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FINAL PAPER

"Internetic Islam: (Re)Configuring Islamic
Authority through Facebook and Email"

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Abstract:
This paper examines how "*new* interpretive communities" of Western-educated Muslim scholars are challenging and reshaping traditional *ulematic* (scholastic) authority in the digital sphere. Historically, Islamic authority revolved around a notion of consensus among "interpretive communities" of scholars, which overlapped and disagreed on various issues. The Sufis and the *Fuqaha* are good examples of such interpretive communities. Colonialism disrupted, and in many ways reconfigured, Islamic thought, opening up traditional interpretive communities to lay-Muslim intellectuals (the role of modern, Western knowledge and education being significant in this regard). Today, modern, Western knowledge and norms are (re)shaping the terms of the debate between many new interpretive communities, as can be seen within the (post)modern interpretive space of Web 2.0. Email-based discussion groups and groups on Facebook provide (post)modern conditions of possibility as far as the (re)articulation and (re)configuration of traditional *ulematic* authority. Based on analyses of four internet-based fora, this paper argues that, as far as the *centralization* of "Islamic opinion" is concerned, such sites of interpretation and argument provide avenues for the continued fragmentation of traditional Islamic authority, as Western-educated Muslim scholars and publics intellectuals are refashioning their faith in powerful ways to fit their (post)modern, Western sensibilities.

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What is Islamic authority? There is no neat way of answering that question. However, in

order to begin our discussion, I have the following working definition: Islamic authority is a

system of power/knowledge where the credence given to an Islamic scholar has historically

rested upon "chains of transmission" (*asanid*) and "licenses to teach" (*ijazat*), handed down

from scholar to student. With the series of fissures introduced by colonial educational projects, the introduction of the printing press, and with the rise of the modern Islamic intellectual, as well as with the growing influence of Wahhabism – Islamic authority became historically reconfigured to focus increasingly upon Quranic and hadith texts, as the discussion of "Islam" itself became a much more mainstream public act.

Tariq Ramadan – as all us of here no doubt know – is Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at Oxford University, and an influential Muslim thinker and activist. His recent (August 20th) article "Why I will not attend the ISNA and RIS conferences,"[1] has caused a considerable amount of consternation, as well as self-reflection, within American Muslim circles. Not one known for pulling his punches, Ramadan writes that he will not be attending the ISNA [the Islamic Society of North America] and RIS [Reviving the Islamic Spirit] conferences this year – the two largest Islamic conferences in North America, where he has been an invited speaker for many years – because of the silence of ISNA's leadership before unconscionable US foreign and domestic policies,[2] as well as because of an RIS leadership that supports dictators in the Middle East.[3]

In his article Ramadan mentions this year's White House *iftar* (July 14, 2014), where, in the presence of the Israeli ambassador, President Obama spoke of "Israel's […] right to defend itself against what I consider to be inexcusable attacks from Hamas,"[4] while Muslim leaders attending the *iftar* remained silent, and continue to do so. Ramadan contends ISNA and RIS are run by (supposedly) Sufi-inspired men who say "Yes sir!" to power, whether in the US or in the Middle East. With regard to the Middle East, Ramadan is implicitl, referencing Habib Ali al-Jifri – an influential Islamic scholar from Yemen, who is based in Abu Dhabi, and has 3,700,000 followers on Facebook – and his recent "prayer of tawfiq"

for Egyptian president as-Sisi[5] (although Ramadan is also no doubt referencing the former Grand Mufti of Egypt, Ali Gomaa, who supported the government crackdown against pro-Morsi ralliers in the months following Sisi's military coup).

I've been following the discussion on Tariq Ramadan's piece in a few Listservs and Facebook discussion groups. Discussants fall on the sides of "for" and "against," as well as those who try to see "both sides of the argument." It is particularly interesting to examine how Islamic authority itself is configured and reconfigured in these discussions. MEISGS (Middle East and Islamic Studies Graduate Students) is a Listserv populated by Muslims academics at various levels in their careers, from full professors to graduate students. An illuminating thread of the discussion emerges from an implicit positionality whereby academics – by virtue of their training within the western academy – see themselves as *set apart from* and *possessing greater intellectual tools than* traditional ulema.

Mohammad Fadel who is Prof. of Islamic law at Univ of Toronto – describes al-Jifri's position as a rather typical, premodern juristic position:

> "Al-Habib 'Ali al-Jifri…is deeply ensconced in a traditionalist conception of politics which…is largely a matter of personal virtue, so that political failures are essentially no different from the personal failures of the private person. […] [H]e believes that the good order of a political community in the modern world is simply the product of the piety or good judgment of some all-powerful ruler, such that our role is simply to pray to God that He give *tawfiq* [ability] to our rulers to do good – that is just superstition."

He writes further that

> "Tariq Ramadan, and others, like myself, believe in a politics of citizenship, which entails active involvement in governance as a mutual project, not something that is given to us by a virtuous ruler, and received by a *passive* citizenry."

Faadel thus places al-Jifri in the position of a premodern subject.

In her plenary lecture at the 2011 "Theorizing the Web" conference, sociologist Saskia Sassen[6] makes a vital point regarding how knowledge within the digital realm is

reconstituted and reassembled as another kind of knowledge: "[T]he body of knowledge gets distributed and spliced-up in different ways so that you lose the packaging, and in losing that packaging all sorts of possibilities open up."

What I want to draw attention to is the way in which al-Jifri – with his three-million-plus Facebook followers – and his authority (and I see authority and power as being co-constitutive of the power/knowledge dyad) is being reconfigured, dissected, and re-appropriated such that the discussants on MEISGS, within their particular "social formation," assume their own, individual domains of authority.

This is of course part and parcel with the formation of the modern (Muslim) self, and how she – *at least in the ideal sense* – appropriates for herself interpretive right and authority. It is in marked contrast to the *ijazas* circulated within traditional Islamic circles. Incidentally, Ramadan's biography, to which he has a link within his article, mentions that he has *ijazas* in seven disciplines from al-Azhar University. This reference is given by Ramadan, no doubt, to silence his mainly neo-traditionalist detractors who argue that he's not really qualified to speak with authority on Islamic matters.

I say "at least in the ideal sense" with regard to the modern Muslim self, and how she appropriates for herself interpretive right and authority, because we know how power exerts itself in *all* knowledge contexts. In this regard, the role of the western academy in its constitution of modern, western subjectivities is a concern that I raised a few months ago. The question that I posed in MEISGS as well as the Sociology of Islam listserv, and two other Facebook discussion groups, was: Are Muslim academics playing the role of 'House Muslims' or 'Field Muslims'? Perhaps unsurprisingly, my question met with a lot of angry criticism, which in turn led me to write two pieces for Al-Jazeera. The first is entitled Why are there no Muslim Philosophers?,[7] and the second is entitled What is philosophy? Or, is all

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of life but a metaphor?[8] Apart from constituting a *retort* to my interlocutors (through the "authority" of the Op-Ed), the pieces also pose the question as to why Islamic philosophy cannot be admitted into the halls of philosophy proper by the academy. I am no innocent observer, in other words. But then again, who is?

To quote Sassen: "[W]hen you bring certain existing bodies of knowledge to a digitized domain, new trajectories for existing knowledge come about…and once a body of knowledge becomes part of a trajectory, it is one point in a broad space – it is not simply *the thing in itself*." That is, what started off as a question about the role of Muslim academics, became – and continues to be – a discussion about the ways in which power/knowledge inheres *within* the academy. And that discussion is now part of *our* broader discussion surrounding Islamic authority. Thus, *Islamic authority is not simply the thing itself, once it has been reconstituted, reconfigured, and re-appropriated within the digital domain*.

To return to Ramadan and the question of Palestine, Islamic authority appears to also become a concern over "authenticity" and/or "sincerity." For Ramadan, being authentically Islamic entails critical voices amongst Muslims living in the West who are able to express their opinions in a manner, and with a freedom, that is denied Muslims in other parts of the world. For Ramadan, such critical voices call to and are guided by the highest values of Islam. At the same time, however, I would argue that we must be sensitive to the ways in which such (supposedly) democratically free voices are *constricted*.

Still focusing on Palestine, but moving to the UK and the Facebook page of Mawlana Shams ad-Duha Muhammad, the director of Ebrahim College in East London: Mawlana Shams has generated a rich discussion on the Islamic permissibility of *boycotting* Israeli goods. He posted an "article"[9] written by a PhD student at Umm al-Qura University

in Mecca, on the *issue* of boycotting Israeli goods, arguing that it *can* be supported by examining the Prophet's life and example.[10] There have been discussions in social media about the Islamic permissibility of such a boycott. An argument that has been put forward is that, since similar examples cannot be expressly found in the Prophet's sunnah, it is not permissible. This is a characteristically Wahhabi position. In any case, the piece by the PhD student in Mecca which was posted by Mawlana Shams has in turn been shared 250 times.

What we see from the above, then, is the wonderful complexity with which the "social digital ecology" (which is Sassen's phrase) takes on its shape, formation, and growth within the interactive spaces of Web 2.0. We see that traditional authority/knowledge becomes dissected, reconfigured, and reassembled. In the face of so much complexity Sassen argues crucially for "*recurrence* as a critical element for recapturing a sense of the complex system."

What, then, is recurring in all of these examples?

There is the issue of what is considered "correctly Islamic." In an interview following his original article, published in the online magazine *The Islamic Monthly*,[11] Ramadan speaks of the necessity of being courageous at the same time as being wise. Ramadan is here responding to Sherman Jackson and his "letter"[12] urging Ramadan to reconsider his decision not to participate at ISNA, because of the damage it would do to the unity of the American Muslim community.

Jackson, on the one hand applauds Ramadan's courage – which, he says, he has always admired – however, on the other hand he suggests that in this case it would be more wise for Ramadan to reconsider his decision not to attend ISNA. Ramadan retorts that "his absence would certainly be the most powerful speech [he] has ever given at ISNA," and that

the importance of courage and wisdom in the face of injustices, no matter where they are suffered, is part and parcel of a correct Islamic ethos.

Incidentally, the president of ISNA, Mohamed Magid, published a response to Ramadan's original article, entitled "ISNA president's letter to the American Muslim community," in which he argues that the concerns of the American Muslim community are different from those of Muslim communities in Europe.[13] Ramadan's response to this in *The Islamic Monthly* interview is that his supposed lack of qualification to speak to American Muslim concerns has never stopped ISNA from inviting him to speak; and that it seems that any time he is critical – whether of circumstances of Muslims in the US or that of Muslims in Britain or in France – the same argument is made.

The "critical element" that is recurring in all of the above – to benefit from Sassen – is a reconfigured, reconstituted, and reassembled notion of Islamic authority, of knowledge, of the performativity of Islamic knowledge, and of one's "Islamic" credentials. Sassen remarks that "in informalizing knowledge [we] are also reassembling." We have seen a number of different ways in which Islamic knowledge and authority are informalized and reassembled. I'm not arguing, however – and I hope this point has been coming through – that there is a complete leveling of all sense of authority, and that it is a free-for-all. To quote Sassen again: "We are really dealing with an ecology that includes those technical logics [of the web itself], but it also includes a whole mix of social logics that can actually distort the [perhaps initially democratic] technical features that are embedded in it."

I'm also not suggesting that this process of "opening up" Islamic knowledge and authority is only coming about due to social media or email. The genealogy of Islamic modernity is far longer than that. A suitable analog is that of Tahrir Square, 2011. To say that the Egyptian revolution happened because of social media *alone* is one of those absurdist

positions we fall into when the mythologies of technology blinker us to longer historical processes.

So, while there is a considerable degree of facilitation of the opening up of Islamic knowledge and authority to alternative voices, we must ask in what ways new kinds of Islamic authority are coalescing, and with what kinds of consequences. As Sassen points out, "The *construction* of [a] perfect, [democratic digital] landscape [itself] becomes a form of power."

It is noteworthy that traditional (or neo-traditional) authorities on this particular topic have been, and continue to be, silent – which was the original incitement for Ramadan's piece. What needs to be done further then is to examine the politics of silence, and what role it plays today and historically for the 'alim. Let us recall that it was the traditional ulema's (perceived) "silence" vis-à-vis colonial rule that prompted (modern) Muslim intellectuals to speak out against, and in response to encroaching European powers – and it was in that context that the ulema were described as irrelevant.

I certainly don't think that digital media is rendering traditional Islamic authority irrelevant; but as with past historic fissures – whether as a result of colonialism, or Wahhabism, or the printing press – it is casting it anew, and Islamic authority is itself being rethought and lived differently.

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[1] http://tariqramadan.com/english/2014/08/10/why-i-will-not-attend-the-isna-august-2014-and-ris-december-2014-conferences/

[2] "Criticism of the domestic policy of the current administration, like those that preceded it, is a moral obligation. Summary arrests, arbitrary prison terms, inhuman psychological torture and solitary confinement, the shadowy role of informers and the deeply troubling and unacceptable methods used by the FBI, which has provoked young people to engage in extremist actions, must be unconditionally condemned. Not in the name of Islam, but in the name of the values proclaimed by the United States. However, the ISNA leadership is too often silent, as if paralyzed by

fear. It fares no better with respect to American foreign policy. Its silence over American support for the outlaw and inhuman policies of Israel cannot be justified, even less so after attending an iftar organised by the White House during which President Obama defended Israel while the Israeli ambassador tweeted his delight! We cannot be forever silent: what kind of active and responsible citizenship does the ISNA leadership offer young American Muslims? What kind of example? That of silent, fearful sycophants–or of free, public-spirited citizens who, while defending the values of human dignity and justice, serve their country in the most sincere and critical way? That of the unconditional loyalty of the timorous, or the critical loyalty of free individuals? To attend the ISNA convention would be to endorse their silence."

[3][I]t is the so-called "Sufi" and "apolitical" trend that lies at the core of the RIS convention. I do not have the slightest problem with this trend (on the contrary), or its underlying structures and aims. The problem is that some of the participants, scholars or preachers, under the guise of Sufism or in the name of avoiding partisan politics, defend highly politicized positions of support for states and dictatorships. Their silence and their inferences in the heart of the West, in Toronto or elsewhere, constitute visible support for the Gulf petro-monarchies or for despots such as al-Sissi in Egypt.

[4] http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/07/14/remarks-president-annual-iftar-dinner-july-14-2014

[5] http://www.ibnpercy.com/habib-ali-explains-why-he-made-dua-for-al-sisi/

[6] http://vimeo.com/23044503

[7] http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/06/muslim-philosophers-2014610135114713259.html

[8] http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/06/what-philosophy-all-life-but-meta-2014629697928406.html

[9] It's not clear whether the piece is to be called an article, a discussion, or a fatwa. The digital realm renders such categories themselves unclear.

[10] "For a while, the issue of whether or not to boycott Israeli goods has been under discussion on Islamic discussion forums and the social media websites. The shallowness of jurisprudential insight in most of those discussions is appalling. I will try to discuss this issue from various angles analyzing the arguments of those who are completely against it.

FIRST: Boycotting is not an end (Ghaaya) in itself. If there is evidence of its effectiveness, then it is a means of inflicting economic damage to the enemy. And as with all means (Wasaail), it need NOT be proven from the practice of the Prophet (Sallallaahu Alaihi Wa Sallam) and his companions. All that is required that it be permissible (Mubah) in itself, and the end (Ghaya) be a noble one.
One example of this is the lines weaved into the carpets of a Masjid so as to enable people to form straight rows. These lines were not there at the time of the Prophet (Sallallaahu Alaihi Wa Sallam), but the commandment to straighten the rows was there. The Prophet (Sallallahu Alaihi Wa Sallam) himself used to straighten out the rows by patting the shoulders of the Sahabah till they were aligned. Now we have

lines on the carpets, and there is nothing wrong with that, because they are merely a means of achieving a legislated and ordained end.

This quashes the argument of those oppose the boycotting of Israeli products on the pretext that it was not the practice of the Sahabah and the Salaf.

SECOND: We have in the Sunnah a precedent for boycotting the enemies economically. It is the case of Thumaama ibn Uthaal (Radi Allahu 'Anhu) who was one of the chiefs of the Banu Hanifah tribe of Yamamah; when he accepted Islam, he enforced a wheat embargo on the Makkan pagans, until they were so hard hit that they implored the Prophet (Sallallaahu Alaihi Wa Sallam) on the grounds of kinship to ask Thumaama to lift the embargo.

[Narrated by Al-Bukhari (4372), Muslim (1764), and Al-Baihaqi 9/66].

The only difference is that Thumaamah boycotted the selling of goods to them, while now people are boycotting the purchase of good from them; both being in essence two sides of the very same economic punitive measure.

THIRD: Some brothers are quoting Ahaadith in which the Prophet (Sallallaahu Alaihi Wa Sallam) and his companions traded with the Mushrikeen, as a proof of refuting the claim that it is "forbidden" to trade with them.

No doubt the Ahaadith prove the general permissibility, but if giving up a permissible act can be a means of achieving a noble end, then it is legislated to give it up; for the means take the ruling of the desired ends. (الغايات أحكام لها الوسائل)

For argument's sake, let us agree that it is not forbidden to trade with them as per the quoted Ahaadith, but does that mean it is not even undesirable?

FOURTH: Some brothers are quoting Shaykh Al-Fawzaan's statement: "The purchase of these products cannot be prevented unless it is a command given by the ruler...".

First of all, the command of the ruler concerns those living in Saudi Arabia, but what about those living in the UK (for example); which ruler are they supposed to follow?!

Secondly, the statement of the Shaykh is concerning American goods, not Israeli ones. As for Israeli goods, they don't enter Saudi Arabia, so the command of the ruler is already there.

FIFTH: There is a very important aspect to this issue which I don't find anyone mentioning: It is Haraam to purchase stolen goods if one knows that they are stolen. And since Israel has illegally confiscated and occupied Palestinian lands, the produce of that land and its natural resources are therefore considered usurped and stolen goods. For example:

"EDEN SPRINGS" bottled water comes from the occupied Golan heights.

"Jaffa Oranges" and "Medjool dates" are grown on land stolen and confiscated from Palestinians. So how can it be considered permissible to buy such stolen Palestinian natural resources? Those who give blanket statements against the boycott should be ashamed of themselves for legalizing the purchase of stolen goods! And they should stop speaking without being well-versed in knowledge!

SIXTH: Many people who advocate the boycott go way overboard by releasing lengthy lists of brands and companies which (supposedly) have ties with Israel or which are (supposedly) owned by Jews. Trying to boycott all these brands and companies is a daunting task that has a very slim chance, if any, of having a concrete impact on Israel.
For the boycott to have its impact, it should be focused and concentrated on that which hurts Israel the most. For this, professional advice should be sought on the matter. The Palestinian BDS (boycotts, divestment and sanctions) Movement is playing a leading role in the cause: http://www.bdsmovement.net/
One should refer to their campaigns and resources to learn how to play an effective role in the cause.

Allah knows best.

Written by: Nabeel Nisar Sheikh on the night preceding the 25th day of the Israeli "Operation Protective Edge" (5th Shawwal, 1435)."

[11] http://www.theislamicmonthly.com/tariq-ramadan-my-absence-would-certainly-be-the-most-powerful-speech-i-have-ever-given-at-isna/
[12] https://www.facebook.com/notes/tarek-elmessidi/dr-jacksons-response-letter-to-dr-tariq-ramadan/936791943003621
[13] http://www.isna.net/isna-presidents-letter-to-the-american-muslim-community-august-12-2014.html