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Muhammad Al Atawneh. *Wahhābī Islam Facing the Challenges of Modernity: Dār Al-Iftā in the Modern Saudi State.* Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2010. XXII, 209 S. $136.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-18469-5; ISBN 978-90-04-18570-8.

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M. Al Atawneh: Wahhābī Islam Facing the Challenges of Modernity

It may seem to be surprising that the Saudi Arabian Dar al-Iftaâ, the supreme body to issue legal opinions (fatwas) in the Kingdom, has not been studied in depth in its 40 years of existence. Frank E. Vogelâs comprehensive book on the Saudi legal system may so far have been the most thorough study on the general relationship between the rulers and the religious-legal scholars Frank E. Vogel, Islamic law and legal system. Studies of Saudi Arabia, Leiden 2000. , while Guido Steinberg contributed extensive research on the Saudi Wahhabi scholars and their education, functions, and involvement in politics until King Abdulazizâs death in 1953. Guido Steinberg, Religion und Staat in Saudi-Arabien. Die wahhabitischen Gelehrten 1902-1953, WÃ¼rzburg 2002. Therefore Al Atawnehâs work fills a gap.

In his introduction, the author identifies the fatwas of the Dar al-Iftaâ to be âa medium for discourse, re-evaluation and redefinition of the connection between state, society and religionâ, (p. xiv) which has great influence on everyday life in Saudi Arabia. Addressing the issue of modernity serves as the basis of his examination. To him âmodernityâ means the increasing bureaucratization of iftaâ (fatwa counseling) in Saudi Arabia. For that purpose Al Atawneh researches the activities of the Dar al-Iftaâ between its inception in 1971 and the death of its most prominent head to date, Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Baz, in 1999. He sets out to explore the challenges for Wahhabi ideals in the context of 20th century modernity as the object of his research.

In essence, Al Atawneh, who is a senior researcher at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, argues that the Dar al-Iftaâ is relatively innovative regarding technological progress, but rather conservative when it comes to social norms. He prefers the emic perspective and provides an excellent review of the literature. His research is based on the sources employed by the muftis and on a content analysis of the fatwas and their identification as either traditional or innovative, that is, based on the text itself and its context or rather the reactions to it. Whereas the topics of fatwas generally include worship, customs, innovations, oaths, and family law with little contemporary relevance Cf. also Gerd-RÃ¼diger Puin, Der moderne Alltag im Spiegel hanbalitischer Fetwas aus Ar-RiyÃ¢d, in: ZDMG Suppl. III,1 (XIX. Deutscher Orientalistentag 1975), 1977, pp. 589-597, p. 590. , the author concentrates on the veneration of âholyâ sites, celebrations, women, and entertainment on the one hand, as well as on visual media, financial matters, and medical treatment on the other. According to him the permissibility of innovation â or to put it differently: the possibility of change â could only be discerned in the latter cases.

To begin with, Al Atawneh outlines the history and development of the Dar al-Iftaâ, which was formed in 1971 through the fusion of the Board of Senior âUlamaâ (BSU) and the Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and Iftaâ. In 1993, the office of the State Grand Mufti was reintroduced. It had been suspended since the death of its long-time holder, Muhammad bin Ibrahim Al al-Shaykh, in 1969. The functions of the Permanent

Committee are to prepare research for the discussions within the BSU and to conduct iftaâ in matters of faith, worship, and human affairs (muâamalat). The BSU then serves as the final authority. It is a gatekeeper to prevent non-sharia legislation and hence a sort of pre-legislative organ. In the same vein of centralization and bureaucratization, King Abdullah, in a move to prevent the spread of âstrange, ridiculous and extremistâ fatwas, has meanwhile decreed that the BSU be the only entity to legally issue fatwas in Saudi Arabia. Hussein Shobokshi, A Wise Royal Decree, in: Asharq Al-Awsat, 19.08.2010, available from: (07.04.2012).

Al Atawneh maintains that even though members of the Al al-Shaykh, the descendants of Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, are seldom muftis within the Dar al-Iftaâ because the King prevents one family of becoming more powerful than he himself and because they have been quite reluctant to enter its service, they are still influential in the religious sphere. Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab himself is said to have been sceptical of muftis, but the political role of iftaâ in modern-day Saudi Arabia is one of reinforcing the legitimacy of the rulerâs acts. Al Atawnehâs statement that there is a mutual relationship between the Wahhabi scholars and the royal family, a âtotal fusion of religion and politicsâ (p. 35), is hardly original. Instead, the added value of his approach is to claim that the classical Wahhabi fatwas were usually issued with the aim to define and promote Wahhabi Islam whereas contemporary Wahhabi fatwas rather tend to adapt Wahhabi Islam to modernity.

As far as the contemporary Wahhabi interpretation of Islam according to the Permanent Committee is concerned, it relies on the commonly known four sources â the Quran, the sunna (Prophetic traditions), the consensus (of the salaf, that is, the Prophetâs companions, not of later generations), and analogy. Analogical reasoning, according to Al Atawneh, was embraced by the Wahhabi scholars, albeit under names different from the legal term âqiyasâ: darura (necessity) and maslaha (common interest, public welfare). Together with tarjih (preference based on the likely truth derived from contradictory evidence) For an instructive overview of this concept cf. Ulrich Rebstock, Vom AbwÃ¤gen (tarÇ§Ä«á¾). Stationen einer Begriffskarriere, in: XXX. Deutscher Orientalistentag 2007. AusgewÃ¤hlte VortrÃ¤ge. Ed. on behalf of the DMG by Rainer Brunner, Jens Peter Laut, and Maurus Reinkowski, 2008, available from (07.04.2012). this forms the basis of Wahhabi ijtihad (personal effort at independent reasoning) and highlights the âWahhÄbÄ« inter-madhhab trendâ (p. 75). Only thus could Wahhabi scholars accommodate âthe challenges of modern lifeâ (p. 80) and contribute to tangible change. For the importance of ijtihad in Saudi politics cf. also Guido Steinberg, Religion und Staat in Saudi-Arabien. Die wahhabitischen Gelehrten 1902-1953, WÃ¼rzburg 2002, pp. 326ff.

As has been mentioned above Al Atawneh distinguishes between two types of fatwa topics: those prohibiting and those permitting change. One example from each section shall suffice to illustrate his argument. On the one hand, leisure time activities are supposed to be directed at worship or at least conform to the sharia. Wahhabi scholars opine that this is true of athletic competitions in camel and horse riding or archery because they strengthen the physical fitness of Muslims vis-Ã -vis potential enemies. It is not true of modern sports like soccer unless the players observe several restrictions. Along these lines also playing music or dancing is forbidden if it imitates idolatry. However, these prohibitions do not mean that these activities do not exist. The scholars are realistic enough to take note of the facts. But they maintain that fatwas are issued to address and resolve the discrepancy between what is and what should be.

On the other hand, media like newspapers and the Internet (or the combination of both) despite their depiction of human beings and animals are considered to be in the public interest (maslaha) because Muslims need to be informed and involved in social life. The Internet is under particular scholarly scrutiny because it can function as a âpowerful toolâ for information, education, religion, and social reasons. Yet it burdens the official scholars with a legal challenge or dilemma inasmuch as it can be used for promoting missionary activities as well as for displaying âunknown, unrestrained and often immoral content [â¦] such as pornographyâ (p. 119). Therefore, the scholars â in an âattempt to âIslamizeâ the Internetâ (p. 120) â successfully insisted on such sophisticated censorship measures as can be found in Saudi Arabia today.

These examples can only hint at the difference Al Atawneh makes. In both cases, of course, the fatwas rest on the precepts which the scholars consider to be consistent with the sharia. Nevertheless, the first set of issues deals with the consequences of bidâa as understood and applied by modern Wahhabi scholars â delineating that which is prohibited. By contrast, scholars make ample use of such notions as darura and maslaha in the second set of issues in order to justify practices needed for running a modern nation state. In conclusion, the muftis play a crucial role inside the Kingdom where their fatwas may even become law. But their decisions are not always

implemented and have not successfully addressed issues of political liberalization despite their attention for other twenty-first century challenges.

Altogether Muhammad Al Atawneh presents a convincing study informed by original sources like, among many others, Umm al-Qura newspaper and royal decrees. Many examples, a general index, and a number of useful appendices (translations of analyzed fatwas, organizational chart of Saudi iftaâ, glossary of Arabic terms) round off this insightful book.

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