

IslamOnline.net: Independent, interactive, popular

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January, 2008. This paper gives an overview of the history and operations of IslamOnline.net, one of the most-visited Arabic/ English Islamic web portals which issue fatwas.ⁱⁱ The body behind IslamOnline (IOL) is the Al-Balagh Cultural Society in Qatar, which was established in 1997 on the initiative of Qatari IT specialist Maryam Hasan al-Hajari and Dr. Hamid al-Ansari, a scholar at the Shari^ca Faculty of the University of Qatar. In its early stages the project was supported by the University of Qatar, especially by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the 1926-born, Azhar-educated Egyptian scholar and theorist of the Islamic Awakening movement who still chairs the Al-Balagh Society today.ⁱⁱⁱ The headquarters and IT development of IOL are based in Doha, while most of the content is produced by more than 150 employees at the IOL offices in Cairo. IOL is mainly financed by donations and by selling its technical know-how to other Islamic institutions around the world. In promotional material for the site, Yusuf al-Qaradawi defined the site's mission this way: "This project is neither nationalistic nor one aiming at a grouping or a group of people; it is a project for the entire Islamic community. It is the jihad of our era."^{iv}

IOL's main bilingual competitors are the Saudi-based IslamToday.net and the Qatar-based IslamWeb.net. These portals are associated with different contemporary schools of Islamic thought; IslamOnline declares its support for *wasatiyya*, the so-called Islamic centrism or Islamic mainstream.^v IslamToday.net is part of the new awakening (*sahwa*) in Saudi Arabia, a moderate Salafi movement (a position that leans towards *wasatiyya* discourse) which follows the ideas of Salman al-^cAwda, who is one of the most popular independent sheikhs in Saudi Arabia. IslamWeb.net is the website of the Qatari Ministry for Religious Affairs.

In spite of their ideological differences, these sites essentially offer similar services: detailed information about Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, the two sources of Islamic law, Qur'an and Sunnah and articles on Islamic history. Some portals, for example IslamWeb.net, host databanks containing other historical texts. This sometimes involves digitizing old manuscripts, an expensive and time-consuming project that not all sites can afford.

All of these portals offer users information on religious practice and its respective contemporary interpretation. This usually occurs through legal opinions (*fatawa*), an established genre of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Users can search online databases for previously issued fatwas by subject or the name of the issuing mufti, or use an online form to request a new fatwa tailored to their personal situation. A key difference between IslamOnline and its competitors is that IslamOnline invites not only sharia experts to give advice, but also academics from fields including sociology, political science, psychology, medicine and economy, and sometimes even from literature or the arts. This is due to a belief among IOL founders that muftis cannot often give answers to questions which require special knowledge outside the framework of Islamic jurisprudence and theology.

The portal promotes the exchange of different views and debate among Muslims, but also between Muslims and non-Muslims. IslamOnline employees moderate Discussion Forums (*sahat al-hiwar* in the Arabic section), refreshing them daily with topical subjects. Interlinked journalistic essays on topics including Islamic normativity, family, youth, health, culture, economics or Muslims in Europe reflect the current debate over Muslim daily life in a wide spectrum reaching from the Middle East and Africa to Europe and Asia.

Beyond being a counseling service and discussion platform, IOL is also, in a way, an independent news agency, which is another aspect that distinguishes it from other Islamic portals. Each day, the IOL staff publishes a range of news stories on the site. In both the choice of the stories, which always have relevance to Islamic countries or Muslims, and the evaluation of global events, the presentation of the news on IOL differs from that of international news agencies, such as Reuters or the German DPA. IOL news

could be most closely compared to that of al-Jazeera and its website, although IOL aims to present a clearly Islamic spectrum of opinions on the news.^{vi}

Missionaries and mission: Founding IslamOnline.net

Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who moved from Egypt to Qatar in 1961 and set up the Shari^ca faculty at the University of Qatar and the Center for the Study of Sunnah and Sira, is correctly associated with establishing IslamOnline but mistakenly with running it. A glance into the portal's operational procedures and distribution of responsibilities reveals that his duties are largely honorary today. IOL began as a project of IT specialist Maryam al-Hajari during her final year at university. She attended a course on *zakat* taught by Qaradawi at the Shari^ca faculty in 1996. Al-Hajari says it was then she was exposed to a meaning of *zakat* that ran deeper than the standard notion of paying a portion of one's income: "How you suppose to dispose your knowledge. That was a new concept to me. Before I thought *zakat* was only for money. So, I thought, I have got a lot of knowledge, I was a top student, so, what am I going to do with itI thought about it a long time."^{vii}

This new understanding pushed her off the commercial IT path and al-Hajari decided to use her computer skills for *da^cwa*, the spreading of Islam: "Muslims all the time are thinking how to tell people about their religion. But I was thinking of other kinds of *da^cwa*, like internal *da^cwa*. We as Muslims, we need *da^cwa* too.... We get lost. What is right, what is wrong. ... Even our shaykhs are separated from modern life. They wouldn't know how to answer to special questions."^{viii} In 1996 the Internet was introduced in Qatar, leading to a proliferation of Islamic websites, many of which al-Hajari considered unappealing. Al-Hajari's vision for her own website to counteract the inferior sites coalesced around three goals: answering questions by other Muslims, improving the image of Islam and offering a platform for discussion that would acquaint users with different perspectives and views. Armed with these ideas, Maryam al-Hajari turned to her lecturer Hamid al-Ansari for help.

After studying Islamic theology (*usul al-din*) in Saudi Arabia, the Qatari-born

Hamid al-Ansari went to England in the early 1990s to work on his dissertation. There, he joined the country's first Muslim-Arabic students' union, the MSS (Muslim Student Society in UK and Ireland). His task in the union was to deal with the image of Islam in the British media. Experiences with the British press, who in most cases would not print any comments from a Muslim viewpoint to counterbalance Western-flavored articles on Islam, caused him to start seeking alternative ways to express his opinions publicly. He established contacts with like-minded people and became interested in the electronic networking cultures that were then developing, especially within university circles. The growth of the internet in the 1990s offered him a solution to his problem: "Finally everybody can produce content, everybody can write, without control."^{ix}

Al-Ansari and al-Hajari gained administrative approval and financial support for the project from then University of Qatar president Ibrahim al-Nu^caymi. Nu^caymi hired Maryam al-Hajari as a university employee and declared IslamOnline a university project. Yusuf al-Qaradawi lent his star power by personally supporting and supervising the project. "He adopted the project. So, we used his name, because he is a respected person in Qatar and all over the Muslim world," said al-Ansari.^x Al-Qaradawi promoted IslamOnline in the media, especially in his frequent appearances on the weekly al-Jazeera program *Sharia and Life*, which is followed by some 35 million viewers around the world. When IslamOnline was first launched, the program's subject was "Islam on the Internet," and the new site was mentioned in the broadcast.^{xi}

Along with the aforementioned persons in Doha, many others got involved in the early stages of the IslamOnline project. The site began to take off, particularly after 9/11 when users from all over the world overwhelmed IslamOnline with questions. Hiba Ra'uf ^cIzzat, an Egyptian political sciences lecturer at Cairo University, often described as an Islamic feminist, is one of those who established the IOL office in Cairo. During a discussion she said that she had devoted no less than three years of intensive work to IOL alongside with her work at the university.^{xii} Combining work at IOL with study or other jobs was a common theme with employees interviewed for this paper.

The structure of the IOL web portal

The IOL web portal consists of two parts, English and Arabic, which are produced independently of each other. Each of the featured topics or sections is managed by one or several editors, whose approach and convictions shape the sections and subpages of the site. An editorial board supervises content production. The pages in Arabic and English are not congruent, which is due to the fact that they are produced for different publics or users. The pages in English mainly address Muslims in non-Muslim societies or non-Muslim users, while those in Arabic are aimed at Muslims in Muslim contexts.^{xiii} The site's structure changes and expands regularly, but one constant is that the Arabic and English sections are tailored to appeal to their respective audiences. The chart below, reflecting the January 2007 site design, gives an idea of the differences in presentation between the Arabic and English sections of IslamOnline:

<i>IslamOnline Topic Headings, January 2007</i>	
Arabic	English
The homepage of the portal: <i>al-Ra'isiyya</i>	The homepage of the portal: Home
1. <i>Akhbar wa-tahliliyyat</i> (News and Analyses)	1. News
2. <i>Shar'ī</i> (Islamic Law, Islamic Normativity)	2. Shari`ah
3. <i>Da'wi</i> (Commitment for Islam)	3. Muslim Affairs
4. <i>Tazkiyya</i> (Purification)	4. Euro-Muslims
5. <i>‘Ulum wa-sihha</i> (Science and Health)	5. Health & Science

6. <i>Thaqafa wa-fann</i> (Culture and Art)	6. Art & Culture
7. <i>Hawa' wa-Adam</i> (Adam and Eve)	7. Family
8. <i>Mashakil wa-hulul</i> (Problems and Solutions)	8. Youth
9. <i>Nama'</i> (Development)	9. Discover Islam ^{xiv}

News content is divided in two different categories, *Ahamm al-akhbar*/ Top News and *Mukhtarat IslamOnline*/ Highlights. The selection of the news items can have an idiosyncratic focus, but generally concentrates on Muslim majority countries or Muslim communities around the world. News from Palestine is heavily covered, although with more emphasis on the Arabic side. During Ramadan, the site focuses on questions and comments on ritual practice, but also on events connected with the holy month. In Ramadan of 2007, the site followed an episode in the online interactive video game *Second Life* in which a group of Muslim players constructed a virtual Ramadan tent that was then attacked by other users. The incident provoked animated discussions on *IslamOnline* about how to handle violence toward Muslims and Islamophobia.

The other subsections are structured in a similar manner, containing journalistic- and academic-style articles, discussion forums, special topics and an archive. As a treatment of all sections is beyond the scope of this article, I would like to pick out one example. During Ramadan 2007 the English-language section Art & Culture contained features ranging from an interview on the Persian poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, to an article about Ramadan observances in Sudan. It also included links to a Ramadan Poetry Competition (an invitation to participate in this competition, the winner's poem was to be read by a poet and performer, brother Dash), and a feature called "A is for Allah" featuring Yusuf Islam, known as Cat Stevens during his pop singing career. The Live Dialogues in this section dealt with two different subjects, "Poetry, A Vehicle for Peace?" with poet brother Dash as the guest, and "The Making of Hyab" with the guest

being the Spanish filmmaker Xavi Sala, the director of the above film. Under Special Topics users could access three entries: Make your Ramadan Art (with instructions on how to make silhouettes), Malaysia: Progress and Diversity (an overview of Malaysia's politics, culture and economy featuring numerous articles and interviews on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the country's independence), and Muslim Cultures in Africa (a special site which tries to correct the perceived misconceptions about Islamic culture in Africa with a variety of material).

The other sections of IOL follow a similar pattern, emphasizing a diversity of experiences for Muslims around the world. All sections accompany text with multimedia: images, audio files of interviews, lectures, radio shows, and sermons, and video. Finally, IslamOnline also provides electronic postcards or an atlas of the Islamic world or the site directory (*Wasa'it muta'addida/ Services*).

In sum, IslamOnline plays two distinct roles. It is a forum for Muslims – both in Muslim-majority countries and elsewhere – to discuss news, receive advice and communicate, but it also aims to correct or complicate the often simplistic image of Islam that other media present to non-Muslims. Playing to these dual audiences is clearly marked by the adaptation of categories between the Arabic and English portions of the site. The site's myriad categories and constantly changing features combine to illustrate IslamOnline's core ideology emphasizing the variety of experiences of Muslims around the world. This emphasis on variety also reflects the *wasatiyya* doctrine espoused by Qaradawi and others following 9/11 to offer a more pluralistic and by definition non-radical school of thought.

Organizational structure

By the end of 2005 IslamOnline employed some 150 staff, most of them young, not including freelance employees abroad.^{xv} Roughly 85% of the IOL workforce is based in Cairo, and most content for both the Arabic and English sites is produced there.^{xvi} Only an inconspicuous sign on one of the buildings in Cairo's Dokki district announces the existence of this relatively large enterprise, which is registered under the name Media

International in Egypt.^{xvii} IOL's headquarters in Doha employed 25 employees as of 2005. This office is in charge of management, coordination and supervision of content production, and also contributes to editing portions of the Arabic site. The Doha office handles IT support and also houses the "Business Development Unit," a department founded in 2005 to coordinate the marketing and sales strategies of IOL products. The full staff, including the Indian IT experts, are Muslim. IslamOnline is managed by two people: general manager Tawfiq Ghanem and vice chairman °Ali Qurah Daghi. Tawfiq Ghanem is Egyptian and studied journalism at Cairo University. Before IOL he worked for various newspapers and magazines. °Ali Qurah Daghi is a legal scholar of Kurdish origin from Qatar. He teaches at the *Shari°a* Faculty of the University of Qatar in the *al-Fiqh wa-l-usul* department and specializes in Islamic finance and economy. Like Yusuf al-Qaradawi, he is a member of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, which was founded in 1997.^{xviii}

In sum, IslamOnline employees come from all over Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, though the majority is Egyptian. Their professional background is heterogeneous and can be roughly subdivided into journalism and communication studies, computer sciences, Islamic theology and jurisprudence, medicine, psychology, administration and economics, as well as social and political sciences. Hierarchies are flat, and a distinctive discussion culture is prevalent. The portal's success is predominantly based on the commitment of its workforce, all of whom feel obliged to perform *da°wa*, the calling of others to Islam.

Financing and marketing

Marketing and the continuous search for financing possibilities are an integral part of the operations of IslamOnline. The ability to finance a project of this scale is to a large extent determined by consumer confidence in Internet projects, the worldwide market for *halal* products and the imaginativeness of the operators. The market for "Muslim" products has grown in recent years, especially in Europe and America where new perceptions of identity associated with consumption, success and individual spirituality have developed among young Muslims. This trend, which Boubekeur calls "Cool Islam,"

values halal foodstuffs and clothing made in accordance with the rules of shar^{ci}.^{xix} Canadian clothing company MuslimGear, for instance, advertises with the slogan “Believe in what you wear.”^{xx} The company’s sales pitch directly ties in to the image and da^cwa goals of the site: “MuslimGear is a clothing company that aims to strengthen the Muslim identity through its modest, stylish apparel, and through its beneficial work within the community. It helps sponsor youth and community activities within Montreal to benefit the area and show the world that Islam is a beautiful religion of peace and compassion.”^{xxi}

Whether the development of markets with specific religious or ethic claims can be described as alternative globalization in contrast to the idea of a neoliberal globalization of profit-oriented multinational corporations is a subject under discussion in academia. Alternative globalization means that, in contrast to the anti-globalization movement, global economic networks are not called into question per se. Rather, the actors use existing experiences and structures and analogously develop markets under different, ethical conditions, such as justice, solidarity, protection of the planet etc, thus challenging neo-liberal economic practices. These alternative economic enterprises tally with the interests of some Muslim thinkers, including Qaradawi, who aspire to Islamize modernity or to encourage globalization in an Islamic setting. Fatwas play an essential part in the realization of these ideas: in 2003, for instance, a fatwa allowing the production and distribution of a beverage named Mecca Cola was issued by Qaradawi and posted on the Internet.^{xxii} For their part, Mecca Cola continues to feature this fatwa on their website.

Advertising, however, does not nearly cover the costs of this high traffic website because the Arabic language Internet market is not sufficiently profitable. In 1997 the project received a generous donation from the Qatar Foundation, which was established in 1995 by Shaykha Muza, the wife of the new emir.^{xxiii} Hamid al-Ansari, who led IOL’s fundraising from 1997 to 2005, notes that raising money for an online project during the end of the 1990s was by no means an easy task. While new mosques or Qur’anic schools opening at this time had no shortage of patrons, an Internet project was something few could imagine and associate with.^{xxiv} The founding of the charitable organization Al-Balagh Cultural Society facilitated IOL's fundraising efforts, and so did, according to

Maryam al-Hajari, a fatwa issued by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, in which he described Islamic websites as “the jihad of our time.”^{xxv}

Another source of income for IOL up until 2005 was a stake it held in the IT company AfkarOnline. Since 2005 the company’s Business Development Unit in Doha has been in charge of developing new concepts for raising and obtaining additional funds. Today, for example, IOL sells books and CD-ROMs within the scope of marketing campaigns.^{xxvi} In addition, a newly-compiled media kit informs potential clients about advertising possibilities, formats and costs.^{xxvii} The handling of the advertising trade is also done by IOL in Doha. The good relationship with the Doha-based satellite television station al-Jazeera has proven advantageous in this respect. IOL commercials broadcast on al-Jazeera and seen by millions of viewers around the world are charged at low rates.

In recent years IOL's know-how and expertise in website production has turned into another important source of income. IslamOnline employees in Cairo program, design and support Internet sites of other institutions, for instance the awqaf ministries of Libya and Morocco and like-minded Islamic organizations, such as the International Union of Muslim Scholars or the Kuwait-based Global Center for Wasatiyya Studies.^{xxviii}

Counseling and fatwas online

One of the most popular sections on the IOL website is the Arabic-language section *Shar‘i*. This can be put down to the opportunities it presents to search and receive fatwas. The Shar‘i section, along with the various fatwa formats, contains the page *Islam wa-qadaya al-‘asr* (Islam and Contemporary Issues), edited by the Syrian academic Motaz al-Khateeb, which offers essays on contemporary topics, comments on conferences and analyses of political events on an abstract level. The page is open to all convictions, from conservative to the progressive, and this juxtaposition highlights variations among Islamic opinions. The section also features audio files with spoken renditions of texts by Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Muhammad al-Sha‘rawi, the first Egyptian media shaykh of all.

According to IOL coordinator Mutiullah Tayeb, an Afghan publicist who studied in Pakistan, fatwas, together with psychological and social counseling, constitute the core of IslamOnline.^{xxix} Maryam al-Hajari, the founder and IT manager, regards online fatwas as “decision supporters” that help people to make their own decisions.^{xxx} For her, fatwas are starting points for reflection rather than authoritative doctrines or instructions on how to act. She argues that scholars are no longer able to provide answers to all questions, and thus IslamOnline’s counseling service aims to consult a range of specialists that can include psychologists or social scientists. Each thematic section of the site, as outlined in the above chart, offers counseling (*istrisharat*) on relevant subjects. The staff members responsible for the counseling service tend to specialize in specific fields, e.g. psychologists and social scientists offer social counseling (*istisharat ijtimāʿiyya ʿamma*), physicians offer medical consultation (*istisharat sihiyya*), and so forth. These counselors are not given the title mufti, but rather *khabir* (expert) or *mustishar* (advisor).^{xxxi} All the advice offered, including the fatwas, is issued according to standardized rules which the site terms “quality management regulations” (*Watha’iq nizam idara al-jawda*).^{xxxii} These quality management regulations seem to replace the classical *adab al-mufti* instructions.

As already mentioned, IslamOnline’s counseling service comprises several subject areas, which are managed by specialists in the respective fields. Contrary to the assumption that someone like Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a conservative Azhar-trained scholar, might object to these practices, he perceives this form of production of knowledge by experts from other scientific provinces as no danger for the interpretation of Islam by theologians and legal scholars (*ʿulamaʿ*). He describes these processes as partial *ijtihad* (*ijtihad juzʿi*), and subordinate to the methods of legal and normative interpretation as practiced by the *ʿulamaʿ*^{xxxiii} which he calls *ijtihad intiqaʿi* (selection of certain doctrines from old legal traditions) or *ijtihad inshaʿi* (interpretation of the two sources, Qurʿan and Sunnah, adapted to the new life circumstances).^{xxxiv}

At IslamOnline fatwas are researched, processed, edited or issued and published in the fatwa department (*qism al-fatwa*). The following is an introduction of the different types of online-fatwas available on the Arabic portion of IslamOnline:

a) Edited fatwas: *Is'alu ahl adh-dhikr*

These are edited versions of previously-issued fatwas originating from well-known muftis that IslamOnline staff members present in response to user questions.^{xxxv} Edited fatwas feature a heading, date of publication online, the name and origin of the questioner, the question itself (*al-su'al*), the fatwa text (*al-hall*), a concluding *Allahu 'alam* (God knows best),^{xxxvi} and a disclaimer.^{xxxvii} A short text written by IslamOnline staff members introduces each fatwa and the issuing mufti or institution. Significantly, the date and place of issue and the source of publication of the original fatwa are not mentioned, nor is the question that led to its pronouncement. The texts might be mere excerpts from previously published fatwas or contain other text formats, neither of which is labeled as such. Of particular interest are edited fatwa texts assembled from several other fatwas (one might call these collage fatwas), which tend to leave the answer to the question up to the questioner (*mustafti*). This system gives considerable leeway to IslamOnline staff to select responses from a massive database of, sometimes contradictory, fatwas. The removal of the original question and the staff-written introduction gives further agency to IOL staff members to craft and package the site's responses.

b) Fatwa bank: Bank al-fatawa

The fatwa bank is an online archive that users can search to find previously issued opinions. The names of the muftis are listed, and the user can choose among some 150 scholars in the Arab-language site and 170 in the English site.^{xxxviii} The orientation of the archive is unmistakable. Yusuf al-Qaradawi's fatwas have the strongest presence (672) out of approx. 6,000 fatwas on the Arabic site. The number of collage fatwas is large (810), which underlines the influence of IOL staff members on the composition of online-fatwas. Remarkably, fatwas issued by Rashid Rida rank on fifth position with 150, which is likely due to the digitization of al-Manar, a religious magazine Rida published for over

35 years. Also at the top ranks in the number of fatwas accessible by users are the Lebanese Faysal Mawlawi (248) and the Qatari scholar ⁶Ali Qurah Daghi (72), both of whom are influential members of the European Fatwa Council.

Together with the choice of muftis, the fatwa bank interface offers the user the possibility to choose from different areas of topics (other fatwa-like texts, are saved in special archives (*arshif al-hiwarat*)). Most fatwas can be found in conventional subject areas of the fatwa genre, e.g. in the sphere of traditional fiqh like ⁶*ibadat* (religious duties), ⁶*mu'amalat* (transactions), *usra* (family issues) or in that of the Qur'an and Sunnah. With 2,448 fatwas, questions concerning religious duties are predominant – a trend which can also be observed in printed publications of fatwas.^{xxxix} In an exchange typical of this category, a Canadian user asks what he should do if his mobile rings during prayer. The fatwa starts with an introduction of the importance of the prayer as the second pillar of Islam and then gives advice in the name of Canadian scholar Ahmed Kutty to stop the ringing immediately. Kutty advises that the prayer would only be invalidated if the ringing repeats again and again. The fatwa closes with the hope that Muslims take the prayer seriously and with a citation identifying the fatwa as an excerpt from the Canadian Islamic website www.islam.ca.^{xi} Quite a number of fatwas (506) can be found in the category Jihad and International Relations (*Fiqh al-jihad wa-l-⁶alaqat ad-duwaliyya*). In May 2007, a Dutch user raised the question of whether Muslims are allowed to vote in parliamentary elections in a Western country. After a lengthy discussion in which a scholar from Iraq and a scholar from Saudi Arabia are quoted, the answer (which was already prepared in 2004) by an anonymous group of muftis (*majmu⁶ min al-muftiyin*) is that every Muslim should take part in elections in the country in which he is entitled to vote and should support moderate movements (*al-tayyarat al-mu⁶tadila*) in order to combat negative preconceptions of Muslims.^{xli} Both of these examples illustrate IslamOnline's efforts to make Muslims live easily, in accordance with one of Qaradawi's main principles besides *wasatiyya* and *i⁶tidal* (moderation), namely *taysir* (ease).

c) Live Fatwas: *Fatawa mubashira*

The live fatwa format offers an entirely different type of *ifta'*, one reminiscent of the classical *ifta'* based on immediate contact between *mufti* and *mustafti* – except for the fact this is over the internet rather than face to face.^{xliii} The users know before the session which mufti they will put their question to.^{xliii} IslamOnline holds two Arabic language fatwa sessions per day five times a week, and during the one- or two-hour sessions several users ask questions in what amounts to an online chat room – another parallel to traditional *ifta'* sessions in the house of a local mufti. Interestingly, these live fatwa sessions do not become part of the IOL fatwa bank. According to Mutiullah Tayeb the reason for this is that the mufti sometimes responds “very short without giving details of fatwa and their references from Qur’an and Sunnah due to the shortage of time” or the arguments are not compelling, whereas the fatwas in the fatwa bank are very detailed and complex and usually give several viewpoints. The individual sessions are chronologically stored in a separate archive.^{xliiv} Live fatwa sessions are offered in thematic areas, the most popular of which is *Fatawa fiqhiyya ʿamma* (general fiqh topics). The others include *Istisharat daʿwiyya ʿamma* (general advice on daʿwa issues), pilgrimage advice and special sessions for Muslims in the West.

By the end of 2006, the number of live sessions in Arabic had reached 1,392, and in English 885. The first session took place on 18 December 1999. The guest (*dayf*), as IOL calls the mufti of a live session, was ʿAli Qurah Daghi. The third session featured Yusuf al-Qaradawi. In total, al-Qaradawi has taken part in five such sessions.^{xliv} A group of scientists (*Fariq al-bahithin bi-l-mawqiʿ*) began taking part in weekly sessions in June 2004. The group consists of staff members in the IOL fatwa team: all graduates in either Islamic jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) at the Cairo University or Islamic studies (*dirasat al-islamiyya*) at the Shariʿa faculty of the Azhar University. Al-Qaradawi's secretary Akram Kassab, an Egyptian who studied Islamic theology at al-Azhar and at the Wadi an-Nil University in Sudan, has been taking part in fatwa sessions since 2005. Live fatwas, then, are issued not only by conventional muftis, but also by IOL staff members who specialize in fatwas. Considering fatwa production at IOL, we see the emergence of a new type of online fatwa editors, non-muftis who shape IslamOnline's response to queries by selecting and editing together existing fatwas. In this context, *ifta'* is becoming a field

within the online production context, towards which one can train but which apparently has none of the aura or the authority of a conventional mufti. The authority of the *ifta'* is not lost, but rather seems to shift from the person of the mufti to the fatwa text as a genre.

d) People's say on fatwas: *Fatawa an-nas*

In the summer of 2006, a new category called *Fatawa an-nas* (Fatwas of the people) joined the above three types on the site. This daily updated section adds a journalistic flare to fiqh, and presents fatwas linked with top news stories of the day. The idea originated from Dr. Mas'ud Sabri, a former staff member in the fatwa department, who has been working at the newly-founded Center for Wasatiyya Studies in Kuwait since 2006. The new category comprises eight subject areas: women's issues, health, transactions, sports and games, principles of fiqh and purposes of shari'a, biography of the Prophet and principles of faith. Two associates in the fatwa department in Cairo are in charge of *Fatawa an-nas*, journalist Nihal Mahmud Mahdi and Islam 'Abd al-'Aziz, an Azhar graduate in communication sciences. They cooperate closely with the other staff of the fatwa department. Nihal Mahmud Mahdi describes *Fatawa an-nas* as translating the language of fiqh into the everyday language of the people. She believes that this presents the opportunity to link fiqh with real life (*waqi' al-hayat*).

The *Fatawa an-nas* category corresponds with IslamOnline's fundamental aspiration, to stimulate thought and discussion by supplying information. But another crucial function of this section is to present information contextualizing fatwas publicized in the mainstream media, information which these fatwas themselves do not provide but without which the fatwas remain almost incomprehensible. This category furthermore represents an effort to cogitate over fatwas and *ifta'* with the tools of journalism as opposed to those of *fiqh*. An important trend arises from this: media-issued fatwas or texts related to fatwas predominantly have neither a direct association to nor do they serve an immediate function for Islamic jurisprudence. On the contrary, they are associated with an imagined public, the "people" (*an-nas*) out there. For IslamOnline, media reportage of fatwas, viewed through the journalistic lens of generalization,

summary and simplification, and pressures to be topical and competitive, threaten not only the content and complexity of fiqh, but also its inherent logic and structure. The issue of amalgamating fiqh and journalism, or fiqh and the commitment for Islam in the media, has recently been under intensive discussion among scholars and intellectuals; articles are published in daily and weekly newspapers (*Al-Hayat*, *Asharq alawsat*, *Al-Ahram Weekly*) as well as in periodicals (*al-Manar al-Jadid*, *al-Mujtama'*) and online portals (www.islamismscope.com, www.islamonline.net, www.almultaka.net).^{xlvi}

e) Dossiers: *Malaffat khassa*

IslamOnline staff members can also take on the role of *mustafti* themselves and raise questions, most of which allude to various current events.^{xlvii} For instance, during my visit to Doha in 2005 the IOL staff was covering the issue of “Avian flu and the Hajj.” Avian flu at that time was under discussion in all types of media, both global and local and the IOL coordinator and editors decided to create a feature topic on it. In July 2005, shortly after the attacks on the London Underground that year, IOL ran another special dossier called “Violence: Causes and Alternatives” which featured an atypical black layout with a red-gold glowing flower.^{xlviii} The editorial to this feature topic ended as follows: “Our aim is to inform and empower people, to allow a genuine platform for qualified and courageous scholars, experts, thinkers, activists, and imams whose cooperation and efforts are needed now more than ever before. We hope to create and strengthen alternative ideas, tools, and visions that will enable Muslims to change realities on the ground.”^{xlx}

The site featured eight headings: “Why?, Concepts Explained, Live Sessions, Alternatives, Your Say, Audio, Special Pages, and Statements” which treated the issue on the basis of various text genres. Under “Statements” were five fatwa-like texts issued by various scholars or institutions, among which was a text by the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS). It carried the title “Bombing Innocents: IAMS’s Statement” and featured a photograph of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the chairman of IUMS.¹ In this text the

union condemned the killing of innocent civilians during the “bloody incidents“ in Egypt, England, Turkey and other countries.^{li} Subsequently the authors presented their perspective on these attacks based on seven items and using quotes from the Qur’an and hadith: “The IAMS, which is keen to clarify Islam’s stance concerning these grisly bombings, decides the following for the whole Muslim Ummah and other nations....“ The text was originally published on the union's website. Apparently, the text had not been preceded by a question; the IOL staff members borrowed it from the IUMS website. The opinion of the Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA), also to be found here had not been preceded by a question either. This text carried the term fatwa in its title: “A Fatwa by Fiqh Council of North America.”^{lii} Here too, the arguments are supported by quotes from the Qur’an and the Prophet's traditions: “... if any one slew a person – unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land – it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people”^{liii}

The statements in this feature topic represent the fatwa genre and clearly serve to establish a link between the published texts and the handed-down Islamic jurisprudence. At the same time the texts possess their own news value, and fatwas with a news value or media fatwas can be used again for multiple purposes on the global media market. At any rate they are a tool towards the legitimization of certain views as being “Islamic.” However, these texts are only remotely connected to fatwas as established institutions of fiqh. The Qaradawi name in such cases is more a reference to a popular brand of a global Islamic project and only secondarily, if at all, to a mufti issuing a legal opinion according to predetermined criteria.

Conclusion

IslamOnline.net promotes an Islamic view of the world. This view is shaped by Egyptian and Qatari national influence, as well as by the Arab-language and Sunni production backgrounds. The propinquity of the portal with the tenets of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, which are associated with the term *wasatiyya* by both Qaradawi himself and others, as well as with his like-minded colleagues and the institutions they belong to is

evident in the portal's fatwa service, whose approach is moralist-conservative and missionary, though not dogmatic.^{liv} In addition, IslamOnline seeks debate with other schools of thought and world views. The IOL portal does not represent or advocate a certain political movement, party or government; rather, it offers the space for the evolution of a discussion culture among heterogeneous Muslim voices (from the conservative to the progressive, from the pro-government to the outlawed, from the highly political to the apolitical), a fact reflected on its numerous subpages and special topics. At IslamOnline, the signs point to an earnest and creative way of handling the discursive tradition of Islam and to an effort to make the plurality of Muslim views in concrete local contexts – be they academic, cultural, political or religious in nature – accessible on a global scale.

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ⁱ I'm thankful to Maryam al-Hajari, Mutiullah Tayeb, Lutz Rogler and Will Ward who commented on an earlier version of this article.

ⁱⁱ In the August 2005 worldwide ranking of Internet sites, IslamOnline occupied position 596 in terms of hits. This puts the site at roughly the same level as the news portal Aljazeera.net at position 275 or *The New York Times* website at spot 155. In the same month, IslamOnline ranked eighth among the top ten of the most-visited Arab-language websites worldwide. According to Alexa Traffic Rank in September 2007 most hits came from Egypt (21.4%), followed by the Palestinian Territories (11%), the United Arab Emirates (10.3%), Saudi Arabia (8.9%), and Morocco (8.7%). The USA-based users made up 2.1% of the traffic volume and Germany and the UK 0.9% each.

ⁱⁱⁱ For Yusuf Qaradawi, see his three-part autobiography that covers his life up until 1977, *Ibn al-qarya wa-l-kuttab. Malamih sira wa-masira*, vol. 1-3, Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2002, 2004, 2006. In the secondary literature amongst others (in chronological order): °Ammara, Muhammad (1997): *ad-Duktur Yusuf al-Qaradawi: al-madrasa al-fikriyya wa-l-mashru' al-fikri*. Kairo: Nahdat Misr (Fi l-tanwir al-islami; 10); Salvatore, Armando (1997): *Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity*, Berkshire: Ihaca Press; Talima, °Isam (2000): *al-Qaradawi faqihan*. Kairo: Dar al-Tauzi° wa-l-Nashr al-Islamiyya; Talima, °Isam (2001): *Yusuf al-Qaradawi: faqih al-du'at wa-da'iyat al-fuqaha'*. Beirut: al-Dar al-Shamiyya/Damaskus: Dar al-Qalam (°Ulama' wa-mufakkirun mu°asirun; 15); Zaman, Muhammad Q. (2004): "The Ulama of Contemporary Islam and their Conception of the Common Good", in: Armando Salvatore, Dale Eickelman (eds.): *Public Islam and the Common Good*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 129-156; Wenzel-Teuber, Wendelin (2005): *Islamische Ethik und moderne Gesellschaft im Islamismus von Yusuf al-Qaradawi*, Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovac; Krämer, Gudrun (2006): "Drawing Boundaries: Yusuf al-Qaradawi on Apostasy", in: dies., Sabine

Schmidtke (eds.): *Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 181-217; Zaman, Muhammad Q. (2006): "Consensus and Religious Authority in Modern Islam: the Discourse of the 'Ulama", in: Gudrun Krämer, Sabine Schmidtke, op. cit., pp. 153-180; Kassab, Akram (2007): *al-Manhaj al-da'wi 'inda l-Qaradawi: mawahibuhu wa-adawatuhu, was'iluhu wa-asalibuhu, simatuhu wa-atharuhu*. Taqdim 'Abd al-'Azim al-Dib, 'Abd al-Salam al-Basyuni. al-Qahira: Maktabat Wahba.

^{iv} Brochure, printed on the occasion of the IOL's first anniversary and distributed during the Cairo book fair in 2000: *Mashru' al-umma fi-l-qarn al-hadi wa-l-'ashrin*. *IslamOnline*. *Uktubir 1999-uktubir 2000* (Project of the Islamic community in the 21 century. *IslamOnline*. October 1999-2000).

^v *Wasatiyya* is a term supported not only by Yusuf al-Qaradawi but by many others, especially after 9/11. The term was coined by Qaradawi in as early as the 1970s. It refers to the maintenance of balance between old and new as well as among the different Islamic legal schools and doctrines (including the *shī'a*) based on the "umma justly balanced" concept in the Qur'an (2/143), see: Baker, Raymond W. (2003): *Islam Without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists*, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press; Baker, Raymond William (2005): "Building the World in a Global Age", in: Armando Salvatore, Mark Le Vine (eds.): *Religion, Social Practice, and Contested Hegemonies. Reconstructing the Public Sphere in Muslim Majority Societies*, N.Y.: Palgrave, pp. 109-131; Gräf (forthcoming): "The Concept of *wasatiyya* in the Work of Yusuf al-Qaradawi", in: Gräf/Skovgaard-Petersen: *The Global Mufti*.

^{vi} *IslamWeb.net* for instance copies the news stories directly from *Aljazeera.net*.

^{vii} Interview with Maryam al-Hajari, Doha, December 2005.

^{viii} Interview with Maryam al-Hajari, Doha, December 2005.

^{ix} Interview with Hamid al-Ansari, Doha, December 2005.

^x Interview with Hamid al-Ansari, Doha, December 2005.

^{xi} *Dawr al-intirnit ka-wasila li-l-da'wa (The role of the Internet for Islamic da'wa)*, topic of the program *al-Sharia wa-l-hayat* on *Al Jazeera* on 3 October 1999. At that time Qaradawi already was one of the very first scholars to have an own homepage, which was produced by the Qatari company *iHorizon*, see Gräf, Bettina (2007): "Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi in Cyberspace, in: *Die Welt des Islams*, 47 (2007) 3-4 (Special issue, ed. by Abdulkader Tayob).

^{xii} Discussion with Hiba Ra'uf 'Izzat, Doha, July 2007.

^{xiii} To compare the English and the Arabic sites of IOL would demand an article itself.

^{xiv} Recently this section became an independent site under the name of Reading Islam, see www.readingislam.com.

^{xv} Interview with Mutiullah Tayeb, Doha, November 2005. During my visit to Cairo in April 2007 I was told that the number of employees had risen to around 180.

^{xvi} An office in Washington operated between 1999 and 2000, but had to be closed due to its high costs. Contact with the context of the site's users was apparently the reason for establishing it. Interview with Mutiullah Tayeb, Doha, November 2005.

^{xvii} IOL is to move into new premises in Cairo on 6 October. The building was planned specifically for IOL and will accommodate the company's entire workforce.

^{xviii} For the European Council for Fatwa and Research (www.e-cfr.org), see Caeiro, Alexandre (2008): "Transnational 'Ulama, European Fatwas, and Islamic Authority: A Case Study of the European Council for Fatwa and Research", in van Bruinessen, M. and Allievi, S. (eds): *Production and Dissemination of Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe*, London: Routledge.

^{xix} Cf. Amel Boubekeur, Cool and Competitive. *Muslim Culture in the West*, in: *ISIM Review* 16, Autumn 2005, 12f.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, www.muslimgear.com.

^{xxi} About *MuslimGear*, www.muslimgear.com/default.aspx (accessed March 15, 2007).

^{xxii} www.mecca-cola.com/en/fatwah.php.

^{xxiii} A lot of things started around the same time in Qatar: the Qatar Foundation in 1995, al-Jazeera channel in 1996, *IslamOnline* in 1997. This certainly has to do with the political changes and the new emir Shaykh Hamid b. Khalifa Al Thani coming to power in 1995.

^{xxiv} Interview with Hamid al-Ansari, Doha, December 2005.

^{xxv} *Op.cit.*

^{xxvi} Interview with Muhammad al-Banna (BDU), Doha, December 2005.

- ^{xxvii} IOL, “Media Kit“, <http://www.IslamOnline/English/mediakit/index.shtml> (accessed January 22, 2007) or “*ʿIṭān maʿana*“, <http://www.islamonline.net/Arabic/MediaKit/index.shtml> (accessed January 22, 2007).
- ^{xxviii} Interview with the journalist and editor of the Arabic *Tazkiyya* section Hamam ʿAbd al-Maʿbud, Kairo, March 2007.
- ^{xxix} Interview with Mutiullah Tayeb, Doha, November 2005.
- ^{xxx} Interview with Maryam al-Hajari, Doha, December 2005.
- ^{xxxi} Mutiullah Tayeb describes these counseling formats as „*adaptation of ifta*“. Interview with Mutiullah Tayeb, Doha, 30 November 2005.
- ^{xxxii} Interview with Muhammad Ibrahim Zaydan (head of the Arabic Sharʿi department), Cairo, April 2007.
- ^{xxxiii} Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *al-Ijtihad al-muʿasir bayna l-indibat wal-infirat* (Contemporary *ijtihad* between discipline and neglect) (Beirut, Damascus, Amman: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1998, second edition, first 1994), 50f.
- ^{xxxiv} *Ibid.* 46f.
- ^{xxxv} Cf. a corresponding page at IOL: *Istisharat al-hajj wa-l-ʿumra*: http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?cid=1121779389930&pagename=IslamOnline-Arabic-Hajj_Umra/Page/HajjCounsellingA (accessed January 22, 2007).
- ^{xxxvi} Brinkley Messick, while talking about the „modernity of (...) fatwas“ in the turn of the 20th century, calls this kind of classical features „hallmarks of the old generic form“ of fatwas, see Messick, B. (2005): “*Madhhabs and Modernities*“, in: Bearman, P. et al.: *The Islamic School of Law. Evolution, Devolution, and Progress*, Harvard University Press, p. 169.
- ^{xxxvii}: The text translates as: “All advice published on IslamOnline’s expresses the opinions of the authors of these advices and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of those who are responsible for IOL.”
- ^{xxxviii} See for the English section, IOL, “Fatwa Bank“, <http://www.islamonline.net/completesearch/english/CounsellorSearch.asp?hID=0> (accessed January 22, 2007), for the Arabic section, IOL, „*Bank al-fatawa*“, <http://www.islamonline.net/completesearch/arabic/CounsellorSearch.asp?hID=0> (accessed January 22, 2007). There are two women among the approx. 170 scholars in the English-language section.
- ^{xxxix} Cf. Masud, M. Khalid et al. (1996): *Muftis, Fatwas, and Legal Interpretation*, in: Masud, M. Khalid et al.: *Islamic Legal Interpretation: Muftis and Their Fatwas*, Harvard University Press, pp. 3-32.
- ^{xl} http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?cid=1195032322989&pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar%2FFatwaE%2FFatwaEAskTheScholar.
- ^{xli} http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-Arabic-Ask_Scholar/FatwaA/FatwaA&cid=1122528618724.
- ^{xlii} The fatwas which have recently been issued during the fatwa programs of satellite television stations are described either as *Fatawa fadaʿiyya* or by the expression *Fatawa mubashira*. Despite the existence of certain similarities, this is a different format (the *mustafti* can see and hear the mufti, and the mufti can hear the *mustafti* (and his dialect etc.).
- ^{xliii} The choice of mufti in IslamOnline’s case is also another point of difference between its live fatwas and traditional *ifta*’.
- ^{xliv} IOL, *Sharʿi, Fatawa mubashira, al-Arshif*, <http://www.islamonline.net/livefatwa/arabic/oldresult.asp>; (accessed January 22, 2007).
- ^{xlv} No. 3, January 13, 2000, no. 12, March 6, 2000, no. 28, August 8, 2000, no. 94, May 30, 2001 and no. 1406, January 18, 2007.
- ^{xlvi} Articles on this subject carry titles such as *al-Fatawa al-mubashira fi wasaʿil al-ʿilam* (Live fatwas in the media) by Ali Qurah Daghi, http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1173087876178&pagename=Zone-Arabic-Shariah%2FSRALayout (accessed January 17, 2007) or *al-Fiqh wa-l-faqih wa-l-dawla al-haditha* (Islamic jurisprudence, the jurist and the modern state) by Motaz al-Khateeb, http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1183484227231&pagename=Zone-Arabic-Shariah%2FSRALayout, (accessed July 12, 2007) or *Mufti al-fadaʿiyyat hal min dabit?* (Are there (general) rules for satellite muftis?) by Salman al-Awda, http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1189064939859&pagename=Zone-Arabic-Shariah%2FSRALayout, (accessed September 15, 2007) or *al-Fatawa wa-l-nawazil wa naqaʿid al-islam al-siyasi* (Fatwas, judicial cases and the contradictions of political Islam) by Ridwan al-Sayyid, <http://www.islamismscope.com/index.php?art/id:362> (accessed April 17, 2007).

^{xlvii} Interview with Mutiullah Tayeb, Doha, December 2005.

^{xlviii} IOL, "Violence: Causes and Alternatives,"

http://www.islamonline.net/English/In_Depth/ViolenceCausesAlternatives/index.shtml (accessed July 25, 2005).

^{xlix} IOL, "Violence: Causes and Alternatives,"

http://www.islamonline.net/English/In_Depth/ViolenceCausesAlternatives/Articles/Editorial/2005/07/01.shtml; (accessed July 25, 2005). In contrast to this view, *IslamOnline* supports the position of Yusuf al-Qaradawi and others, who legitimizes Palestinian suicide attacks arguing that these are the weapons of the weak against a long-lasting, unequal and unjust war of aggression.

^l(IUMS was formerly called IAMS, International Association of Muslim Scholars). On IUMS, see Gräf 2005.

^{li} IOL, "Bombing Innocent: IAMS's Statement"

http://www.islamonline.net/English/In_Depth/ViolenceCausesAlternatives/Articles/topic08/2005/07/01.shtml (accessed July 25, 2005).

^{lii} IOL, "A Fatwa by Fiqh Council of North America,"

http://www.islamonline.net/English/In_Depth/ViolenceCausesAlternatives/Articles/topic08/2005/08/01.shtml (accessed August 4, 2005).

^{liii} Qur'an Sura 5/32. Yusuf 'Ali translation.

^{liv} These organizations include the Fiqh Council of North America, the European Council for Fatwa and Research, the International Union of Muslim Scholars, and the Global Wasatiyya Center in Kuwait.