fewer problems if the family were to fulfill its function in disciplining and policing the conduct of its members appropriately. It is within this context that Islamic broadcasters describe their family-focused programming as a “social responsibility” aimed at assisting the state to strengthen the family against the negative influences of urbanization, atomized individualism, and an immoral media scene.

Despite their reluctance to be associated with the state or the government, there is a significant convergence between government projects and family-focused Islamic television programming. Most televangelists and other television personalities that host family guidance shows also take part in other family-related projects organized by AKP-led municipalities and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). For example, Saliha Erdim trained preachers working for Diyanet’s Family Guidance and Religious Counseling Offices about the fundamentals of family counseling. Hosted and sponsored by several AKP-led municipalities in Istanbul, televangelist Mustafa Karataş delivers a series of public lectures titled “The Prophet’s Family Life” and “Islamic Family Values.” Moreover, Muhsin Bay made a television adaptation of the book Forty Years Sharing a Bed, which is distributed to couples who get their marriage certificates from the AKP-governed Üsküdar Municipality with the goal of discouraging these couples from getting a divorce in the future.

**Normalizing familial responsibilities through television:**

Since the AKP came to power, Islamic TV programming has increasingly focused on providing viewers with religious and psychological guidance, self-help, and personal development with the aim of resolving domestic problems and inculcating the responsibility to provide for and take care of one’s family. These TV channels’ focus on instilling familial responsibility coincides with the reconfiguration of state policies toward strengthening the family as the main provider of nurturance, protection, moral inculcation, and welfare as well as the increasing devolution of the responsibility of social care from the state to the family.

*The Family Guide (Aile Rehberi)*, a self-help style talk show aired on Mehtap TV, clearly illustrates how Islamic television serves to inculcate familial responsibility in viewers by encouraging them to consider themselves accountable for enhancing their families’ well being. In an episode, a female theologian warns viewers that the

---


15 By situating the family as inherently the most ideal site for providing financial, physical, and psychological care for the elderly, the disabled, and children, government policies have sought to devolve the responsibility for assuring social protection and security to the family. To illustrate, since 2005, the Turkish Social Services and Child Protection Agency has implemented a program commonly known as “Back to the Family,” which proposes to send children placed in institutional care facilities due to economic reasons either back to their biological families or to foster families and to give these families monetary assistance. According to this program, family care at home is not only presented as the most moral, humane, and natural way to provide care and upbringing but also justified to be economically more efficient than institutional care. Moreover, the AKP has placed new incentives to encourage families to assume responsibility for providing home care for the elderly rather than sending them to state-run nursing homes.
unwillingness to fulfill one’s familial duties is a grave sin:

When you get married, you sign a contract and testify that you have accepted your responsibilities. You don’t have the luxury to say, ‘I don’t feel like feeding my child today or providing for my family.’ You shoulder the responsibility of giving your spouse, your children, your extended family, and your spouse’s family their rightful due (kul hakkı) […] To deprive someone of their rightful due is a grave sin (vebal) in Islam.

Within the same episode, a hijab-clad family counselor compares forming a family union through marriage to initiating a business venture, whereby business partners make investments and shoulder responsibilities toward ensuring the successful management of their company. She complains that married couples stop investing in their families once the marriage ceremony is over.

This show and others also advise viewers to be prudent (e.g. “Wives should refrain from trying to keep up with the Joneses.”); self-reliant (e.g. “Don’t expect your parents to keep supporting you financially after getting married.”); entrepreneurial (e.g. “You can turn your hobby into profit by selling your handicrafts in a marketplace.”); and responsible for the caring of their family members (e.g. “You should take care of your old parents instead of sending them to nursing homes.”) In addition to the endorsement of neoliberal market rationality, these family shows simultaneously advocate upholding so-called “traditional family values” through love, caring, devotion, and self-sacrifice— as opposed to those values considered to be endemic in contemporary consumerist society such as autonomy, individualism, and self-centeredness. Although the moral values of caring, devotion, and self-sacrifice seem to be in contradistinction with market rationalities, in fact, these co-exist in a productive tension. While the promotion of the other-oriented, disinterested, caring self is in line with religiously inspired ethical norms, it is simultaneously implicated in broader economic processes such as the privatization of care and the withdrawal of the state from the provision of welfare services.

Hikmet Kocamaner is a visiting fellow at Harvard University’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies and a visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Boston University.

---

16 According to anthropologist Andrea Muehlebach, it is this “productive tension, and the tendency of proponents of this morality to present it as opposed to market rationalities” that make neoliberal ethics so compelling to many people coming from different walks of life, including faith-based actors. See:


Islamists’ calculated use of media and their evolving relationship with different media forms is not unique to the Middle East. After decades of strict censorship and restrictions on religious programming during the New Order regime of former president Suharto (1965-1998), Indonesia experienced a massive privatization and proliferation of television media following his ouster (Sen and Hill 2006). Within a couple years, nearly every TV channel featured Islamic sermons, soap operas, and recitation contests. In the process, K.H. Abdullah Gymnastiar – known popularly as “Aa Gym” – became Indonesia’s (indeed, one of the world’s) most famous Muslim televangelist. He positioned himself as an exemplar of public piety and branded himself as the embodiment of the modern Muslim man – pious preacher, shrewd entrepreneur, and doting family man (Hoesterey 2016). Aa Gym capitalized on the aura of media technologies and the ideals of Islamic ethics to appeal to the aspirations of middle-class Muslims in search of piety and prosperity. He offered hope in an uncertain time.

Aa Gym built his brand around the image of doting husband and loving family man. He serenaded his wife on live TV, shared their secrets of a happy marriage, and scolded husbands who could not control their anger. With “one foot in the future” (Lambek 2013, 273), Aa Gym was a harbinger for the promises of religious revival and Islamic ethics, of digital technologies and capital accumulation, of personal fortune and family bliss. Then, at the pinnacle of his popularity, a secret went public and Aa Gym suffered a dramatic fall from public grace and his television empire crumbled. In this essay, I consider the rise and fall of a celebrity preacher to examine the prominence, and precarity, of Islamist media in Indonesian politics.

Summoning the State: Pornography, Politicians, and Pop Preachers

In his early years in the national limelight, Aa Gym was eager to parlay his television pulpit into political capital. He was adept at capitalizing on his stardom to broaden his network among the religious, financial, and political elite. Whereas Indonesian politicians are accustomed to using religion for political ends (Buehler 2016), Aa Gym was intent on using politics for religious ends (Anderson 1977). He carefully cultivated connections with state officials and media executives, and leveraged these relationships to mobilize both corporate and popular support for his moral crusades against pornography and sexual vice.

Aa Gym and Ninih Mutmainnah share the secrets of a happy family. Photo by author.

Hurry Up and Kiss Me!
(Buruan Cium Gue)
On August 18, 2004 Aa Gym went to Indonesia’s Film Censor Board to protest the release of the teen romantic comedy *Hurry Up and Kiss Me*. Aa Gym claimed that his goal was “not to judge, but to request further clarification about how the censor board could have possibly approved the film.” Aa Gym disciplined the state indirectly by inviting state officials to fulfill their roles as moral guardians. He summoned state officials to protect public ethics by banning the film. During the press conference that followed (also organized by Aa Gym, standing shoulder to shoulder with Dr. Din Syamsudin, then-leader of Indonesia’s modernist Islamic organization Muhammadiyah and Indonesian Council of Ulama), he derided the film as a vulgar affront to national morality:

The title alone. Excuse me, but that is just vulgar. It’s bold because it encourages kissing outside the context of marriage. Don’t we all know for ourselves that is not good behavior? ... Based on what I understand about Islam, kissing outside of marriage is one aspect of improper sexual relations (*zinah*). So, actually I would say that the title should be ‘OK, Hurry up and *zinah* me.’

His political quest was not about bodily discipline or an Islamic caliphate but about encouraging state actors to use Islamic ethics to safeguard the nation. Shortly after Aa Gym’s public summoning, the censorship board revoked their authorization, banning the film from theaters.

After this early success in the politics of public piety, Aa Gym began to hone his skills in the art of summoning – and shaming – state officials. When the inaugural Indonesian edition of Playboy magazine was about to be published, Aa Gym was invited to provide congressional testimony about the moral perils of pornography. On the following Sunday, Aa Gym invited President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) to be the special guest on his live television sermon at the national mosque, Istiqlal, part of a new segment called “heart to heart.” Aa Gym summoned SBY to speak about his personal views on pornography and to articulate the role of the state as moral vanguard of the nation. SBY was eager to publicize his friendship with Aa Gym and frame the work of the state in terms of sincere religious duty. The brief excerpt below gives a sense of how both Aa Gym and SBY use the public pulpit for their own political purposes.

**Aa Gym:** Earlier, I was speaking with some of the community here... the silent majority, who do not have much of a voice in the media, cannot write in the newspapers, and cannot speak in the legislature building. But their heart moans just the same when they see things that disturb the future of the younger generation. I believe that Mr. President is also disturbed by this [Playboy magazine]? What do you think, Mr. President?

**SBY:** I consider it very dangerous, a big threat to our nation, for future generations. Aa Gym, for a long while I have stirred up discussion and declared war on things like this: pornography, *pornoaksi*, sadism, mystical programming that goes too far, drugs and other such things... Because of this, at the recent meeting of the Association of Indonesian Journalists, Aa Gym you also attended, I asked the press and mass media to help, to not add to the vice in this country. Isn’t that the spirit of *amar ma’ruf nahi munkar* [Indonesian from the Arabic: enjoining virtue, forbidding vice], to battle against vice? Everyone, not just the president, not just Aa Gym, not just cabinet members and governors, but every group must join in safeguarding the nation. This nation will wage war on pornography. God-willing it will succeed.
Eager to cloak himself in the language of Islamic ethics, President SBY played his part in the public theatrics of moral politics. At that moment in his political career, SBY was losing support from Islamist political parties and the pornography debate provided a chance to demonstrate his Islamic credentials. SBY also described his role and the work of the state through Islamic idioms of personal and public piety: the presidency was a noble trusteeship (amanah), his work was worship (ibadah), and his heart was sincere (ikhlas). In SBY’s reckoning, statecraft is a religious practice. Aa Gym, in turn, carefully crafted his theological argument about pornography and shame, situated it within the diverse moral problems confronting the nation, and leveraged his personal relationship with President SBY.

Aa Gym reminded state actors once again that they, too, were being watched. In doing so, he reversed the political optics of the classic Foucauldian panopticon in which the unseen state constantly watches its citizens (Nugent 2011). Aa Gym’s disciplining of the state is not a public scolding per se, but rather a public summoning for state authorities to embody an explicitly Islamic ethics. Or, to invoke Louis Althusser (1972, 174-175), we could say that Aa Gym “interpellated” state officials to embody an Islamic ethics on the public stage. However, by the time the anti-pornography bill became law in 2008, Aa Gym had fallen from grace and lost the public pulpit from which to summon the state.

**Sincerity and Scandal: Islamist Media and Islamists in the Media**

Islamist groups’ strategic use of media is only part of the story of the media landscape in Indonesia. The post-authoritarian moment of hope and aspiration that allowed for Aa Gym’s rise to fame soon gave way to a renewed cynicism about Islamist politics and public proclamations of personal piety. Digital skeptics have challenged such professed piety, sincerity, and authenticity – especially when those Islamic icons find themselves embroiled in scandal.

When Aa Gym’s female followers learned that he had secretly married a second wife, they took to the streets in protest, publicly shredded his photographs, and boycotted his products and programs. Even though most women attested to the permissibility of polygamy in Islam, they felt betrayed by what they viewed as his insincerity and inauthenticity as a family man. Subsequently, television executives cancelled his contracts, politicians like President SBY kept their distance, and investors pulled out of his business enterprises. After the story broke, Aa Gym held a press conference with his first wife, Ninih. As she explained to reporters that she gave her sincere permission for the marriage, a tear streamed down her cheek. For weeks on end, Aa Gym’s downfall played out on the very same television channels that ushered in his rise.

Aa Gym’s rise and fall mirrors the fortune and fate of the PKS (Justice and Prosperous Party), the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired party that enjoyed popularity in the early 2000s yet never gained significant electoral support. In the aftermath of disclosures of widespread corruption and massive state violence during Suharto’s authoritarian rule, PKS leadership branded their political party as clean (bersih), free from the moral ills of public corruption and personal vice. In a quest for political power, PKS traded on this image. And, like Aa Gym, the real fell short of the ideal. Indonesians took a certain delight in public revelations of immorality among PKS elite, whom they referred to pejoratively as “holier than thou” hypocrites (sok suci). The fall of PKS politicians was characterized...
not just as immoral, but insincere. From the private and personal to the public and political, these Islamists were now the objects of a moral-political gaze.

President Obama’s first official visit to Indonesia in 2010 was broadcast live on national television. Political choreographers were eager to capitalize on the homecoming of Indonesia’s adopted son. Tifatul Sembiring, former chair of PKS and then Minister of Communication and Information, frequently cited ethical comportment for routinely refusing to shake hands with Indonesian women. But during Obama’s official welcoming line at the state palace, Sembiring smiled giddily as he greeted Michelle Obama with a double-clasped handshake. Prominent female journalist Uni Lubis immediately chided Sembiring via Twitter for his apparent double standard: “How is it that Tifatul can shake Michelle Obama’s hand, but he doesn’t want to shake hands with [Indonesian] women?” With over one million Twitter followers, Sembiring tweeted his defense, blaming the “inadvertent” contact on Michelle Obama: “I was holding back my two hands, but then Michelle placed her hands way in front and [my hand] was inadvertently touched. [Then] @unilubis got offended 😊.” Lubis retweeted that video footage suggested otherwise. The video soon appeared on YouTube and was reposted on social media. Within hours, activists, politicians, and even porn stars stirred up a media campaign to challenge Sembiring’s claims to sincerity and authenticity. In just days, the controversy appeared on *The Colbert Report*.

Other high-ranking PKS officials also found themselves embroiled in ethical scandal. In April 2011, critics of the religious elite took great joy in reports that PKS politician Arifinto – a vocal advocate for the anti-pornography bill – was allegedly photographed watching pornography on his laptop during a session of the DPR. One critic re-inscribed the acronym PKS with the unflattering words “The Sex Work Party” (*Partai Karya Seksi*). Although Arifinto claimed he did not know the sender and he immediately closed the file, the photographer responded that Arifinto actually took time to dust off the screen for a better view. Once again in 2013 Indonesians expressed a mix of horror and pleasure when former PKS chair Luthfi Hasan Ishaaq was sentenced to 16 years in prison for corruption charges in a kickback scheme involving beef imports. PKS’s detractors used digital and social media to challenge political authority and religious authenticity by once again re-inscribing the PKS acronym with the “Corruption and Prosperity Party” (*Partai Korupsi Sejahtera*).

Conclusion: When media is a two way street

Indonesian Islamists have adeptly deployed media technologies to promote public piety, brand political parties, and “socialize the state” (Bayat 2007). At the same time, however, others have used media to challenge the purported piety of Islamic icons and Islamist politicians. As Karen Strassler astutely observes: “Political communications thus travel from medium to medium.
in a complex traffic, taking on, at each remediation, distinctive forms of address, authority, and authorship. Unruly processes of reception and reinvention... have thus become an integral feature of contemporary Indonesian political communication." (2009, 95). So, whereas Islamist politicians and pop preachers continue to use digital and social media to promote their grand visions of public piety, so too do their detractors turn to humor and visual culture to capture what they view as the hypocrisy behind the Islamist project. The scandals of Aa Gym and PKS also point to a different sort of political Islam, a moral politics of pop culture not easily reduced to electoral politics or visions of a global caliphate.

How might we understand the phenomenon of Aa Gym? What are the historical precedents? Is there a typology of popular preachers that fits across the diverse political and economic contexts of Muslim societies worldwide? As historian Jonathan Berkey (2001) observes, popular preachers have a long history in Muslim religious and political life. My colleagues in this collection (especially Yasmin Moll and Walter Armbrust) look to the ways in which Muslims themselves refer to the “New Preachers” in Egypt, even if there are precedents in earlier decades of the Islamic Revival (as Aaron Rock-Singer discerns in his contribution). In Indonesia, this genre of popular preachers is often referred to as “celebrity preachers” (*Ustad Seleb*), and those targeting youth are known as “Hip Preachers” (*Ustad Gaul*). Another colleague in this collection, Tuve Floden, suggests that we refer to these preachers as “Media Preachers” to include their diverse uses of print, broadcast, digital, and social media. However, in Indonesia and elsewhere, more orthodox religious leaders also circulate their image and politics through digital and social media, yet such preachers are not considered “celebrity preachers” and certainly not “hip preachers.” As the rise and fall of Aa Gym suggests, these celebrity preachers are not epiphenomena of media technologies as much as they are mediated brands that articulate a particular vision of the future and resonate with the anxieties and desires of the middle class.

The most remarkable dimension of Aa Gym’s celebrity appeal is precisely his personal branding as the embodiment of the “cutting edge of modernity” (Hoesterey 2012). As my Indonesianist colleagues and I have argued elsewhere (Barker, Lindquist, et. al. 2009), such figures of modernity in Indonesia “seek to mediate what they believe to be the new sources of power... Islam, technology, and capital. They position themselves not as leaders, but as experts, exemplars, and facilitators of vast empires of self-improvement.” And as the rise and fall of Aa Gym and PKS suggest, such figures of modernity also run the risk of being cast as insincere charlatans more concerned with worldly riches than heavenly redemption. The privatization and proliferation of media technologies might explain the emergence of this genre of popular preachers across diverse Muslim societies today. However, to comprehend the fall of specific preachers like Aa Gym (and political parties like PKS) requires a better understanding of how, and to what extent, their personal brands and exemplary authority resonate with competing visions of Islamist politics and Muslim modernity.

James B. Hoesterey is an assistant professor in the Department of Religion at Emory University. He is the author of *Rebranding Islam: Piety, Prosperity, and a Self-help Guru* (Stanford University Press, November 2015).

Works Cited


Barker, Joshua and Johan Lindquist, with Tom Boellstorff, Daromir Rudnyckyj, Rachel Silvey, Karen Strassler, Chris Brown, Aryo Danusiri, Dadi Darmadi, Sheri Gibbings,
Cultural policies may be an area where Islamist parties have to make some hard decisions. Cinema illustrates their dilemma.

The movie “Mawlana” may be a good illustration of the role of Islamists in Egypt’s cultural production – and of the dilemmas Islamists are confronting when formulating a viable political position post-2013. Released in January 2017 and an instant hit at the box office, the film depicts a late Mubarak Egypt obsessed with Islam but largely devoid of Islamists. In the film, Azharis are pliable tools of the state, Salafis are making Islam into a business of piety, and enlightened sheikhs who understand the plight of ordinary Egyptians are looked upon with deep suspicion by the intelligence service, at least if they are courageous and popular. In the important film and television drama business, the Muslim Brotherhood is written out of the picture. When the Brotherhood actually appears on the screen, it is normally as the villains. Ramadan 2018 will feature the second season of al-Jama`a (“The Society”), which painted a portrait of the organization’s leadership as

---

Some of this material is drawn from a longer paper, “Media Controversies and the Policies of the Morsi Government”, that is due to appear in the journal Communication and the Public.
power-hungry and in control of violent cadres in its first season in 2010.

No wonder the Muslim Brotherhood considers art to be political. But where do Islamists stand on the issue of the arts? Written out of the script of the Egyptian movie industry, have they themselves also written off the movies? This question of Islamists and cultural policy has been somewhat neglected by scholars, but it is of some significance when discussing possible future political orientations and positions of the Brotherhood. This paper will look at the cultural policies adopted and pursued by the Brotherhood when it came to power. It will argue that Islamists have neglected cultural production at their peril. In so far as Islamists in Egypt and elsewhere want to re-connect to mainstream Arab Muslim culture, they would be well advised to formulate an approach to the arts and cultural policy that is less preoccupied with censoring “filth,” combating “aggression” or avoiding showing “what God has prohibited.” Instead, it could embrace cultural production that engages more with human characters in their complexity and frailty. A bit, perhaps, like Mawlana – the sheikh who is main character of the film and the book behind it.

A long, uneasy partnership

The first Egyptian full length film was produced in 1927, the year before Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Egyptian movie industry and the Brotherhood both came of age in the 1930s. They had few connections. The biggest production company, Misr, was part of Talaat Harb’s project of economic and cultural liberation from the British. That, however, did not mean religion. After an aborted attempt at a movie about the prophet Muhammad, the film industry shied away from religious subjects for several decades. Hassan al-Banna, in turn, was deeply suspicious of the movie theatres and the culture that came with them, and several times called for more censorship on movies. Still, compared to the nascent Salafist trend, the Brotherhood did not completely reject films or other performing arts. It regularly reviewed films in its magazine, and, more surprisingly, al-Banna himself took a strong interest in arts, including painting and theatre. Al-Banna had good relations with Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad and other playwrights, and the Brotherhood had its own performing theatre troupe. The Brotherhood's men's choir performed in one of the first films with a religious theme, “Bilal, muezzin of the prophet” (1953).

This engagement with performing arts died out with the outlawing of the Brotherhood during the presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954-70) and was never really revived. The Nasser state drafted the culture industry into its ideological project, further alienating it from the Brotherhood. Interestingly, it is also during the Nasser era – often, wrongly, considered “Secularist” – that the film industry took to religious themes and produced a dozen films on religious subjects. A good example is the film Rabia al-Adawiyya (1963), about a country girl in medieval Iraq who abandons the world and becomes one of the most illustrious female Sufi saints. Sufism, simple piety and the working, unassuming people were staples of the Nasser era take on Islam, promoting a very different form of religion than the Brotherhood’s more puritan, legalistic and modernist ideology. While al-Banna’s criticism of the movie industry had focused on its morals, the theme of political conspiracy was now added to the Brotherhood’s misgivings. When the Brotherhood resurfaced again in 1970s, its journal al-Da’wa, took a vocally negative stand against the movie industry, which it considered an “imported art form” and part of a Western cultural imperialism (ghazwa thaqafiyya), sowing doubts about the faith. It repeatedly castigated movies for endorsing “what God has forbidden,” such as alcohol and illicit love affairs. When the Brotherhood began to have representatives in parliament in the 1980s, they regularly called for censorship when a film was said to be scandalous, often adopting the less overtly Islamist claim that it violated “Egyptian values.”

By the 1990s and 2000s, two tendencies of Islamist engagement with performing arts stood out clearly. On one hand, a tendency to judge the performing arts as immoral

2 http://www.essamtallima.com/load_files/media/1404048942.pdf
and unislamic, thriving inside the Brotherhood and linked to what Hussam Tammam called the “Salafization of the Brotherhood.” And on the other hand, a tendency to revive an interest in art, considering it uplifting and an important means of worship, or daawa. The latter was espoused by Yusuf al-Qaradawi – himself an author of a play in the 1940s – who recently went so far as to endorse the project of a film about the prophet Muhammad.

A good illustration of this clash was the closure of the hugely popular Islamist-leaning website IslamOnline in 2010. Produced in Arabic and English for a global audience, IslamOnline featured reviews of films as an established part of youth culture and entertainment. In 2010, IslamOnline was closed due to differences between the owners – based in Saudi Arabia and Qatar – and the editors in Cairo, in part because of these movie reviews.

The Egyptian film industry, meanwhile, had since the 1990s abandoned its policy of neglect towards Islam. In the 1990s a couple films were produced agitating against the threat of Islamism. From the 2000s, however, other films and TV-dramas began to take a more conciliatory approach, affirming the Islamic nature of Egyptian society and the religious commitment of ordinary Egyptians.

The Nahda vision

When the revolutions spread across the Arab world in 2011, the Islamists were not prepared, but it was clear that they stood to gain. For more than a decade, they had been pursuing a strategy of political inclusion, gaining visibility and parliamentary experience, albeit without tangible power and influence. During that time they had also adopted new ideological positions – again largely developed by Islamists outside the Brotherhood – stressing the conformity of Islam and democratic institutions. They had even moved towards political liberalism, stressing the rights of citizens and the limits of state power.

Written a month after the revolution in 2011, the political program of the Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party took this democratic commitment further than ever, arguing for a pluralist Egypt with freedom of expression. And yet, in the chapter on culture, older themes of defending a healthy, pious and uniform Egyptian culture against aggressive foreign corruption resurfaces: “The Egyptian culture with its above-mentioned [religious] characteristics forms a hindering wall protecting against the modes of destructive cultural imperialism, the scheming, dissolving playfulness of foreign cultures that does not edify, but corrupts.” The party wants a firm state cultural strategy in the field of performing arts, “developing the quality of the Egyptian TV film and drama and cinema film in order for it to play its role in spreading lofty values and prohibiting low works that excite the instincts and lead to crime.”

This was echoed on the Brotherhood wiki-website, where the subject of art was understood to be not only of great significance but also great danger, to society and the community, or umma. A fictitious brother horrifies his conservative family by declaring that he wants to become an actor, but defends his decision by explaining that the performing arts cannot be left to those who only aim to rouse the senses. He envisions himself as inspiring people and filling their hearts with faith and lofty aims. Art and acting can be a means of jihad on the path of God. An elderly sheikh of the family agrees.

Nahda politics

When the Freedom and Justice Party actually won the parliamentary elections in the winter of 2011-12, it took no major initiative in the field of culture. And when half

5 Birnamij Hizb al-Hurriya wa I-`Adala, (Cairo, 2011) 81.
6 Birnamij, 84.
7 http://ikhwanwiki.com/index.php?title=%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86_%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86_-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE_%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%84%9A_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B2
a year later the Muslim Brother Mohammed Morsi was elected president and appointed his first cabinet, he decided to retain the minister of culture of the former government under SCAF, Muhammad Saber Arab, opting for cultural continuity rather than rupture. This reflected other priorities and was probably partly meant to reassure the critics of the Brotherhood, domestically and abroad. Moreover, since the revolution Salafi parties had successfully contested the elections, and Salafis regularly attacked the cultural sector in Egypt, culminating with a long sit-in in front of the media production city.

Still, even if it did not become official policy, many Islamists were determined to develop new cultural institutions and expressions with an Islamic hue. A theatre troupe, Yanayir, and a film production company, Rihab, were set up after the revolution, and an art production group of young Islamists, al-Nahda, announced its establishment. In September 2012, the Islamist TV-station “Mirs 25” began broadcasting. Among its programs was al-Fann bi-jadd, “Art, seriously,” whose young host, Hamid Musa, insisted that art must be multazim “committed” and come from the heart.

These are words that many Islamists also use about the right attitude towards religion. But what would this entail in relation to art? Under pressure from the revolution, the conservatives were revising their position, as well. A fatwa by the Brotherhood’s quite conservative mufti, Abd al-Rahman al-Birr, permitted performing arts as long as they conformed to Islamic values. But this in his view meant that nothing sinful could be shown, including women without headscarf.

A controversial example came from the artist collective al-Nahda, which produced a short film, “The Report” in 2013. Never released by the censor after a single presentation, it reportedly showed Egyptians responding to the controversial anti-Muslim YouTube film “Innocence of Muslims.” The director Izz al-Din Dweidar, a vocal representative of the young brothers, accused the censor of political bias. Towards the end of his first – and only – year in power, Morsi finally responded to the Islamist frustration. A new minister of culture, Alaa Abd al-Aziz, was appointed, and he immediately proceeded to substitute directors of cultural institutions with new names with Islamist leanings. Dubbed akhwana (“Brotherhoodization”), this move was met with a long demonstration in front of the ministry and contributed to Morsi’s growing unpopularity and downfall in July. This was the beginning of Ramadan, and the most successful Ramadan series that year was al-Da’iya, about a young Salafi preacher who preaches that music and art are immoral, but is converted to a much more humane version of Islam through his meeting with a revolutionary woman from Tahrir square who happens to be a violinist in the Cairo Opera. The cultural industries, in short, had not adapted to the Brotherhood’s cultural agenda, but actively confronted it.

Conclusions

The revolution of 2011 paved the way for Islamist influence, and even dominance, in Egyptian politics and culture. Nevertheless, naming production companies and television stations after the 25th of January, did not in itself make them revolutionary. The year of Morsi’s reign revealed that, in spite of its talk about the defense of culture, the Brotherhood had few ambitions when it came to contributing to Egypt’s actual cultural production. In April 2013, well-known representatives of

---


Egypt’s art scene confidently stated in a survey that the Islamists simply lacked the skills and the talent.\textsuperscript{10} To be sure, the small group of young Islamists who took up the task had little to offer; this is understandable, given the Brotherhood’s history of ambivalence towards the arts.

The cultural production environment, on the other hand, proved to be a formidable foe. Antagonizing it was, if not fatal, then at least an ill-considered move on the part of Morsi that made it easy for his enemies to mobilize. Sometimes ridiculed by Western scholars for its crude political messages, the Egyptian film and television industry is probably fairly well attuned to its audience. In 2012, Islamism, too, was able to appeal to Egyptians. But the Brotherhood and its supporters tended to consider the popular vote a cultural entitlement, rather than a support to be continuously earned. And it never took a clear stand to accept entertainment and art as a value in itself, beyond its value as a tool of moral education and daawa. The experience of IslamOnline demonstrates that, if they abandoned this self-serving moralism, Islamists might not only be able to connect to a powerful industry with significant politico-cultural clout, but they might also re-connect to mainstream Muslim populations concerned with many other issues in life than religion. Who knows, they might even be able to produce art.

\textit{Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen is an associate professor at the University of Copenhagen’s Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies.}

The Preacher: A Backstage Islamic Media Drama*

Walter Armbrust, University of Oxford

Over the past two decades, a steady trickle of Egyptian films and television serials has addressed Islamism. Al-Da‘iya (The Preacher) was a Ramadan musalsal broadcast in the summer of 2013 that attempted to outline a nominally positive argument for what religion should be (humanist, tolerant of difference and apolitical), rather than simply a negative argument about what it should not be (violent, misogynist, intolerant of difference, obsessed with the afterlife rather than with this world). The first maneuver in building this particular construct was to make the preacher both beautiful and repulsive (at least to non-Islamist audiences) at the same time. In the first scene of the series, we see an audience of men at a sermon in a large mosque. We hear the preacher’s voice before we see his face:

If they ask you about music, say that it is Satan’s flute. It is forbidden! Forbidden! And it’s not just me saying that. That is what the correct religion says, as was explained by scholars over many generations, may God be content with them. Let us pray for the Prophet. What did our shaykh Ibn Hanbal say about the matter? ‘Singing sprouts hypocrisy in the heart’. More than that, he said anyone who sees a musical instrument should break it. He said, ‘there was a group of men (“orphans,” yatama) who inherited a singing slave girl. She had been sold while singing for a price of 20,000 dinars. If she didn’t sing she would bring only 2,000. [Ibn Hanbal] said ‘no, sell her for 2,000. Because if singing was lawful God wouldn’t have caused such money to not be given to orphans.’ Do you understand my brothers? You understand? [the crowd answers approvingly; closeups on the faces of a grizzled man saying ‘May God strengthen you; God bless you’] I don’t agree with the ‘good brother’ who tells me that that the lady Nancy ‘Agram is singing a patriotic song when she says ‘a son of Egypt, may God be with him.’

Shaykh Yusuf’s proximate real-life models are the du‘a al-gudad – the so-called “new preachers” who have emerged since the early 2000s. Amr Khaled, a young dynamic da‘iya with a business degree, started the trend, and since his first appearance in the mediascape numerous imitators have emerged. Initially he gave private lessons in religion to well-off audiences, particularly women, but then broke into public consciousness in 2000 with an innovative program called Kalam min al-Qalb (words from the heart), broadcast during Ramadan on the private satellite channel Dream TV. In the previous decade the tenor of Islamist discourse circulating outside state control had tended to be rather grim and death-obsessed, focusing, for example, on

The latter reference is from a patriotic music video Ana Masry (I am an Egyptian) made by the sometimes provocative and always sexy Lebanese singer Nancy ‘Ajram (2009). It is at this point that the camera swings from panning over the all-male and generally scruffy mosque congregation (lingering on the faces of individuals who would eventually be revealed as part of the narrative) onto a close-up of the preacher’s face. He is young and startlingly handsome, wears designer glasses, an expensive gold-trimmed abaya, and sports a neatly trimmed beard rather than the deliberately unruly facial hair cultivated by many television shaykhs. And so we are introduced to Shaykh Yusuf. The contrast between his conservative rant against music and the preacher’s handsome and stylish appearance is striking.2

---

1 Nancy ‘Ajram recorded a number of songs in Egyptian dialect as a means of marketing herself to the largest Arabic-speaking audience. This song, accompanied by a highly patriotic video montage, is an excellent sample of the mainstream convention of refusing to include Islamically marked bodies in a representation of the nation.

2 The “sama” polemic” about the status of music (forbidden or permitted) dates from early Islamic history (Nelson 2001, 32-51). The aggressively anti-music position expressed in the sermon is plausibly drawn from the debate (and the story about the jurist Ibn Hanbal and the slave girl inherited by the orphans is commonly told to support the anti-music opinion). But to the extent that modern Egyptians care about legal debates on music, there are other less negative opinions that can be cited.

---

*This memo is an extract from a longer paper published in the Journal of the American Academy of Religion (82, no. 3: 841-856)
the ‘Adhab al-Qabr (“tortures of the crypt” as the title of one much-discussed 1990s-vintage book title put it; ʻAshur 1979) that would be suffered by anyone who practiced religion incorrectly, which is to say in contravention to a harsh Islamist ethos.3 The general tenor of Amr Khaled’s program, in contrast, was love: God’s love of man and man’s love of God. Moreover, the form of Words from the Heart deliberately followed populist American evangelical television, in which preachers were humanized and made as approachable as possible (Wise 2004; Moll 2010). On Words from the Heart Khaled appeared in a natty Western business suit. His audience was gender mixed and prosperous looking. The format looked like that of a game show, or The Oprah Winfrey Show, with a live audience in the frame. It was interactive rather than structured by the delivery of a sermon to passive listeners. Words from the Heart was an earthquake in the sphere of mass mediated da’wa. Hence The Preacher’s Amr Khaled-like Shaykh Yusuf was a contradictory character: a “modern liberal” in appearance, but a fanatic in tone.4

3 The doctrinal basis of such Islamist trends is broadly Qutbist. Sayyid Qutb was a prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood Guidance Council in the 1950s, arrested after an attempted assassination of Gamal ʻAbd al-Nasir in 1954, and executed after a show trial in 1966. His principle works, Milestones (1989) and In the Shade of the Quran (1979), have been major inspirations for radical Islamist groups over the past five decades. Qutb’s application of the term jahiliyya (age of pre-Islamic ignorance) to contemporary governments, including governments of Arab states such as Egypt, underpinned a strategy of some groups, such as Takfir wal-Hijra (excommunication and exodus) in the 1970s and 1980s, and more contemporary offshoots such as al-Qaeda, to withdraw from a modern society that they saw as hopelessly corrupt. Kepel (1994) details the history and politics of Egyptian Islamist radicals in the 1980s. Those groups—extremists withdrawn to the spatial margins of the modern Egyptian state—have been central to many Egyptian televised and cinematic representations of the whole phenomenon of Islamism.

4 This is not to say that Amr Khaled’s “liberal” credentials were necessarily a given. He quickly became a social sensation with many followers, but he was controversial, and sometimes the object of conspiracy theories (e.g. “Amr Khaled ...” 2014). Some dismissed him as a “yuppie preacher”; others suspected him of hiding dark motives or Muslim Brotherhood affiliations in his relatively milquetoast Islamic discourse (and note that Shaykh Yusuf’s discourse at the beginning of the serial was not milquetoast). In the early 2000s Khaled was said to have been banned from preaching in Egypt by the Mubarak regime, though some suspected him of having invented the banning story in order to gain greater “street credibility.” For a while he was based in Birmingham in the United Kingdom. At about the same time he became affiliated with the Saudi-funded Iqra’ religious channel, which produced programs in Beirut. Moll (2010) discusses Khaled’s relationship with Iqra’. Shortly before the January 25th Revolution he returned to Egypt amid much speculation about whether or not he had political ambitions (Ajam 2010).

In the serial, the paradoxical quality of Youssef strikes women with particular intensity. Immediately after his anti-music sermon Youssef goes to a studio of the (fictional) al-Qahira channel to record a television show. Dual cameras point at the stage, each operated by a chic woman in hijab. “He’s so beautiful,” murmurs one to the other. “What a shame that he’s so harsh.” “Fear God!” says the other, slightly shocked. “What, he’s not beautiful?” replies the first woman. “Yes, he is, but see to your work.” The topic of the television show is love. The only kind appropriate to “the true Islam” is love of God. Again, music comes into his discourse: “Love based on songs and separation from the beloved – this is unsuitable for true religion.”

But Shaykh Yusuf’s al-Qaeda-in-Amr-Khaled-clothing persona was only the serial’s starting point. Over the course of its thirty episodes, The Preacher evolved into a non-Islamist’s ideal vision of what a Muslim preacher should be: essentially a moral resource to be tapped into when necessary and not an omnipresent moral censor. The cause of this transformation is that the handsome young fanatic falls in love with his next-door neighbor, Nesma. In the beginning of the series, she has nothing but disdain for Youssef’s ultra-conservative message, and his appearance means nothing to her. Nesma happens to be the principal violinist of the National Orchestra. She enters the story in her own home, practicing a difficult musical passage with a colleague, which is interrupted by the sound of Youssef’s program playing on a television in the next room. It is Nesma’s mother listening to his show. She is a fan of Shaykh Youssef, captivated by his appearance and barely hearing the harshly conservative message. Nesma lashes out at her mother. “How can you listen to that retarded stuff? The whole world knows my opinion of that man. He’s reactionary!” “Quiet,” hisses her mother, “I want to hear the rest of it. Stick to music, you know about that. You shouldn’t talk about other things.” Nesma responds indignantly: “How can a cultured medical doctor who understands the world sit in front of that guy while he tells you stuff he gets from God knows where? What’s going on Mama? Isn’t it enough that he’s against the revolution?”
The contours of the plot emerge. Nesma’s reference to Youssef’s position on “the revolution” fixes the time frame (the post-January 25th present, which means during the year of Mohamed Morsi’s rule, who is never mentioned by name, but is alluded to frequently in scenes of righteous demonstrations against a tyrannical Islamic regime). Her initial loathing for Youssef establishes the emotional distance between them that has to be overcome in order for the plot to advance. The love story of course develops gradually over the next few episodes and then gathers steam. A thirty-episode series allows scope for many subplots. A few of them bear mentioning in a short summary of the story.

First, much of the story takes place against a backdrop of the religious broadcasting industry.5 The industry is shown as mostly corrupt and cynical, though the main representative of the business (the owner of the al-Qahira channel) ultimately achieves some ethical redemption. Another strand of the serial is the complexity of Youssef’s family: an estranged lower-class drunkard father; a jealous would-be-preacher brother-in-law who marries the daughter of Youssef’s television producer (depicted as strictly a businessman with no religious agendas) after Youssef rejects her advances; Youssef’s sister married to the would-be-preacher who demands and is granted a divorce when her husband marries the daughter of Youssef’s television producer (she eventually rejects a marriage proposal from the television producer himself); a younger sister bristling at the harsh discipline that Youssef metes out to her in his earlier (pre-falling-in-love) persona; an epileptic younger brother whose life is saved by Nesma’s medical doctor mother, thereby forming a less hostile link between the two families that ultimate leads to the love story between Nesma and Youssef.

The Islamists in the serial, aside from Youssef, who ultimately transcends the category of “Islamist,” are more straightforward. All are unethical, hypocritical, prone to violence, and conniving to use Youssef for their own dark ends. The Muslim Brotherhood is never named as such. This has less to do with the fact that the serial was made during the Morsi era than with the conventions of mass mediated narratives on Islamism. Specific groups are rarely named, which means that the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis (all variants, some of which are jihadist and others politically quietest) are conflated. This convention is consistent with attitudes of the non-Islamist intelligentsia: for many, all men in beards are distrusted. Indeed, one of the bitterest grievances against the Muslim Brotherhood during their year in power was that they only seemed to be seeking political alliances with Salafis, never attempting to seriously reach out to non-Islamist political forces.6

The state, unlike the intelligentsia, does make distinctions between men with beards. Ultimately when the Muslim Brotherhood was crushed by the military in the summer of 2013 it was only the Brotherhood that was singled out by the security forces and the judiciary; Salafis were largely ignored. Accusations are often made that many of the prominent Salafi shaykhs were in fact in the pay of Amn al-Daula (the state security service) during the Mubarak era. The swift reversal of their support for Morsi once the military moved against his government and the relatively light attention given to them in the post-Morsi era seems consistent with these suspicions of earlier collusion between Salafis and the regime.

In The Preacher, bearded men in western suits try to co-opt Youssef. Eventually one of the Islamists, Shaykh ‘Ali, emerges as crazier and more violent than the others. After Youssef goes public on-air about collaboration between Shaykh ‘Ali and State Security, Shaykh ‘Ali retaliates by taking Youssef hostage and threatening to kill him. The

---

5 Moll (2010) analyses the broad contours of this kind of religious broadcasting in Egypt prior to the Revolution. The Preacher was undoubtedly inspired to some degree by Maulana (our master), a novel by journalist and media personality Ibrahim ‘Isa (2012). Maulana was published about a year before the broadcast of The Preacher. Events in the novel are structured by the ever-expanding satellite broadcasting religion industry, and its relation to business and politics. The credits of The Preacher do not mention Maulana, but the resemblance of the two narratives is nonetheless striking.

6 For a sample of the non-Islamist activists’ stance at about the halfway point of Morsy’s year in office see Soueif (2012). Hamid (2013) comments specifically on the tendency of the Muslim Brotherhood in power to court only Salafi coalition partners. Brown (2013) provides a more methodical overview of the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi political parties over the long term.
most senior of the radical shaykhs in the end forces Shaykh ‘Ali to release Youssef, not so much from an ethical obligation to save the preacher’s life as from a sense of self-preservation tempered by outrage at the revelation of Shaykh ‘Ali’s betrayal. The senior shaykh refrains from having Shaykh ‘Ali killed, but banishes him forever from his Islamist brethren.

Shaykh ‘Ali’s expulsion from the radical Islamist organization leads to a finale that ties the serial to precisely the same State Security service for which Shaykh ‘Ali had spied on his own organization. As the serial nears its end Shaykh Youssef, through the magical transformative power of Nesma’s love, becomes a proper human being. There is no other way to put it. On air he renounces his condemnation of music and art. He declares his love for Nesma openly and they become engaged. He joins Nesma in demonstrations against the ruling Islamist regime. And most importantly, he begins preaching a form of liberal Islamic feminism totally at odds with the harsh quasi-Qutubist opinions he had formerly propagated. Once Shaykh ‘Ali’s desperate revenge plans are frustrated by the reluctantly repentant radical shaykh, and Youssef is freed, he makes plans to attend the final performance of Nesma’s endlessly rehearsed solo – the very device that had captured his heart and led to his conversion from harsh Islamism to tolerant humanity.

Youssef sits in a private box seat to watch Nesma’s performance. The disgraced Shaykh ‘Ali, now shaved to blend in with non-Islamist society, takes a box seat opposite Youssef. As Nesma’s solo nears its climax Shaykh ‘Ali produces a silenced pistol from a concealed holster, draws a bead on Youssef, and shoots him in the heart. Youssef slumps over, dead. Nobody notices. The concert ends, and the crowd files out with Youssef still slumped over in his seat, blood slowly seeping over his white shirt. It appears to be the ultimate revenge of radical Islamism.

At this point the image freezes, and a solemn voice intones in ponderous formal Arabic, “This is one possible ending of our story, in which bitter darkness is victorious and rigidity and backwardness defeats the nation. But there could be another ending…” Then the camera goes into reverse, back to the beginning of the violin solo. Youssef again sits transfixed by the music. Shaykh ‘Ali again pulls his pistol and draws a bead on Youssef … and just before he pulls the trigger two uniformed policemen appear from behind. They grab Shaykh ‘Ali, prevent his shot at Youssef, and hustle him out of the orchestra box without ever disturbing the concert or the crowd.

This incredibly contrived endorsement of the State Security service was broadcast on August 7, 2013 one week before state security forces cleared the pro-Morsi sit-in at Midan Rab’aa al-‘Adawiyya, resulting in 924 civilian deaths and 8 members of the security forces (“Taqrir Shamil…” 2013). Of course the serial had been in production during the Morsi era. I remember seeing an article in The New Yorker of all places claiming that the Morsi regime was going to ban the serial, but that after his overthrow, just before the beginning of Ramadan, the censorship office had heroically reviewed all thirty episodes in one sitting so that it could be approved and aired (Chang 2013). Or maybe not. Another article conveys thanks by The Preacher’s writer to the Amn al-Watani (national security) for “refusing the request by the director of the office of the President, who was responsible for coordinating between the presidency and the security agencies, to stop the broadcast of The Preacher on grounds that it defamed preachers” (Ghoneim 2013). The article was published on June 25th, before the tamarrud demonstration that set the stage for the army’s removal of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood from government.

Walter Armbrust is an associate professor of Modern Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford.

---

7 Al-Amn al-Watani (national security) is the post-Revolution name for Amn al-Daula (state security), the forces of which had been humiliated during the Revolution
References

‘Abd al-Hafiz, Isma’il

Abou-El-Fadl, Reem

Al-‘Adl, Muhammad Gamal

‘Ajam, Muhammad

Ajram, Nancy

“‘Amru Khalid al-Masih al-Dajjal?”

Armbrust, Walter

‘Ashur, Abd al-Latif

Boyd, Douglas

Brown, A.C.

Chang, Leslie

“Egypt Media Roundup (December 10)”

“‘Fahmy’: Kana Yastahil al-Intizar li-Intiha’ Fatrat Mursi … wa al-Ikhwan Haddadu al-Huwiyya.”

Ghanim, Ibrahim al-Bayumi

Ghoneim, Islam
Hamid, Shadi

Al-Imam, Rami
2013 al-‘Arraf (tv serial) Cairo: Tamir Mursy.

’Isa, Ibrahim
2012 Maulana. Doha, Qatar: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation.


Kepel, Gilles

Mahmud, ‘Abd al-Mun’im

Moll, Yasmin

Nelson, Kristina
2001 The Art of Reciting the Quran. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Qutb, Sayyid
1979 [1959] In the Shade of the Quran. Translated by M.A. Salahi and A.A. Shamis. London: MWH.


Sakr, Naomi

Al-Shal, Mustafa


Soueif, Ahdaf.


Wise, Lindsay

Yasin, Muhammad
2010 al-Gama’a (tv serial). Cairo: Sharikat al-Batrus lil-Intag al-Fanni wa al-Tauzi’.
The role of traditional and new media in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s internal power struggle

Mokhtar Awad, George Washington University

Over the last three years the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has suffered what is arguably the worst crackdown in its 89-year old history, leading to unprecedented fragmentation and an internal power struggle. State repression is nothing new for the organization. It has weathered the assassination of its founder and the rounding up of its members in the 1950s-60s, almost to the point of extinction. The group has also witnessed power struggles and divisions throughout its history. Due to the secretive nature of the organization, many of these disputes were dealt with quietly and the resolution usually ended up in the defection of dissidents to either found terrorist groups or moderate political parties.

The one exception was the 1953 struggle between Supreme Guide Hassan al-Hudaybi and renegade commander of the Secret Apparatus Abdel Rahman al-Sanadi, when supporters of the latter stormed the headquarters of the organization. A power struggle no less dramatic has been playing out over the past three years inside the Brotherhood. But unlike 1953, the group’s leadership is now scattered across the world and its members operate underground. There are no physical headquarters to be stormed. Instead – and for the first time – rival factions have been clashing with each other over the airwaves and the Internet as they seek to consolidate control over a scattered organization. This has helped provide unprecedented insight into the MB’s usually opaque power structure and a real time understanding of dynamics as opposed to relying on memoirs written years after the events.

Both traditional and new media have been critical tools in this internal struggle. Different satellite channels compete to “set the tone” for the group’s struggle against the regime and the rhythm of the organization through their programming and guests they allow on air. Rival factions now operate two different websites and have two different spokesmen on social media. Each first and foremost concerned with securing the loyalty of the MB rank and file. Senior leaders post rival statements on websites and followers instantly react on their Facebook walls, sometimes arguing with each other. Other members have also set up independent Facebook pages to assert their demands or act as privateers on behalf of one faction to land blows against their rivals.

This fascinating new environment naturally allows forces outside the MB’s traditionally rigid structure to interfere in this internal struggle with either their financing or through media activism. This has significant consequences for the organization and the Egyptian Islamist movement overall as different Imams and ideologues—ranging from the “moderate” to the outright Takfiri—can compete for ratings and as a consequence possibly influence. The new diverse media environment also provides a useful tool to help analyze internal MB dynamics and help answer the fundamental question of who speaks for the Muslim Brotherhood and Egypt’s dissident Islamists.

History of Brotherhood media

Since its founding, the MB and its members have prolifically produced acculturation material and other propaganda through their own magazines, books, and articles. This written material became more important as the organization grew and the Supreme Guide’s recurring messages to MB Usras, the smallest organizational unit, became a critical tool for maintaining communication between the leadership and the rank and file.

However the government forbade the MB, like virtually any other political entity, from operating its own radio or
television channels. Although Islamic content made its way on these two platforms, no explicitly Islamist content was allowed. This began to change for the MB with the Internet age as the group was among the first to commission new websites beginning in 1998 with a website for its print publication Al-Dawah.2

Other websites were launched in subsequent years by the organization that kept the explicit link to the MB hidden—ostensibly for security reasons—and primarily focused on Islamic content and general Islamist political issues. By the early 2000s the group began to experiment with explicitly political websites, among them Egyptwindow.net in 2002 and in 2003 the first official website Ikhwanonline.net, which became one of the most popular websites in Egypt. By the mid-2000s, some Muslim Brotherhood youth began to operate political blogs that raised awareness of conditions in Egypt and the detention of MB leaders.3 Some MB youth also formed the social media crowdsourced network Rassd, which became an instant hit as it posted news and pictures from Tahrir Square during the January 2011 revolution.

Following the uprising, the MB had the first opportunity to launch its own satellite network, Miser 25. Quickly it became apparent that the channel was more than just a propaganda platform. It represented the image of the Brotherhood for many Egyptians who were never personally familiar. The group had also long talked about how it wished for media in Egypt to be “purposeful,” code for conservative and moral. The network was the Brotherhood’s opportunity to lead by example and content was carefully curated. All female hosts wore a conservative hijab and uncovered women were rarely seen. Religious content was also generally in keeping with Sufi leaning traditions, or “Brotherhood moderate.”

Yet the channel’s political content was polarizing and reflected increasing tensions in society. One host, Nour Abdel Hafiz also known as “Khamees,” was the target of numerous segments on the political satire show El-Bernameg. He was represented as a detestable apologist for the MB and Morsi. Sometimes radical Salafists like Mohamed al-Zawahiri and Islamic Group members like Assem Abdel Maged were invited on air. However, the most polarizing content was usually aired by Salafist networks loyal to the MB but not explicitly tied to it. On these pro-MB Salafi networks, hosts dismissed Morsi’s opponents as either nonbelievers or traitors and demonized symbols of secularism in Egyptian society.

**The evolution of the Brotherhood’s post-coup media empire**

Following the July 2013 coup, the new government swiftly shutdown Miser 25 and pro-MB Salafi channels fearing a platform for Islamists to reach and mobilize supporters. However, this media blackout was instantly bridged. Regional Brotherhood linked channels like Jordanian Al-Yarmouk and Hamas’s Al-Quds and Al-Aqsa networks carried live feeds from Rabaa square. Al-Jazeera and its Egypt focused Mubashir Miser network provided a platform for MB leaders.4 During this time, MB activists also began to more heavily rely on social media platforms and produce independent content.

Shortly after Miser 25 was shut down, the Brotherhood quickly came back with Ahrar 25 as the main MB channel, though it had sporadic coverage and poor production quality. In December 2013, the decision was made to launch Rabaa network from Istanbul as the first major foreign-based MB opposition channel. Although the MB played a key role in launching the network,5 it remains unclear to what extent it centrally controlled the channel.

---


4 Mubashir Miser was later suspended by Al-Jazeera in December 2014. Anecdotally this appears to have helped the ratings of MB and pro-MB channels as viewers looked for alternatives.

By the summer of 2014, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood had nearly half a dozen Turkey-based satellite networks supporting it. The group evolved to recognize satellite TV's power to not only raise spirits and communicate with supporters, but also prove that the organization still had the wherewithal to support a multi-million long-term media opposition campaign against the Egyptian government.

Mapping Brotherhood and pro-Brotherhood networks content

As the new networks were being launched, a new temporary Crisis Management Committee and other temporary bodies were taking over the reins of the MB. Although the period was undoubtedly chaotic, there was still a degree of organization as the group successfully set up bases in exile and launched networks. While it wasn’t clear who editorialized the content on these networks, they were connected to each other, with guests from one network appearing on the other, referencing each other, and creating an echo chamber.

On the far right of the spectrum stood Rabaa network in inciting violence. It had an explicitly Salafi-Brotherhood bent with clerics such as Mohamed Abdel Maqsoud and Wagdy Ghoneim appearing as guests and leading their own shows. Former Islamic Group leader Assem Abdel Maged had a show titled “Egypt is Islamic.” Radical former Morsi-era Awqaf Ministry cleric Salama Abdel Qawy hosted the main flagship show. Revolutionary Salafi leader Mahmoud Fathy, who advocated for violent “revolutionary” action, also appeared frequently on this network and others. The network also invited clerics like Salama Abdel Qawy. In one “town hall” style show, surrounded by youth, he calmly issued a fatwa that Sisi should be killed and whomever kills him and the “big criminals” will be rewarded by God. Finally, Brotherhood clerics like Essam Telemeh, former office manager of Imam Youssef El Qaradwi, has his own fatwa show called Yestaftonak. In one appearance, Telemeh justified the killing of the Mufti and Egyptian judges on religious grounds saying that they should be treated like thugs and that unlike other categories of criminals, thugs can be killed by any member in society without the permission of the ruler.

Mekamleen still broadcasts to this day, but after receiving a warning in 2015 from Eutelsat the network stopped allowing Wagdy Ghoneim on air as they feared that his frequent anti-Semitic comments will force the network to shut down. The sources of funding have never been disclosed, but according to an employee, the network mainly relies on financing from Gulf businessmen and other private individuals.

Another network, Mekamleen, rose to prominence as it aired the infamous Sisi leaks in early 2015. Mekamleen has more news content than Rabaa and attempts to appeal to Islamist youth by having younger hosts and programs geared towards them. The channel still echoed calls for “revolutionary,” code for violent, action by the youth. It also invited clerics like Wagdy Ghoneim and presented him as an acceptable religious figure for youth to listen to, even though he had been explicitly Takfiri in his discourse. The network also invited clerics like Salama Abdel Qawy. In one “town hall” style show, surrounded by youth, he calmly issued a fatwa that Sisi should be killed and whomever kills him and the “big criminals” will be rewarded by God. Finally, Brotherhood clerics like Essam Telemeh, former office manager of Imam Youssef El Qaradwi, has his own fatwa show called Yestaftonak. In one appearance, Telemeh justified the killing of the Mufti and Egyptian judges on religious grounds saying that they should be treated like thugs and that unlike other categories of criminals, thugs can be killed by any member in society without the permission of the ruler.

---


10 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OQjHGZp3V4

11 Awad and Hashem.

12 Interview with Mekamleen employee, Turkey, June 2016.

13 Ibid.
Misr al-An was the one network that was explicitly tied to the Muslim Brotherhood and its active coverage during the period from summer 2014 to fall 2015 ranged from news, variety/entertainment, to religious content. In a December 2015 interview on Al-Jazeera, MB Secretary General Mahmoud Hussein said that a committee of his set up the channel.\textsuperscript{14} Initially, Wagdy Ghoneim was brought on as a frequent guest but as pressure grew the network stopped having him on-air. In late 2014 and spring 2015 the network engaged in the most explicit incitement of violence as it cheered on newly founded militant groups like Revolutionary Punishment. One of the most serious incidents happened during January 2015 when the network’s main host said: “I say to the wife of every officer…your husband will die, your children will be orphaned…these kids [“revolutionaries”] will kill the officers in Egypt.”\textsuperscript{15} Misr al-An also sometimes invited radical figures like Shahid Bolsen, an Islamist anti-capitalist ideologue who advocated for targeting foreign owned businesses.\textsuperscript{16}

The other major network, El-Sharq, gained prominence after it too aired leaked recordings of senior government officials. Initially, the network echoed its sister channels in calls for “revolutionary action” with its owner Bassem Khafagy personally appearing on air on several occasions to deliver messages intended to mobilize Islamists. After facing significant financial pressure, the network was taken over by prominent Egyptian political figure Ayman Nour with other undisclosed investors.\textsuperscript{17} The move attempted to symbolize how the pro-Brotherhood networks reflected a broad segment of Egyptian opposition figures and “liberals” like Ayman Nour. Initially, content on El-Sharq after the Nour takeover was mild and one uncovered woman was given her own show – albeit a “political” cooking show. This appears to have been a temporary façade, however. Radical clerics Salama Abdel Qawy\textsuperscript{18} and Mahmoud Fathy\textsuperscript{19} now have their own shows on El-Sharq.

\textbf{Competition over media in the Brotherhood’s internal power struggle}

As the on-air content of these networks grew more radical, the existence and influence of a distinct “revolutionary” faction became increasingly clear.

This “revolutionary” faction comprised some members of the Crisis Committee, High Administrative Committee, and a new office for Egyptian MB leaders abroad, including Brotherhood leaders like Ahmad Abdel Rahman and Mohamed Kamal. After Egyptian police killed Mohamed Kamal in October 2016, it was revealed that he had headed the High Administrative Committee and was effectively the leader of the revolutionary faction.\textsuperscript{20} Kamal had allegedly greenlit the founding of so called “special committees” that began to practice violence in 2014. And as Brotherhood leader and Kamal lieutenant Magdy Shelesh explained on Mekamleen following Kamal’s death, their plan was to escalate the conflict with the regime starting in January 2015.\textsuperscript{21} At that time, more protests were organized and a more sophisticated militant group called Revolutionary Punishment was formed echoing the tone set by the satellite networks.

As some Brotherhood elements on the ground began to engage in armed violence and others on the air incited them, older and more senior leaders recoiled.\textsuperscript{22} They believed that the Crisis Committee and other newly formed bodies were meant to be temporary and had

\textsuperscript{14} See: https://youtu.be/Cu1LRFeAGo
\textsuperscript{18} See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8wsqrsUG_p0
\textsuperscript{19} See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q81ZD-0494Q
\textsuperscript{21} See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffxVHduo064&feature=youtu.be
\textsuperscript{22} Awad and Hashem.
overreached. Just as importantly, these older leaders were being sidelined and serious internal disagreements over internal bureaucratic processes and bylaws had emerged. This “old guard” faction included Acting-Supreme Guide Mahmoud Ezzat, Secretary General Mahmoud Hussein, and now London based deputy Supreme Guide Ibrahim Munir. However, as previously noted, Mahmoud Hussein did set up *Misr al-An.* It remains unclear when exactly the old guard decided that their media creations had gone too far.

In spring 2015, this internal power struggle came out to the open. Members of the old guard weren’t allowed to appear on the networks, while their detractors launched attacks against them. The revolutionary faction then had its own spokesmen whose messages were broadcast on the channels and consistently challenged the authority of the old guard leaders. Old guard leaders were also allegedly not allowed to post articles on the main MB website Ikhwanonline.com, and in response launched their own rival website, Ikhwan.site, and social media accounts. As this was brewing, London based leader Ibrahim Munir attempted to assert power and exercise his new position as deputy Supreme Guide. He began to appear on London-based MB linked network *Al-Hewar,* founded by Azzam Al Tamimi in 2006. The network began to dedicate more airtime for Egypt coverage, and a prominent host from *Mekamleen,* Osama Gaweesh, transferred there.

As this was happening, new Facebook pages claiming to speak for disfranchised Brothers popped up. The most notable example was that of “Ikhwan Voice,” which launched attacks against the old guard and uploaded internal documents, including the passport page of Secretary General Mahmoud Hussein to show their reach. Such unprecedented behavior in the media prompted some to speculate that perhaps some MB members were calling the authorities on each other to settle scores.

The Brotherhood old guard, however, had more money and experience and weren’t shy to use unconventional tactics. Supporters of the revolutionary faction alleged that rebelling MB regional offices that refused to recognize the authority of the old guard received less money. This may have played a role in winding down the operations of violent groups like Revolutionary Punishment. Other violence deployed by the special committees and other MB linked groups also saw a precipitous drop starting in the summer of 2015. The old guard and their supporters also began to walk back some of the more incendiary stances.

The most audacious and decisive move by the old guard was the taking over of *Misr al-An.* According to an investigation by Islamist leaning website Noonpost, based on original internal MB documents and Turkish legal documents, the takeover began when Secretary General Mahmoud Hussein ordered the acting president of *Misr al-An* to sign over the network to a front company the old guard established. The move allowed the old guard’s men in Turkey to have editorial influence over the new channel.

This new network, called *Watan,* meaning homeland, began broadcasting around February 2016. Viewers tuning into the new channel will instantly recognize its more professional production quality and content. Although

---

23 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cu1LRF6eAGo
25 See: http://ikhwan.site/
26 See: https://www.facebook.com/%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7-%D9%86-364674683729077/
27 See: https://www.facebook.com/364674683729077/photos/a.364783523718193.1073741828.364674683729077/394872574042621/?type=3&theater
29 Ibid.
31 See: https://www.facebook.com/wataneegypt; https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDA4qHb3YiZeZgEIvNz3FMQ/featured
anti-government rhetoric remains, the hosts are far less fiery. Egyptian militant groups are not explicitly praised, though Hamas militant content is aired. The channel now has a wider variety of religious programming with a traditional Brotherhood-Sufi bent that airs Sufi chanting or nasheeds. The network also has consistent news content with news hours throughout the day. Its programming appears to be designed to broaden its base to more Egyptians and attract Brotherhood viewers who may have been turned off by the explicit incitement on the other channels. The network’s main hire was famous Egyptian actor turned dissident Hesham Abdulla, a move that surprised many Egyptians who didn’t know their beloved actor had MB sympathies. There is a call-in radio show and another show hosted by a man in full farmer garb and accent designed to appeal to farmers and uneducated Egyptians, and Khamees is back with the same show he hosted on Misr 25.

When the revolutionary wing launched what amounted to an internal coup, assuming all leadership positions and officially relieving old guard leaders of their posts, in December 2016 the media tools proved critical. The new wing relied on social media to get the message out and set up Ikhwanonline.info to rival the official .com version the old guard retook. For their part, old guard leaders took to Watan and their own websites to dismiss the power grab. This back and forth has left the base confused about who exactly were their legitimate leaders.

Conclusion

Media tools played an unprecedented role in how the Muslim Brotherhood adapted to its new reality of repression. The transformations in the MB’s media empire mirrored the mood, tendencies, and power struggles inside the organization, providing a unique window for researchers to study these developments in real time.

The satellite networks and new media platforms also showed how easy it could be for dissidents to challenge leaders and for radicals to introduce their ideas into the body of the Muslim Brotherhood. These media platforms helped bridge the connective tissue lost between members, leaders, and clerics in a time of extreme repression. Through these media platforms, Brotherhood leaders and clerics also attempt to acculturate a fragmented organization and win over a young rebellious generation. When left unchecked, Brotherhood clerics and their Salafist allies with Gulf funding quickly propagated the most hateful, violent, and sectarian expressions of Islamism, arguably helping radicalize some youth by providing them with religious justifications for violence against the state. Now the old guard is using the same media tools to counter these extreme calls and answer the question of who speaks for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Yet new media platforms will always challenge the attempted consolidation by the old guard of traditional media like satellite television. Dissidents will still have access to their Facebook pages and websites. Indeed, in 2016, at least two new militant groups that are ideologically aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood have sprung up. One Facebook page called “Resistance Media” frequently posts propaganda geared towards Islamist and Brotherhood youth. The militant groups also have their own media platforms, specifically encrypted ones like Telegram, where they can reach their audiences uninterrupted. As the Brotherhood continues to evolve to face new challenges, its internal and external struggles will be reflected in the media its leaders produce and its changing audience consumes.

Mokhtar Awad is a research fellow in the Program on Extremism at George Washington University.

32 See: https://youtu.be/0CPGGYAiz7A
33 See: https://www.facebook.com/qawem.media2/?fref=ts
Viral Pulpits:
Clerics and the Sectarianization of the Gulf Online Sphere

Alexandra Siegel, New York University

Dubbed “Twitter Sheikhs” and “YouTube Preachers,” a diverse group of Sunni clerics have emerged as the superstars of the Gulf online sphere.¹ The four most popular Twitter accounts in both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are Sunni religious leaders.² Prominent cleric Mohammed al-Areef tops the list in Saudi Arabia, with 15.8 million followers, while televangelist Mishary Rashid’s 11.4 million followers have made him the most popular Twitter user in Kuwait. Although news outlets, royal family members, popstars, and soccer players hold these top spots in other Gulf monarchies, clerics aren’t far behind.

While their social media platforms have earned them titles including the “Brad Pitt of Muslim clerics” (Mohamed al-Arefe), or the “Dear Abby sheikh” (Ayed al-Qarni), their online celebrity status has far more substantive consequences than these nicknames suggest.³ A wide variety of Sunni clerics—including ultra-conservative Salafis like Nabil al Awadhy, Adnan al-Arour, and Salem al-Rafei, Saudi Arabia’s salwa (Islamic Awakening) Salafi clerics who draw influence from the Muslim Brotherhood such as Mohammad al-Areef, Ayad al-Qarni, Nasir al-Omar, Abdul Aziz al-Tarifi, and Saad al-Buraik, and more mainstream Islamists like Qatar-based Egyptian cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi—have increasingly used their social media platforms to incite anti-Shia hostility and deepen sectarian divisions across the region. From spreading hate speech to fundraising for armed groups, these clerics are playing an important role in entrenching sectarian divisions both on and offline.

Although their followings are smaller, Shia clerics and movements are also contributing to the sectarianization of the Gulf online sphere. Rather than using social media as a means of disseminating religious advice or jurisprudence, a variety of Shia clerics in the Gulf are using digital platforms to advance their own brands of Shia identity politics. Furthermore, while usually less overt than the derogatory rhetoric advanced by Sunni religious leaders, Shia clerics have also disseminated divisive anti-Sunni messages in the online sphere.

In this new media environment in which elites, extremist groups, media outlets, and everyday citizens interact on the same platforms, Sunni and Shia clerics are playing a key role in popularizing a more visible, mainstream form of sectarianism. While on the one hand, clerics have a long history of adapting to changing media technologies, the immediate, uncensored, and transnational nature of social media has changed the rules of the game. Clerics are promoting sectarian narratives in real-time that reach larger audiences than ever before, and have tangible consequences offline.

Social Media as Clerics’ Latest Pulpit

Sunni and Shia clerics alike have long relied on the prevailing media tools of the day to reach their followers. Centuries ago, Muslims would frequently travel long distances to consult clerics for advice and to receive authoritative legal opinions. This process was first transformed by books, and later by question and answer columns in magazines and newspapers, giving Muslims more direct access to religious guidance.⁴ The advent of


radio and television brought interactive talk shows in which clerics—particularly government-approved clerics—could be broadcast into their constituents’ living rooms and answer questions by phone. In the 1970s, Ayatollah Khomeini’s sermons were dispersed covertly on magnetic tapes in souks and bazaars in Iran. Beginning in the 1990s, the development of satellite television also enabled clerics to take advantage of quasi-independent media platforms, building larger networks and gaining more freedom to produce content.

More recently, clerics have used the rise of Internet access and the growing popularity of social media to broaden their reach. Shia and Sunni religious leaders alike have developed websites, Twitter and Facebook accounts, and YouTube channels to reach their followers. These platforms contain links to religious Q & A, video sermons, fatwa libraries, and accounts where followers can donate money. Analysis of clerics’ online activity suggests that they behave quite strategically. For example, more political clerics are more likely to use social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook and are more likely to direct their messages toward a domestic constituency. By contrast, clerics that have more religious, apolitical, doctrines tend to make greater use of their websites and produce content in a variety of languages designed to reach a global following.

Sunni Clerics’ Incitement of Sectarianism in the Online Sphere

Recent research that I have conducted at NYU’s Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) lab suggests that Saudi Sunni clerics—particularly ultra-conservative and sahwa Salafi clerics—are playing a key role in spreading anti-Shia narratives in the Saudi Twittersphere. Using a large dataset of Saudi tweets collected between February and November 2015 containing anti-Shia slurs, I measure the degree to which clerics are responsible for spreading sectarian hate speech through Saudi Twitter networks in the aftermath of diverse violent events. My results show that Saudi clerics were highly influential in spreading anti-Shia rhetoric and increasing the number of Saudi Twitter users tweeting such language in the aftermath of Houthi military advances in Yemen in February and March 2015, as well as following the Russian intervention in Syria in late September 2015. Particularly influential clerics in the dataset included Saudi sahwa clerics Mohammed al-Arefe, and Abdul Azziz al-Tarifi and Saudi-based Syrian Salafi cleric Muhammad Al-Munajjid. Their tweets containing sectarian slurs—as well as those sent by other clerics—were retweeted frequently by other popular Twitter users who then spread their messages through the network. Clerics also tweeted early on in the aftermath of violent events, directly instigating upticks in the overall volume of sectarian rhetoric.

The following tweets illustrate the types of derogatory anti-Shia language that appears in my dataset. For example, in April 2015, Saudi Sheikh Nasser al-Omar told his 1.65 million Twitter followers, “it is the responsibility of every Muslim to take part in the Islamic world’s battle to defeat the Safawis [derogatory term linking the Arab Shia to Iran] and their sins, and to prevent their corruption on earth.”

---


6 Although many clerics have a significant online presence, others like Saudi Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh have railed against social media as “a source of all evil and devastation” and a “council for jokesters.”

7 Mugbar, Safa. 2014. “Religious Use of Social Media in the Gulf and Iraq.” *Gulf Research Center Cambridge*.

8 Mugbar, Safa. 2014. “Religious Use of Social Media in the Gulf and Iraq.” *Gulf Research Center Cambridge*.


10 These slurs include rafidah, safawi, majous, as well as variations of these terms—each of which are dehumanizing epithets, which imply that the Shia are not true Muslims. Each tweet in my dataset contained at least one anti-Shia slur, identified using dictionary-based text analysis methods. Qualitative analysis suggests that these tweets did in fact express anti-Shia sentiments. The entire dataset contained over 9 million tweets, about 500,000 of which contained location meta-data indicating they were sent from Saudi Arabia.
In a video posted on his Twitter account, he tells dozens of Saudi men seated in a mosque that their “brothers” in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Afghanistan are fighting a jihad, or holy war, against the Safawi.\(^{11}\) Giving another example of how this language appears in my dataset, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Tarifi tweeted in February 2015, “Jews and Christians did not used to collude with the rafidha [Shia rejectionists] as they do today in this country and every country.”

Plotting the daily volume of clerics’ tweets containing sectarian rhetoric relative to the overall volume of anti-Shia tweets in the Saudi Twittersphere offers an illustration of this phenomenon. The spikes in the plot of clerics’ anti-Shia tweets (shown below in green) occur at the same time as spikes in the overall volume of sectarian tweets in the Saudi Twittersphere (shown below in black). By contrast, as a point of comparison, tweets containing sectarian slurs sent by pro-ISIS accounts (shown below in red), which tweeted anti-Shia rhetoric frequently but were not influential in spreading such rhetoric throughout the Saudi Twittersphere, follow a very different pattern. This finding is also backed up by more rigorous statistical analysis of the timing of clerics’ tweets as well as their positions within retweet networks.

This proliferation of anti-Shia hate speech on social media has had substantive consequences on the ground. For example, Saudi Arabia’s minority Shia population has been alarmed by the vehemence of online rhetoric condemning them as false Muslims and suggesting that they are not loyal citizens. In this climate, the Saudi Shia population has increasingly feared for its safety.\(^{12}\)

More tangibly, Sunni clerics across the Gulf have used social media to encourage their followers to donate money to militia groups or even take up arms themselves in the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria. For example, in May 2012, a group of prominent sahwa clerics calling themselves the “Ulema Committee to Support Syria”

---


---

Data: NYU Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) Lab. Figures: Alexandra Siegel
created a group on Facebook, organizing a fundraising drive for Sunni civilians in Syria, and calling for greater Gulf intervention in the conflict. For the Saudi government, this action crossed a red line, and the government summoned the clerics to Riyadh to ban them from soliciting donations. Additionally, in 2013, the Kuwaiti government banned the television show of Shafi al-Ajmi, a prominent haraki (activist) Salafi cleric who had called on his supporters to torture and kill fighters in Syria linked to Hezbollah both on TV and through his Twitter account and YouTube channel.

Despite these governmental attempts to ban clerics from involvement in the Syria conflict, popular Saudi Salafi cleric Abdullah bin Mohammad bin Suleiman Muhaisini, who is currently living in Syria, has developed an online media empire aimed at funding and supporting various Sunni armed groups fighting the Assad regime. He has reportedly raised millions of dollars in support of militias on the ground. Along these lines, following the Russian intervention in Syria late September 2015, dozens of Saudi clerics called on Arab and Muslim countries to “give all moral, material, political and military” support to jihad against Syria’s government and its Iranian and Russian backers. The clerics signed an online statement saying, “The holy warriors of Syria are defending the whole Islamic nation. Trust them and support them ... because if they are defeated, God forbid, it will be the turn of one Sunni country after another.” In this way, by using their social media presence to spread hostile anti-Shia messages and encouraging their domestic constituents in the Gulf to take sectarian stances or actions in ongoing regional conflicts, Sunni clerics are elevating sectarian tensions both on and offline.

Clerics and Online Politicization of Shia Identity

Although their online presence is less pervasive, Shia clerics and religious movements are also contributing to the sectarianization of the online sphere. Motivated by ongoing social and political unrest among Shia populations in the Gulf, many Shia religious leaders have advanced their own forms of identity politics in the online sphere. Qualitative research suggests that the Shia online presence in the Gulf context is particularly politicized. Recent analysis of Twitter accounts suggests that nearly half of the social media messages transmitted by Shia clerics and organizations in the Gulf are political and tend to be primarily focused on domestic—rather than transnational—Shia politics.

While the origins of Shia identity politics in the Gulf are complex and have deep historical roots, the politicization of Shia identities has been accelerated by the advent of social media. As online tools have diminished state monopoly on media outlets, citizens in the Gulf are now able to access real-time information about events occurring across the globe. Given that the public expression of Shia identity has often been tightly restricted, social media has emerged as an important outlet for marginalized Shia populations to express political disaffection. Shia clerics including Hadi Al Modarresi, Muhammad al Hussaini, Sadiq Al Shirazi, Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, Faisal al Awami, Abdulrahman al Hobail, and Abdullah Al Ghuraifi, as well as Shia organizations like Al-Wefaq Society, Amal Society, and Da’wa Islamic Society have played a prominent role in disseminating content. Gulf regimes view this online Shia activism as particularly threatening, and have worked to arrest and intimidate its leaders.

While on the one hand Shia clerics and religious movements’ online activity has bolstered political opposition movements in the Gulf, their mixing of religious and political messages has also made it difficult for Shia citizens to engage and bridge the divide with Sunni reformers. For example, although in the early days of the Arab Spring, Sunni and Shia opposition groups in Saudi Arabia collaborated to organize a country-wide “Day of Rage” against the monarchy, relations soon soured and Shia political opposition has often been portrayed as a sectarian demand, rather than a more universal call for representation and political freedom.\footnote{Wehrey, Frederic M. 2013. *Sectarian politics in the Gulf: from the Iraq war to the Arab uprisings*. Columbia University Press.}

Social media has also facilitated the spread of hostile anti-Sunni rhetoric advocated by Shia religious leaders. For example, Sheikh Yasser al-Habib, a Kuwaiti televangelist who was jailed in Kuwait and now resides in the UK uses his social media accounts to disseminate a constant barrage of anti-Sunni content. From cheering the deaths of prominent Sunnis to referring to Muhammad’s wife Aisha as an “enemy of God,” al-Habib’s social media messages and YouTube videos have spread virally.\footnote{Gye, Hugo. 2014. “Preacher Stirs Race Tensions.” \url{http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2589795/Fears-preacher-stir-race-tensions-Buckinghamshire-village.html}} Additionally, numerous Shia religious media outlets with strong online presences have emerged in the Gulf, advocating hyper-sectarian jingoistic discourse.\footnote{Feldner, Y. 2015. “Fitna TV: The Shi’ite-Bashing Campaign On Salafi TV Channels And Social Media.” \url{http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/8879.htm}} However, unlike the overt expression of anti-Shia hostility by Sunni clerics, Shia religious leaders and organizations have mostly employed somewhat less incendiary language. For example, Shia clerics and media outlets will emphasize the need to fight “terrorists,” and sometimes “Wahhabis,” but generally refrain from directly encouraging a war against Sunnis.

Taken together, while Shia clerics and organizations in the Gulf have been instrumental in using online tools to organize opposition movements and cultivate a new sense of political awareness among Gulf Shia populations, their role in the sectarianization of the online sphere has inhibited cross-sectarian cooperation and the development of non-sectarian opposition movements. Furthermore, the use of antagonistic, thinly veiled anti-Sunni narratives contributes to the general climate of sectarian hostility in the Gulf online sphere.

**Conclusions**

While Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube were touted at the beginning of the Arab Spring as revolutionary tools for throwing off the shackles of state repression and achieving political freedoms, they have also bred darker political forces. Sunni and Shia clerics and sectarian media outlets have cultivated large online networks, which they use to spread divisive and hostile rhetoric to large audiences on a daily basis. Gory imagery from ongoing conflicts in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria are frequently used to drum up sectarian animosity. In this new media climate, dehumanizing and derogatory rhetoric that was once the purview of extremist groups has become more mainstream, and sectarian tensions continue to mount.

Despite these distressing developments, online tools nonetheless present a useful opportunity for religious leaders to develop compelling counter-sectarian narratives. For example, following an anti-Shia terror attack in Al-Ahsa in 2014, Sunni and Shia clerics issued a joint statement saying, “Those who carried out this attack do not represent a specific [Islamic] sect or school of thought, rather these are adherents of a malicious satanic ideology.” A prominent Shia cleric added, “Those who carried out this terrorist attack wanted to explode the national social fabric and incite sectarian fitna [civil strife].”\footnote{Al-Sharq al-Awsat. 2014. “Saudi clerics warn against sectarian conflict as anti-terror efforts continue.” \url{http://english.aawsat.com/2014/11/article55338266}} As these statements suggest, clerics have the potential to use social media to spread cooperative, counter-sectarian messages to their followers.

Unfortunately, as long as Gulf governments continue to pursue domestic and foreign policies that breed sectarian
divisions to suppress opposition and bolster their power, and as long as clerics can use sectarian animosity to rally their constituencies, it seems unlikely that religious elites will spontaneously begin to use their large online followings for more positive purposes. Given that the most influential online actors have strategic incentives to use new media to incite tensions, it seems the very tools that were once considered harbingers of progressive ideologies and democratization will continue to perpetuate and exacerbate Gulf sectarianism and impede political reform.

Alexandra Siegel is a political science PhD candidate at New York University and a Graduate Research Associate at NYU’s Social Media and Political Participation Lab (SMaPP).

---

**Does the Islamic State have a Media Doctrine?**

*Marwan M. Kraidy, University of Pennsylvania*

The Islamic State shocked the world with its use and publication of graphic violence. Its coordinated media apparatus and social media campaigns have been widely discussed and studied, but little is actually known about its media strategy, a potent blend of weaponized images and creative poaching from American popular culture.

In my new research project, funded by the Carnegie Corporation through a 2016 Andrew Carnegie Fellowship, I have been examining multiple primary jihadi documents about media and communication. Far from random acts of violence, IS has a clear media doctrine intended to do as much damage as its bullets and bombs.

The well-known 2004 jihadi tract, *The Management of Savagery* emphasized “savagery” because it attracts extensive media coverage. Violence must be spectacular, over the top. Jihadists should use massive explosive charges that obliterate buildings into smithereens, underscoring “the role of violence and coarseness against the infidels in combat and media battles.”

The book calls for an aggressive media strategy that both demoralizes the enemy and rallies the population. But it has little to say about targeting jihadi themselves, particularly those who design and execute media campaigns. For that, we have to turn to *Ayyuha al-Elamy Anta Mujahidon* (*Oh Media Worker, You are a Mujahid*).

A striking document, *Ayyuha al-Elamy* is at once inspirational tome, field manual, revolutionary pamphlet and philosophical manifesto. It mixes technical instructions with bursts of indoctrination, all peppered with religious quotes. Imagine an undergraduate media production textbook on ideological steroids.

From the onset, *Ayyuha al-Elamy* emphasizes “jihad of the tongue” over “jihad of the self,” reminding readers “that the weapon of the word can be more devastating than nuclear weapons.” In lengthy epigraphs, leading jihadis describe how the prophet Muhammad attacked his enemies with the most important media of his time – poetry, which was “more extreme than arrows.” The publication repeatedly highlights the importance of jihadi media and media workers and “achieving a media triumph hand in hand with a military victory.”

Most revealing is the systematic weaponizing of images. *Ayyuha al-Elamy* explicitly compares jihadi media to arrows, bullets and bombs. Quoting top Islamic State in
Iraq leader Abu Hamza al-Mujahir, it reminds readers that in “the military front, and ... the confrontation with the demonic media ... media rockets exceed in their ferocity and danger the flames of bombs dropped from airplanes.”

Speaking of “[T]he arrows of jihadi news,” Ayyuha al-E’lamy compares a camera to a machine gun, and underscores that image-weapons are so important they are worth dying for: “Don’t you see the photographer/cameraman carrying his camera in lieu of the Kalashnikov and running ahead of the solider in our conquests, welcoming bullets with his breast?”

This equation of images with weapons is not merely metaphorical. German artist and writer Harun Farocki once described footage shot by drones as “operative images,” which “do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation.”

After the U.S.-U.K. invasion of Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq – which eventually became the Islamic State – championed high-quality, high-brutality images. Especially compared to al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations poorly produced videos, post-Zarqawi IS videos are often described as “slick” and “sophisticated.”

But to understand images as operative, we need to reach further than the conventional narrative of technical sophistication and high production values. We could learn much about how images operate as weapons by shifting our attention from the messages images convey to the affects they impart.

Individuals first experience affects as bodily sensations. By the time people can make sense of these stirrings and give them names, affects become emotions. Terror itself is an affect. It stirs us, provoking sensations that we define as the emotions of fear and anxiety.

Philosophers have argued that weapons have an affect that is “projectilic.” As a fast, penetrative object that crosses a distance and hits its target at high velocity, a projectile can overwhelm a human body. When IS indoctrinates its media workers with the idea that images are tantamount to bullets, rockets and missiles, it is defining images as projectiles. This climaxes in Ayyuha al-E’lamy’s equation of media workers and suicide bombers: “the media worker is a martyr-operator without a belt.”

IS publications like Ayyuha al-E’lamy reflect a media doctrine that understands images as projectiles. They pack such an extreme dose of violence that their affect can overwhelm those it reaches. Most people will go to great lengths to avoid seeing such images, just as most people would escape a bullet or an arrow.

Aware of this, IS brings us the affect of terror in familiar form. Many have noted that IS videos have a “Hollywood visual style,” particularly when it comes to images of death. This is not the only visual trope in IS imagery familiar to Western audiences. Hostages about to be beheaded wear orange jumpsuits, a clear reference to jihadi detainees in Guantanamo.

Using a visual repertoire provided by Hollywood film and the U.S. military, and therefore familiar to American and global audiences, IS efficiently delivers its image-projectiles. Wrapping images of atrocity in a familiar visual and narrative format makes them more accessible, and thus more potent, inflicting the affect of terror on viewers.

As many have argued, the Islamic State is not an exceptional phenomenon, and its violence is not unprecedented. However, the group’s image weaponization, spelled out in official, prescriptive and lasting documents, and conveyed through a familiar delivery system, betrays a particularly creative media philosophy. Created during a moment of IS ascendance, this media doctrine may have to evolve as losses mount, but it still offers insight into an idealized form of media jihad.

Marwan M. Kraidy is the Anthony Shadid Chair in Global Media, Politics and Culture, and director of the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication (CARGC), Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania.
The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.