

CHAPTER 1

The Net *Imam* Effect: Digital Contestations of #Islam and Religious Authority

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Introduction

This chapter explores the contestation on issues of representation and religious authority in cyber Islamic environments. In an era where authority networks transcend geographical boundaries, and when digital proficiency can be more important than religious status, there has been an evolution in the dynamics of Islamic authority and leadership. Today, digital technology is reshaping how Muslims across vast territories relate to religious authorities in fulfilling spiritual, mystical, and legalistic agendas. Millennials and “digital natives” may respond more to aspects of online authority than “analog” equivalents, impacting everyday concepts of religious knowledge and identity, and also raising concerns regarding radicalization. Online environments often challenge traditional models of authority; “traditional” in this context refers to the purview of *imams*, *mullahs*, and *shaykhs* located in the historically rooted “analog” locations of religious authority such as *madrassahs* or mosques.¹ The term is ambiguous, as it can also refer to those adhering to diverse notions of expertise associated with Islamic sources relating to the Prophet Muhammad, his followers, and/or the descendants of projected authority, scholarship, and interpretation. This does not preclude gatekeepers in these contexts articulating notions of religious

authority online, with a blurring between analog and digital authority. One result is the impact of digitally literate religious scholars, authorities, and “influencers,” whose impact goes beyond these demarcated boundaries of established spiritual exemplars and legal experts.²

This chapter examines how diverse religious perspectives contest for audiences, reflecting on multimedia approaches from a variety of players in the spectrum of Muslim zones of cyberspace. It questions the impact of social media pronouncements and explores how religious institutional organizations and their corresponding digital platforms respond to contemporary concerns in the light of continually shifting religious and media contexts. I also demonstrate how the global Covid-19 crises focused attention on the ways in which Islamic digital interfaces could be utilized within Muslim communities and by religious institutions to negotiate questions of spirituality, interpretation, and ritual propriety within the rapidly changing pandemic context.

Exploring Islamic Cyberspace

Any analysis of cyber Muslims should reflect upon the exponential growth in internet technologies and gradual increases in digital access spurred by a rapid growth in online Islamic discourse in a multiplicity of formats and religious zones, all of which featured in my initial definition of “cyber Islamic environments.”³ This term has evolved in line with technological shifts and their applications in diverse Muslim contexts but has not yet become redundant given its flexibility in encompassing a complex range of digital media forms from content providers who define themselves as “Muslims.” Although *jihād*-oriented discourse has proportionally distorted the field for some observers, it actually constitutes a small component in a much more substantial and varied set of online networks, affiliations, and voices associated with the articulation of Muslim identities and knowledge. In observing and monitoring the constant shifts in these cyber Islamic environments, one becomes conscious of the utilization of increasingly innovative and digitally literate applications as digital natives become embedded in platforms and organizations—while also establishing their own novel outlets online. The separation between on- and offline is increasingly anachronistic, with mobile devices coupled with enhanced digital literacy and access making the internet a natural zone for all elements of Muslims’ lives. In fact, the complexity of content associated with religion comprises a minor component of a much wider pattern of digital media consumption in Muslim population zones.

The early phases of online Islamic expression prompted reactions from apathy to resistance from some established Muslim religious authorities toward the new media, for multiple reasons: a lack of digital literacy, “technophobia,” generational divides, and concerns that the internet would

“distract” and “corrupt” people were common views. Resistance to the usage of online media in religious spaces such as mosques, concerns about the presence of the Qur’ān on the internet, and fears that digital media would challenge or subvert traditional norms through digital influences were also frequent fears. Amid the information “vacuum” caused by initial inactivity from these conventional Muslim authorities, there emerged a wave of digital content generated by enthusiasts and opportunists. These users presented a new vision of how a “market share” in cyber Islamic environments would lead to influence in and impact on an exponentially growing online context. New voices and platforms focusing on a digital rather than analog presence contested for influence, encompassing a range of religious perspectives. This trend accelerated when web-focused content expanded into growing social media applications and spaces, zones where technological innovation and application in presenting alternative interpretations of Islamic content left a number of conventional authorities in their wake.⁴ In response, those established authorities, experts, and institutions that had ignored or condemned the internet changed course, realizing that their influence across generations (especially among younger people) would wane in the absence of a digital presence. The increasing expectations among Muslims that religious questions could be answered by an authentic authority through an internet search—and that the hierarchy of search linked to algorithms, metadata, and links was more influential than scholarly reputations—meant that a “shopping around” for opinions became more prevalent.⁵ In everyday practice, religiously oriented content was increasingly integrated into much wider content consumption patterns. This included, for example, the production of apps for specific Islamic purposes, such as reading the Qur’ān, determining prayer direction, and generating reminders of specific prayer times.⁶

The utilization of a search engine to seek basic knowledge on Islam can expose the surfer to a multitude (or cacophony) of different voices and opinions. While this information overload exposes the reader to a range of options, it can also be challenging and confusing, necessitating detailed research rather than providing an instant answer. Content providers who are able to present themselves as the “go-to” source for information may offer their adherents a shortcut, one that already relates to their existing worldview. Alternatively, this may impact or alter religious perspectives entirely. Occasionally, this reshaping may go against the traditional values of a community network. This has certainly been a contributing factor in the political-religious framing of opinions, which have led to so-called radicalization, with militant groups such as al-Qaeda and “Islamic State” now forming part of the marketplace of ideas open to all web users. Attempts to mediate or provide gatekeeping options that reflect specific cultural and religious outlooks within communities are not always successful, especially in the face of intergenerational disconnects based on differences in ideas about (and approaches to) knowledge, as well as more prosaic factors such

as digital literacy limitations. Overall, however, the competitive nature of online content, the need to ensure design is fresh and navigable, and the constant demands for immediacy, identity, and affiliation with networks and causes have meant that opportunities for exposure to alternative worldviews and interpretations have extended exponentially amid the reduced digital divide and corresponding increases in digital literacy. Even when censorship and monitoring impede this exposure, tech-savvy Muslims have found many ways around local internet restrictions.

Digital Contestation of Islamic Influence

In the twenty-first century, mosques, Muslim organizations, religious lifestyle influencers, and diverse Islamic interpretative frameworks contest online for impact on issues of belief, identity, politics, and community through diverse digital media forms. In 2020 this was highlighted with an intensified utilization of technological interfaces aimed to bring together socially distanced communities and networks during the Covid-19 pandemic—manifested in YouTube *Ramaḍān* rituals, TikTok religious advice, and online activist mobilization through social media. Authority is increasingly shaped by its approaches to online questions, the “searchability” and immediacy of responses, and the ease in which it can be navigated and accessed online via diverse media formats. Specific strands of belief draw on these digital spaces to present granular ideas of interpretation, leadership, and religious identities—capturing these formulations through Islamic digital media that increasingly have responded to the “always on” nature of mobile devices, building content that factors in immediacy and responsiveness. Marginalized perspectives outside of the mainstreams of interpretation and practice have also taken advantage of online opportunities to open up new audiences for their interpretations, on issues as varied as sexuality and *jihād* radicalization. Traditional boundaries rooted in historical layers of scholarship, interpretation, and ritualistic practices have broken through globalizing online influences, introducing a range of digitally literate players unencumbered by governments and organizational limitations.⁷ This includes individuals presenting Islamic lifestyles and ideas through social media, capturing and influencing young audiences in the process. Contesting notions of “authentic” Islamic messages can be found online, part of long-standing debates that pre-date digital media, often reflected in the emergence of diverse interpretative strands, multiple “schools” of thought, and the political manifestation of religious authority.⁸ This can be a cause of conflict, contestation, and even antagonistic “trolling” and abuse between different factions.

Among increasingly globalized Muslim communities, there is a pervasive evolution in terms of notions of authority and leadership, and this extends

into digital technologies which shape how Muslims across vast territories relate to religious authorities in fulfilling their spiritual mystical and legalistic agendas.⁹ The contestation for authority through different models appears online and offline (and at points in-between). Pre-technological approaches of authority dissemination continue, even as innovative approaches toward interpreting Islam as a “lifestyle” play out through streaming media with little differentiation between the on- and offline worlds—especially for those digital natives and technologically literate generations for whom devices are embedded throughout their daily activities. The notion of Islam being “always on” takes on a different dimension in online contexts, with devices continually presenting reminders, updates, prayers, and networking affiliations across diverse Muslim networks. The capture and presentation of ritual through digital media acts in some zones serve as a reinforcement of authority, especially when societal norms are challenged by other influences outside of conventional religious reference points. Traditional narratives rooted in time-bound layers of interpretation and scholarship can achieve a continuity through their electronic presence online, even as “innovative” interpretations and ideas filter through to receptive and curious audiences.

Voices of Religious Authority

The projection of religious authority online now serves as a vital focal point for those seeking to position themselves as significant voices within a complex Islamic milieu. Individuals providing opinions on well-designed web interfaces compete with the “major players,” acquiring influence and prestige for their religious interpretations which might contradict “traditional” perspectives. This can unsettle the status quo, but also open up spaces to access new audiences. The mediation power of the local *imam* (or otherwise titled “religious authority”) may be challenged by an online (and, at times, anonymous) authority projecting an “authentic” interpretative voice. Conversely, the local *imam* may transform into a net *imam* when developing a global voice through online articulation and presentation of their worldview. The creative application of online media is influential in this context, especially in an increasingly competitive marketplace for ideas and influences. Presenting Islamic authority online requires investment of time and resources, especially if an individual or group seeks to develop interactive and responsive digital spaces where affiliations and memberships can be engineered. The online marketplace for ideas can also stretch into micro-areas. As with other sectors of the internet, the “long tail” of micro-demand means that highly specialized perspectives and “products” can be strategically targeted; networks of individuals may communicate a specific set of interpretative values which they cannot easily express in their local, analog context. This might include allegiance to a political-religious perspective

which is prohibited in the local context or online observance of religious practices and rituals that are not permitted or encouraged in local mosques.

Some key players now have a digital heritage stretching back to the 1990s, with a continuity of content and an established brand and profile within the authority marketplace. Other Muslim media stars have come and gone: burnt out, censored, or eclipsed in this contested space. Some net *imams* have profiles which are monetized, either literally or figuratively in terms of the number of “likes,” clicks, and reposts. At the same time, they compete with other forms of online influencers with Islamic identities and ideas of religious authority that are projected through YouTube lifestyle channels, Instagram brand promotion, and tweets. A subtle underpinning religious ethos filtered through content more aligned with motivational speakers, “edutainment,” and personality culture has effectively recalibrated contemporary notions of authority projection. The emergence of both self-proclaimed “scholars” and net *imams* into these zones as a means of asserting influence suggests skill development, which goes well beyond the conventional religious structures of knowledge dissemination.

Advocates of diverse religious perspectives have recognized these factors. The spectrum of authority, from *jihād*-oriented content to Sufi performance, relies on the production of dynamic content attuned to different online consumption patterns, interfaces, and influences in the contested marketplace. Digital material is designed to attract attention immediately, before an individual swipes through to other content; attention spans in digital spaces can waver, especially with the myriad distractions available for consumers, including message alerts and pop-ups which interfere with the consumption of content. Marketing is key. Affiliation and continuity with pre-digital Muslim networks and interests can also be a significant factor, albeit with a reframing of the parameters of knowledge and identity in the digital context. There is a continuity of themes as well. Notions of interpretation, prophethood, and Islamic piety, for example, are often interpreted by what I have defined as “iMuslims” (or digitally connected Muslims) in line with traditional understandings. This includes how significant questions of identity, theology, law, and epistemology are approached. For example, in some Sunni contexts, the application of *ijtihad* (a pragmatic interpretation of Islam in the light of contemporaneous circumstances) may include all of the traditional processes and components of knowledge interpretation and dissemination. The key difference lies in the fact that the circulation of legal opinions is instantaneous through online channels and frequently hyperlinked to other opinions and information sources. As a result, interpretations of Sunni law may become part of a multimedia output—rather than being sent through a laborious process of editing, proofing, publication, and distribution. In Islam’s formative historical period, especially in the centuries following the death of Muhammad in 632 CE, religious interpretations were distributed through written forms or oral transmission. Their emphasis and immediate impact are significantly altered within the digital context, however.

Audience expectations are also different in digital contexts. Petitioners may attempt to acquire or search for alternative responses from a range of online scholars, prior to formulating a decision based on the response that most closely fits their own individual outlook or circumstances. The net *imam* effect in this instance is the notion of immediacy: the pressure to provide an opinion before competitors can result in reduced opportunities to reflect on and research the complex nuances within a religious opinion. Search engine algorithms impact online information acquisition, including in Islamic contexts. Some religious perspectives place greater emphasis on the production of a religious opinion (*fatāwā*) than others. Institutions such as the Deobandis, for example, have dedicated *fatwā* departments to answer questions;¹⁰ machine-generated responses to common questions are also evolving in the UAE.¹¹ Searching online through specific databases—as well as general searches—offers another way to access legal opinions. The extended shelf life of a *fatwā* is itself a further consequence of cyber Islamic environments: the pronouncements of generations of deceased scholars compete with contemporary perspectives through digitized archives, augmented by audiovisual materials. In effect, the advocates of specific legal authorities subtly project their own views through the edited opinions of others.

Into this context emerge new players and perspectives, drawing on alternative approaches to online media which go well beyond websites. These voices gain traction through social media, applying innovative approaches to dissemination. Over time, there have been some major shifts and changes in terms of responses to different platforms. Content has “evolved” to accommodate these transformations, whether through compressing written thoughts into the format of a tweet (initially 140 characters, currently 280 characters) or developing a dynamic digital format to discuss the Qur’ān. Adapting traditional source materials for specific audiences also increased edutainment content for children, such as animated *Sīra* biographical films, whose narratives combined the latest iteration of a communication process with a reliance on traditional Islamic sources.¹² Some of these presentations even linked to opportunities to subscribe to dedicated online channels for further or more extensive content.

The exponential rise of TikTok, in which concise video clips are created and circulated on cellphones, offered a further opportunity to project ideas about Islam, especially toward a youth demographic. Some authorities have expressed concerns that the app might be *ḥarām* (forbidden) because it contained immoral content, showed “gender mixing,” dancing, and had addictive qualities.¹³ Others, like Zimbabwean preacher Mufti Ismail Menk, acknowledged the complex issues of TikTok’s utilization by religious scholars but did not dismiss it.¹⁴ None of these debates, however, prevented TikTok becoming popular with young people, a point that has not been lost on religious authorities and those seeking to present religious values. Although there have been concerns from authorities in Mecca over the use

of cellphones in the *Ka'bah* precincts over the years, for example, this has not stopped the phenomena and the incremental increase in clips made in Mecca uploaded online. Following suit, the presentation of “official” content from Mecca is now allowed on TikTok, including clips from *haji* and *'umrah* filmed close to the *Ka'bah*.¹⁵ The Qur'ān and its recitation also feature extensively on TikTok, a natural format for brief presentations and audiovisual recitations.¹⁶ In 2020, this included the presentation of a *du'ā'* (prayer) on the Coronavirus.¹⁷ In a similar fashion, the rise of TikTok *fatāwā* has facilitated the circulation of religious opinions among broad audiences. Some of these have explored relatively controversial topics, such as a widely shared TikTok on the “Islamic ruling for Or@l \$ex” (the use of this spelling designed to avoid inappropriate links to other sites).¹⁸

Some cyber Islamic environments do not necessarily require a traditionally trained religious scholar to mediate ideas of authority and influence. Performative and ritual practices articulated online emanate from diverse sources, including those who could be identified as “Islamic influencers.” The presentation of the Qur'ān online features on numerous translation and recitation sites and apps, offering searchable digital interfaces which open up the Revelation to audiences ranging from the curious to the devoted, from Muslim and other perspectives. Social media have also played a role in projecting different approaches toward the Qur'ān, often attracting substantial online audiences in the process. While many famous reciters can be found online (including via archive recordings), there are also some atypical, niche approaches to the science of recitation, with new trends developing around female reciters and examples of children presenting *suwar*.¹⁹

The Net Imam Effect and Covid-19

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 led to an increasing digitized mediatization of Islam, especially relating to ritualistic practices and expressions of religious authority. This built on existing practices and structures within cyber Islamic environments but amplified and, in some cases, adapted them to suit situations, where lockdown and limited social mixing meant that access to mosques was restricted or prohibited. Multiple Islamic authorities and institutions that had previously been reluctant to place sermons and prayers online on a regular basis, for example, determined that the pandemic circumstances required some pragmatic interpretive approaches toward this unprecedented situation. This included responses to key events in the Islamic calendar such as *Ramaḍān*, which acquired a digital dimension through the facilitation of online *iftār* (a pre-pandemic phenomenon that acquired added impetus and poignancy because of the Covid-19 situation), as well as recitations and sermons specific to *Laylat*

al-Qadr that would usually have taken place in the mosque context.²⁰ The responses from Muslim scholars and authorities to this situation required new rules within this crisis mode. I am not suggesting here that these digital outputs and concerns were priorities for everyone, however, given how content competes for attention amid the continued digital divides that inhibit access.

Responses to the pandemic from religious authorities reflected the pressures of their rapidly developing contextual situations. In numerous locales, religious opinions were placed online as a quick response to significant questions associated with the outbreak. In the UK, this included countering rumors that started to emerge on issues which were impacting communities. There had been concerns in London that bodies of Muslim Covid-19 victims in hospitals were being cremated—in violation of Islamic practices for burial. In response, a religious scholar had to go online in order to counter these rumors which, though unsubstantiated, had wide social media circulation, causing disquiet within local communities.²¹

A particularly revealing indicator of the role of social media, religious authority, and the net *imam* effect during Covid-19 was reflected in Mecca, where investments in multimedia rapidly intensified. This included the enhanced development and promotion of apps presenting streaming content broadcasting specific ritual practices associated with *haji* and *'umrah*, as well as specific responses to the pandemic. This was significant in terms of projecting ideas of religious influence and “appropriate” practice during the Covid-19 outbreak, from social distancing during prayer to the wearing of masks in the precincts of the *Ka'bah*. An implication of these apps was the authorization of the use of digital interfaces for religious purposes during circumstances where normative practices and rituals were in crisis mode. The cliché of the “new normal” played out in empty pilgrimage sites and social-distanced prayer rituals. Particularly striking were images of an empty *matāf* (the precincts surrounding the *Ka'bah*) and of cleaners praying toward the *Ka'bah*. An especially instructive example of these apps came from Haramain Recordings, part of a suite of apps associated with the precincts of Mecca, including for the practice of *haji* and *'umrah* (available via Android and Apple platforms). This app features recordings and streaming of prayers and sermons, while its Instagram page displays socially distanced adapted activities such as prayer and sermons—alongside photos of religious and other functionaries observing protocols (from *imams* to security personnel).

Since the 2020 *haji* was exclusively open to limited numbers of pilgrims based in Saudi Arabia, others could only observe activities online through channels such as these. Some of this imagery was taken from cellphones, which had previously been banned or restricted near the *Ka'bah* (an edict that has steadily eroded with the presence of improved Wi-Fi in the *Ka'bah* precincts and digitally connected pilgrimage devices and apps). These images were frequently taken on and reposted by other Islamic digital

media platforms, especially with the striking and unusual images of sparsely attended *umrah* and *hajj* rituals. The Haramain social media feeds, such as Twitter, further intensified attention on these focal points with clips from recitations and livestreaming (some drawn from other online broadcast channels), along with poignant photos from a relatively empty Mecca and Medina. This was a digital projection of religious authenticity from the focal point of Islamic authority.

In a similar fashion, Islamic media outlets in local and international contexts spotlighted the efforts of religious authorities to mitigate the impact of social distancing, along with their advice, as restrictions slowly eased. These sites also reproduced specific recommendations on pilgrimage, especially concerning the prescribed restrictions. The socially distanced 2020 *hajj* was strictly regulated to keep participants safely away from each other, generating in the process some striking and unusual photographs of the resulting practices. This included time lapse photography of the *tawāf*, as well as the final circumambulation of the *Ka'bah* at the completion of pilgrimage.²² At the time of *Ramaḍān*'s conclusion, the image of a solitary woman praying by the *Ka'bah* was widely circulated, described by one social media commentator as “a beautiful metaphor of how many Muslims have spent Ramadan and Eid. Physically alone, but spiritually (and digitally) connected. As a friend said to me, Muslims have rich interior lives.”²³

Other Islamic portals offer entry into diverse online content, from a variety of usage perspectives and levels of interest. Amid the pandemic, this included the incorporation of advice about Covid-19, drawn from a range of sources. The About Islam channel was one of several platforms that offered advice on “Holding Virtual *Jumu'ahs* and *Taraaweek* [sic] Prayers,” reproducing an article from Sheikh Ahmad Kutty, which originally appeared on a Toronto Islamic website.²⁴ It provided a *fatwā* on how a virtual congregational prayer could be instituted in order to enable the continuity of practice until the reinstatement of “normal” prayers. Kutty argued, “With the situation being unprecedented, it calls for an exceptional ruling or opinion.” However, he also noted that this was not a principle for the long term: “In the age of increasing trends of individualism, and movements away from mosques (i.e. being unmosqued), we must never adopt online gatherings as a general rule.”²⁵ While accepting a temporary break due to the Covid-19 situation, Kutty advised that the prospect of a long-term cancellation would break mosque attending habits, thereby endangering the community.

Congregational prayers are a cornerstone of Muslim ritual practice and religious life, with continuity going back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Because they require physical meeting points, their enactment in virtual settings necessitated a responsive interpretation of sources according to the needs of the day. Different sectors within diverse Muslim contexts responded online to the Covid-19 crisis with pronouncements indicating shifting attitudes to this issue. The Council of Senior Scholars in Al-Azhar

in Egypt, for example, advised the avoidance of congregational prayers entirely due to the pandemic.²⁶ The Minister of Endowments Muhammad Mukhtar Jumaa responded with partial restrictions in mosque settings, rather than closing congregational prayer, emphasizing that the Ministry had been focusing on preventing the spread of infection through intensified cleaning and sterilization campaigns. Dr. Jumaa also noted that rumors on “suspicious pages and websites” were causing difficulties with regard to these issues. In response, he advised that while it was not compulsory to attend mosque during this situation, ablutions should be performed at home before entering a mosque, and the traditional hand shake greetings should be avoided.²⁷ As an international center of Sunni Islamic learning, Al-Azhar has broad influence beyond the Egyptian borders, increasingly mediated through its digital output. Mixed messages emerged from other authority channels as well, including debates on the origins of the virus and assertions that it was a “punishment” for China’s restrictions on Uighur Muslims.²⁸ The International Union of Muslim Scholars issued prohibitions on any congregational prayers as part of a detailed *fatwā* on preventing the spread of Covid-19.²⁹

As a further manifestation of the net *imam* effect, the Covid-19 crises also became a dominant theme within online *fatāwā* sites. This genre of Islamic digital media is a long-standing phenomenon, which has survived and thrived within different technological iterations of the internet and World Wide Web. Indeed, there are digital sites related to all the complex and competing shades of opinion within the Muslim spectrum. This is part of a much wider phenomenon associated with online religious opinions and “Question and Answer” (Q&A) sites, which have been utilized since the emergence of the earliest Islamic websites. As new iterations of newspaper Q&A sites, these innovative platforms presented scholars in their own rights as authentic authorities. Personal profiles and academic credentials were emphasized. Since *fatāwā* sites have formed part of the contestation for religious authority online, it was not surprising that a number of digital platforms devoted resources to respond to Covid-19. A few salient examples of Covid-related *fatāwā* are illustrative of these phenomena.

IslamQA.info was founded by the Syrian-born Shaykh Muhammad Saalih al-Munajjid (1960–) in Saudi Arabia in 1997, making it one of the long-standing *fatwā* sites in a web format. The content has evolved since *IslamQA*’s inception to include in 2020 material in sixteen languages, integrating diverse social media including WhatsApp. Al-Munajjid has been described as a leading Salafi, who allegedly influenced the ideology of al-Qaeda and ISIS.³⁰ Al-Munajjid was arrested in 2017 in Saudi Arabia; he remained detained in 2021, having been charged with encouraging people to fight in Syria and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and the Houthi movement.³¹ Even so, *IslamQA* continues to operate. The site describes al-Munajjid as “General Supervisor” and continues to widely circulate his videos and statements despite his incarceration.

During the pandemic, this meant that “endorsed” responses to readers’ questions about Covid-19 continued to appear on *IslamQA*. This included inquiries about ritual practices such as *ghusl* (the ritual bathing prior to prayer) and whether a Covid-19 death was the equivalent to martyrdom. Many of the *IslamQA* responses in the archive are “timeless” in that they refer to general issues of faith, practice, ritual, and interpretation which do not connect to specific events. The Covid-19 tranche of questions, however, responds specifically to a set of circumstances surrounding the virus—offering yet another example of the use of *ijtihād* in response to specific issues. In 2020, some readers inquired about whether *ruqyah* (exorcism) might be effective in the pandemic situation. More “practical” questions were also raised as to whether the traditional approach toward the deceased regarding ritual washing and the funeral prayer could be performed in absentia when it is too difficult to be in the presence of the body (with a response citing precedents drawn from the Prophet Muhammad’s own practice). *IslamQA* condemned as *bid‘ah*, or “innovation,” the practice of offering the funeral prayer every night for all Muslims who had died on a specific day.

Given al-Munajjid’s status in prison, it was not surprising to see that statements from the Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia started to appear on *IslamQA*. This included a statement in response to a “question” (solicited or otherwise) asking for a ruling on attending *Jumu‘ah* prayers in the pandemic context; the resulting opinion cited *aḥādīth* sources as analogous for prohibiting an infected person to attend the mosque.³² *IslamQA* also highlighted that quarantine should be observed, if pronounced by a specialist, authoritative medical body.³³ Another Covid-19 specific question related to whether personal protective equipment (PPE) could be worn by someone during prayers. This was deemed permissible “as long as the worshipper is able to place his nose and forehead on the ground when prostrating,” again citing *aḥādīth* sources in justification.³⁴ Additional responses outlined the modification of prayers for the sick.³⁵

Other online Islamic perspectives also sought to exert influence and promote their interpretations of religious authority during the pandemic, seeing it as a duty to help their local communities. The UK-based *Islamic Portal* responded to the preponderance of internet-based content—and specifically issues surrounding the transmission of *aḥādīth*—via Zoom, Skype, and similar platforms. Although this contrasts with the traditional methods of face-to-face transmission of knowledge, it was deemed acceptable in light of the pandemic situation.³⁶ The site’s digital discourse illuminated an interesting exploration of the minutiae of details associated with prayer during Covid-19. This included issues associated with socially distanced prayers and mosque prayers requiring physical space between congregants, including the introduction of ticketed systems requiring the registration of personal details.³⁷ Mask-wearing was also a resonant issue, especially around the question of whether the use of masks contravened a principle in the *hajj*, requiring an extra sacrifice. In

this case, the special circumstances of the pandemic were seen as a mitigating factor, altering how and when the state of *iḥrām* (ritual purity and symbolic clothing required for participating in pilgrimage) commenced.³⁸

Online approaches to lockdown also adopted other forms of digital media in order to disseminate opinions and attract audiences. The Scottish *Deenspiration* channel offered a “chat show” format in its online Q&A on how to approach *Ramaḍān* (especially fasting) during the Covid-19 outbreak.³⁹ A further episode featuring Shaykh Ruzwan Mohammed, a Scottish religious scholar and education advisor, discussed aspects of spirituality during the pandemic while also promoting an online course on Islam which was a response to Covid-19.⁴⁰ *Deenspiration* is part of a wider set of podcasts, blogs, e-books, and digital resources seeking to communicate ideas to make readers “better Muslims” through “authentic” interpretative processes. Given its multimedia outlets, it was well positioned to adapt and effectively project its ideas within the lockdown situation.

Social media were applied across diverse Muslim contexts internationally in order to present perspectives on the Covid-19 situation. This included images from Istanbul in May 2020, showing socially distanced prayers at Fatih Mosque via aerial photographs. In contrast, the August 2020 repositioning and reopening of Aya Sophia as a mosque (after eighty-six years as a national museum) was seen by online critics as disregarding social distancing conventions.⁴¹ In Egypt, Al-Azhar University drew on Periscope as a means to present video clips and images demonstrating social distancing during *Ramaḍān*, marking the Islamic New Year with recitations of the Qurʾān in an otherwise empty mosque.⁴² Al-Azhar also extensively utilized Twitter to present its views on Covid-19 measures, with photos of sermons emphasizing social distancing measures.⁴³ Social media became a significant channel for Al-Azhar on a broader range of issues as well, including speeches and conference proceedings embedded into numerous activities. In November, for example, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar was seen discussing terrorism measures—following attacks in France—with the French Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian. The clip of the meeting was immediately translated and uploaded online, accompanied by music more in line with a cinematic epic than an information clip.⁴⁴

Instagram also became a significant channel for the amplification of diverse religious perspectives. This included Shīʿī Iranian clerics promoting their activities on *TalabeToday*. Posts displayed various clerics undertaking their everyday activities and jobs while negotiating the difficulties of the Covid-19 situation; others were shown being proactive in hospital wards, conducting prayers with patients and working with medical teams.⁴⁵ Some Covid-19 content responses centered on a specific personality. This included the use of brief videos using Snapchat by the American *imam* Suhaib Webb who developed “Snapwas” (a combination of Snapchat and *fatwā*) to present extremely concise religious opinions. Webb’s pioneering use of social media extended from the virtual *iftār* to *Eid* prayers and *Ramaḍān* sermons.⁴⁶

In a similar fashion, many international Muslim religious organizations drew on online video delivery channels such as Zoom to present their *iftār* celebrations to broad audiences during the pandemic lockdowns.

Conclusion

Digital media have provided an ideal—and at times the only—way to project ideas of religious authority and authenticity during a time of social isolation in diverse social settings. In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic expanded the application of internet technologies in Islamic contexts. This is the latest iteration of the net *imam* effect, drawing upon existing social media and internet techniques, and extending their application across diverse cyber Islamic environments. Amid the global pandemic, organizations and individuals intensified social media deployment to articulate divergent approaches to religious authority, including *fatāwā*, prayers, and interactive content. Some preexisting barriers to usage diminished in a pragmatic recognition of potential utility in an increasingly connected milieu. This recognition heightened an appreciation of how social media can reinforce religiosity—especially in crisis mode—within a competitive marketplace for influence and audience. Mosques and religious organizations operating in this context developed innovative solutions to atypical issues and situations, illuminating a dynamic of change and transition through digital content.

Presenting religious opinions online was not without potential problems, however, especially for activists, advocates, and authorities using media against governmental authority or established norms—and facing possible sanction or imprisonment as a result. The potential for any digitally proficient individual to set up a channel and pronounce on religious issues—whether or not it was endorsed by religious conventions—has led to censorship and prosecution in some contexts. Clearly, it is important to avoid idealizing any notions of digital media as a universal “liberation” force. In local and global contexts, they encompass complex perspectives, sometimes opening up audiences for potential “radicalization” under the guise of conspiracy theories, *jihād* narratives, and “jihādi” identities. Al-Qaeda, “Islamic State,” and their variants project an interpretation of values, propaganda, and responses through public and clandestine networks of digital authority to diverse audiences (from supporters to curious and speculative observers) where, in some zones, ownership of content is itself a prosecutable offense.

In continually shifting media contexts, salient questions emerge on how various Muslim gatekeepers will continue to respond and adapt to this information overload of authority, *fatāwā*, and alternate opinions. In online zones with limited or no “central” authority, there is clearly a complex marketplace of online influences and ideas. The design of sites and the

application of algorithms to enhance searchability can be as influential as the reputation of any individual scholar. For academics, the capture and analysis of this continually shifting online context raise vexing methodological and research challenges.

Islamic organizations compete with fluid social media from diverse sources within diverse cyber Islamic environments, responding to the intensified relationship between iMuslims and their devices. Many project competing messages of authenticity, authority, and direct connection to core Islamic principles. Amid this ongoing contestation, funding considerations shape the terms of influence, as apps and other media require increasingly significant investments of time, money, experience, and input. The increased integration of digital threads into the overall discourse about Islam and Muslims in contemporary contexts demonstrates that the net *imam* effect is in a process of continual development, refinement, and innovation in line with technological advancements. Amid these momentous changes, digital media narratives and practices retain a continuity with traditional roots and routes of knowledge—the latest iteration of a message emanating from a seventh-century prophet.

- 48 Lo and Aziz (2009).
- 49 Sisler (2013).
- 50 Alatas (2017); Rozehnal (2019); Sijapati (2019).
- 51 Cantwell and Rashid (2015); <https://mappingislamophobia.org/> (edited and directed by Caleb Elfenbein); www.cyberorient.net (editor-in-chief, Daniel Martin Varisco).
- 52 Echchaibi, "Taming the West," p. 145.
- 53 In 1965, Intel cofounder Gordon Moore noted that the number of transistors per square inch on integrated circuits had doubled every year since their invention. "Moore's law" predicts this trend will continue in the future, an observation that also serves as shorthand for the exponential growth of digital technologies in general.

Chapter 1

- 1 In this context, *imam* refers to a religious leader or functionary with responsibilities for leading the prayers; *mullah* refers to a religious leader or scholar; *shaykh* refers to a religious leader. The terms can have other meanings, depending on the religious orientation and tradition of the individual. The focus in this chapter is primarily on Sunni perspectives and interpretations. I have written extensively elsewhere on other approaches.
- 2 Bunt (2018).
- 3 Bunt (2000).
- 4 Bunt (2009).
- 5 Bunt (1996). This was a common feature of my discussions with Muslim scholars during fieldwork on religious authority issues in the mid-1990s, when the use of the internet as a form of communication of religious ideas was in its early stages (often through mailing lists and chatrooms).
- 6 Cox (2020). Islamically oriented apps were not without issues or problems. In 2020, for example, there were allegations that some Muslim apps had been compromised and their data shared with a variety of partners, including security-oriented organizations.
- 7 Bunt (2003); El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009).
- 8 Abusharif (2019).
- 9 Mandaville (2014).
- 10 Darul Ifta (2020).
- 11 *Associated Press* (2019); *Virtual Ifta* (2019).
- 12 *IQRA Cartoon* (2018). *Sīra* refers to the biographical genre associated with the life of the Prophet Muhammad.
- 13 *The Islamic Information* (2019).
- 14 *OnePath Network* (2020).

- 15 *TikTok* (2020); Stanton (2020); Bunt (2015); Arjana (2017). *Hajj* refers to the “major” annual pilgrimage; *‘umrah* is the “minor” pilgrimage. Both take place in Mecca and focus on the *Ka’bah*, the central cube-like structure in the Great Mosque. The 2020 *hajj* took place in the year 1441 in the Islamic calendar.
- 16 *TVQuran* (2020).
- 17 *Mudasir_100* (2020).
- 18 *Reminder4Believer* (2020).
- 19 Bunt (2020: 39–44); Smith Galer (2020). *Suwar* (singular: *sūrah*) are chapters in the Qur’ān.
- 20 The term *iftār* relates to breaking the *Ramaḍān* fast. Practices vary in diverse religious and cultural contexts. *Laylat al-Qadr*, the “Night of Power,” is associated with marking the day of the initial Revelation received by Muhammad. It is celebrated with additional prayers and readings of the Qur’ān, often over several nights as there is no precise contemporaneous date.
- 21 *Versi* (2020).
- 22 The term *ṭawāf* refers to the ritual circumambulation of the *Ka’bah* at the commencement and conclusion of the *hajj*.
- 23 Khan (2020).
- 24 Kutty (2018–); *About Islam* (2021). Kutty is Director of the Islamic Center of Toronto and resident scholar at the Islamic Institute of Toronto. His religious opinions have been widely circulated online on prominent Islamic websites. His opinions are also featured on his personal *Ask the Scholar* website, which links to *About Islam*.
- 25 Kutty (2020).
- 26 *State Information Services* (2020).
- 27 *Akhbar el-Yom* (2020); *ShoroukNews* (2020).
- 28 Brown (2020).
- 29 Al-Qaradaghi (2020).
- 30 Fakude (2014); Lauzière (2015); Wiktorowicz (2005); Thomas Hegghammer (2009). The term “Salafi” is complex, relating here to a spectrum of political-religious movements associated with “reform” and “renewal” of Islam. The term can have negative connotations from observers (Muslim and other) in relation to its perceived association with so-called fundamentalism(s) and *jihād*-oriented militancy.
- 31 *Middle East Monitor* (2020).
- 32 *Jumu’ah* refers to the Friday prayer, which is conventionally seen as most beneficial when undertaken communally in a mosque. The term *aḥādīth* (singular: *ḥādīth*) is associated with the reports, traditions, and sayings and actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.
- 33 *IslamQA* (2020c).
- 34 *IslamQA* (2020b).
- 35 *IslamQA* (2020a).
- 36 *Islamic Portal* (2020b).

- 37 *Islamic Portal* (2020a).
- 38 *Islamic Portal* (2020c).
- 39 *Deenspiration* (2020b).
- 40 *Deenspiration* (2020a).
- 41 Durmaz (2020); *Arab News* (2020).
- 42 *Al-Azhar* (2020b).
- 43 *Al-Azhar* (2020c).
- 44 *Al-Azhar* (2020a).
- 45 *TalabeToday* (2020). Shī'ī and other diverse perspectives would require a wider study than this present overview.
- 46 Webb (2020).

Chapter 2

- 1 El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009); Marcotte (2016); Bunt (2018); Rozehnal (2019).
- 2 Permission from the participants and REB approval have been obtained for publication purposes.
- 3 For more info, see www.risconvention.com
- 4 Campbell (2013).
- 5 Helland (2007).
- 6 Hoover (2016).
- 7 Bunt (2018).
- 8 Peterson and Echchaibi (2017).
- 9 Rozehnal (2019: 14).
- 10 Orsi (2006).
- 11 Ammerman (2007).
- 12 McGuire (2008).
- 13 Jeldtoft (2011).
- 14 Orsi (2006: 188).
- 15 Ammerman (2007).
- 16 McGuire (2008: 8–13, 120).
- 17 Jeldtoft (2011).
- 18 At the time of research, I assigned this age group for millennials.
- 19 The participants were required to be repeat attendees so they could discuss their reasoning for returning to this conference.
- 20 Qadhi resigned from this institution in 2019 to join the Islamic Seminary of America.