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Comment on Possamai, Turner, Roose, Dagistanli and Voyce/2. The "Fatwa" Chaos, the Multiplication of Competent Authorities, and the State

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Comment on Possamai, Turner, Roose, Dagistanli and Voyce/2.

The “Fatwa” Chaos, the Multiplication of Competent Authorities, and the State

by Abdulhadi Khalaf

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1. Introduction

I share the authors' celebration of the new forms of communication, facilitated by the IT revolution, that can “allow Muslims to shape their own religiosity, to become less dependent on established sources of authority, and thereby become aware of their own diversity as a community” [Possamai et al. 2016, 1]. Similarly to its predecessors, including the printing press in the Nineteenth Century, or the transistor radios in 1950s, or the audiocassette tapes in the 1970s, the IT revolution's impact is deep and far-reaching. Like its predecessors, it is empowering a variety of new claimants to religious authority who seek to replace traditional authorities. More and more Muslims find it possible to choose among these competing authorities and to select a suitable *fatwa*, to solve an everyday conundrum and to smooth adjustments to live in the new environments. The “*fatwa* shopping” has become accessible to other categories than those privileged by wealth, political power or education. New channels for seeking *fatwas* are reaching new segments of the population who have access to satellite TVs and/or internet connection. In spite of expansion, the access to the services of the new religious authorities remains constrained by other factors including the limited access to satellite TVs and/or internet connections.

The authors also observe that while the new forms of communication did not result in the individualisation of authority or the establishment of subjective opinion over religious knowledge, they resulted in “a multiplication of competing authorities”

[*Ibidem*, 1]. The jury is still out with regard to the significance of the emerging authorities. Some of them, I contend, are genuine attempts to respond to the changing needs of various Muslim communities, others may best be described as franchises of *fatwa* authorities in X or Y Muslim states. The authors' optimism, while qualified, rests on not pursuing the role of the State in facilitating or constraining the emergence of new *fatwa* outlets in the countries of migration. The noted "multiplication of competing authorities" becomes relevant if one eliminates political interventions from home authorities.

I contend that the State, in most Muslim countries, remains capable of mobilizing its despotic and infrastructural capacities to hold on to a sufficiently functional control over the public spheres. Further, the survival of any new competent *fatwa* authority and its ability to engage in an equitable competition with state-sponsored *fatwa* outlets are far from certain. Abdel-Fadil [2011] provides an interesting case of the role of the State in determining the lifeline of *Islam Online*, IOL, one of the well-established religious websites. IOL emerged and prospered at a time Qatar and Egypt shared a common interest, i.e. to carve out a piece of the emerging field. In the subsequent power struggle between the two states, Qatar prevailed and took over control of IOL site, its mission, location and personnel.

Fringe and/or counter public spheres, including those opened up by the new forms of communication, when perceived as challenges to state authority, become subject to the proper State responses. These responses may include censorship; constraining access to undesirable sites; control of ISPs providers; delegating security agencies to monitor accounts and interactions, and/or persecution of sites owners and administrators. Even when these measures cannot be applied outside the territorial control of the State, it can resort to other measures ranging from discrediting aspirants to co-opting them. In the rest of my comment I will take up a few examples of measures taken by Muslim states in response to challenges to their dominance of the *fatwa* field.

2. Weird Australian Fatwas and the Fatwa Chaos

On May 21, 2016 the Arabic edition of *The Huffington Post*¹ raised the question "*Why weird fatwas are issued in Australia?*". The article takes up several other examples of the weird *fatwas* and actions by Muslim clerics in Australia. Among its

¹ See: http://www.huffpostarabi.com/2016/05/21/story_n_10006366.html (accessed June 27, 2016).

examples, the article refers the fatwas issued by Sheikh Mustafa Rashid,² “the Imam and preacher of Sydney Mosque.” In one of them, the Sheikh considers wine drinking as *makroob* and not *haram* and claims that “the Prophet Muhammad drank wine.” By the second *fatwa*, according to the *Post*, he encourages Muslims to pilgrimage to *Mount Sinai*, which is “more sacred than *Mecca*”.

The Australian story was widely publicized in Egyptian and other Arab media outlets. It was presented as yet another manifestation of what has long been known as the “*Fatwa Chaos*.”³ The perceived chaos is not new and certainly not unique to Australia. Arab media have allocated considerable space and air time to deal with the perceived threat. According to an editorial in the Egyptian semi-official daily, *كلذلق* *أدعوا*, *إلى* *إمام* *السنة* *إلى* *إف* *القائل* *رشد* *و* *قن* *تفل* *هذه* *يلع* *اض* *قل* *ل* *ن* *أ* *دق* *ف* *اظ* *ف* *ح* *و* *ة* *ي* *ص* *خ* *ش* *ل* *أ* *و* *ه* *أ* *ل* *اع* *ن* *م* *ء* *ات* *ف* *إ* *ل* *ر* *اد* *و* *ر* *ه* *ز* *أ* *ل* *أ* *خ* *ي* *ش* *م* *ق* *ي* *ر* *ط* *ر* *ي* *غ* *ن* *ع* *ي* *و* *ات* *ف* *ر* *اد* *ص* *إ* *ب* *ح* *ام* *س* *ل* *أ* *د* *ع* *و* *ة* *ح* *ي* *ح* *ص* *ل* *أ* *ع* *ن* *م* *ء* *ات* *ف* *إ* *ل* *ر* *اد* *و* *ر* *ه* *ز* *أ* *ل* *أ* *خ* *ي* *ش* *م* *ق* *ي* *ر* *ط* *ر* *ي* *غ* *ن* *ع* *ي* *و* *ات* *ف* *ر* *اد* *ص* *إ* *ب* *ح* *ام* *س* *ل* *أ* *د* *ع* *و* *ة* *ح* *ي* *ح* *ص* *ل* *أ* *ع* *ن* *م* *ء* *ات* *ف* *إ* *ل* *ر* *اد* *و* *ر* *ه* *ز* *أ* *ل* *أ* *خ* *ي* *ش* *م* *ق* *ي* *ر* *ط* *ر* *ي* *غ* *ن* *ع* *ي* *و* *ات* *ف* *ر* *اد* *ص* *إ* *ب* *ح* *ام* *س* *ل* *أ* *د* *ع* *و* *ة* *ح* *ي* *ح* *ص* *ل* *أ* *ع* *ن* *م* *ء* *ات* *ف* *إ* *ل* *ر* *اد* *و* *ر* *ه* *ز* *أ* *ل* *أ* *خ* *ي* *ش* *م* *ق* 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ing questioning his credentials, his mental capacities, or accusing him of entertaining impure influences.

It is doubtful that institutionalizing the *fatwa* field and introducing *collective Ijtihad* could bring the Muslim State back to full control. Such a project faces a plethora of obstacles and could be difficult to achieve. The most immediate obstacle may be the chronic power struggle among Muslim rulers on who, among them, represents the *true* Islam.

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Comment on Possamai, Turner, Roose, Dagistanli and Voyce/2.

The “Fatwa” Chaos, the Multiplication of Competent Authorities, and the State.

Abstract: The new forms of communication facilitated by the IT revolution have provided followers of various interpretations of Islam to participate in the newly opened public spheres. More and more Muslims find it possible to choose among these competing authorities and to select a suitable *fatwa*, to solve problems of everyday life and to smooth adjustments to living in the new environments. IT revolution is empowering a variety of new claimants to religious authority who aspire to state-sponsored traditional authorities. In spite of those changes, the role of the State and its institutions continues to dominate the field. The State, in Muslim countries, is able of mobilizing capacities to maintain its control over the public spheres in general. The success of any new competent *fatwa* authority and its ability to engage in an equitable competition with state-sponsored *fatwa* outlets are far from certain. Fringe and/or counter public spheres, including those opened up by the new forms of communication, can trigger a diversity harsh responses by the State. Even, in countries of migration, I suggest, these responses may include diverse ways of discrediting challengers to co-opting them.

Keywords: Fatwa Chaos; Collective Ijtihad; State; Fatwa Charter; Institutionalization.

Abdulhadi Khalaf is a senior researcher at the Department of Sociology, Lund University. His publications include *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf* (with the co-editor G. Luciani), Dubai: GRC [2006]; *Transit States: Labour, Migration and Citizenship in the Gulf* (with the co-editors A. Hanieh and O. AlShehabi), London: Pluto Press [2015]; “Precarious Citizenship in the GCC Countries,” *Inamo* 81 (20) [2015]; “On the Prelude to the 14th February Uprising,” in *Bahrain Uprising*, edited by A. Shehabi and M.O. Jones. London: Zed Books [2016].