
The modern opening of Saudi Arabia to the outside world poses constant challenges to Wahhābī vigilance. Muhammad Al Atawneh has analyzed the responses of Wahhābī jurists to the influx of foreign cultural influence and technological innovation by researching the formation, functions, and fatwās of two ‘ulamā’ councils. He argues that while Wahhābī muftīs have drawn a hard line on core issues pertaining to ritual, gender segregation and morality, they have exhibited a pragmatic streak in their rulings on financial transactions and medical procedures.

Al Atawneh sets the stage in Chapter One with a brief historical review. He describes the central role played by Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb and his descendants (Āl al-Shaykh) in the practice of iftā’ during the first two centuries of Saudi power and then the initial step taken in the direction of collective jurisprudence in 1953, when a royal decree established Dār al-Iftā’ under the authority of Muftī Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Āl al-Shaykh. The author mentions Crown Prince Fayṣal’s 1962 Ten-Point Programme that proposed the creation of an Iftāʾ Council but does not explain that it was shelved due to opposition from the formidable muftī, who suspected it would curtail clerical independence. Only after Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm died in 1969 did King Fayṣal move ahead with plans for the Iftāʾ Council with the creation of two bodies of ‘ulamā’: the Board of Senior ‘Ulamāʾ (BSU) and the Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and Legal Opinions (CRLO). Together these two organizations comprise the Dār al-Iftāʾ, roughly the Office for Issuing Legal Religious Opinions.

In Chapter Two, Al Atawneh describes the membership and procedures of the BSU and CRLO. The BSU has consisted of between seventeen and twenty-one members who convene twice a year for about one week. The CRLO has four to six members and a number of research assistants to investigate questions on behalf of the BSU and the Saudi king. The author also discusses the office of the Grand Muftī, revived in 1993 under ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Bāz, and gives a sketch of Ibn Bāz’s life, but overlooks the political circumstances underlying his appointment, namely the opposition of the ṣaḥwa protest movement that challenged the dynasty’s religious legitimacy and its reorganization of religious ministries to purge dissident clerics.

In Chapter Three, Al Atawneh discusses the relationship between Dar al-Iftā’ and the king in the context of Wahhābī political theory, rooted in Ibn Taymiyyah’s conception of al-iṭyasah al-sharʿiyyah. The author’s discussion establishes that Saudi fatwās become binding legislation only when affirmed by royal decree; otherwise they possess the moral authority of their authors, which ordinary Saudis may or may not accept. Royal support is essential to executing Islamic law, but in the early 1990s, ‘ulamā’ loyalty to the monarchy left them open to Islamist criticism that they bent the law to stay on the good side of the rulers.

In Chapter Four the author reviews how modern Saudi jurists preserve and extend Wahhābī-Ḥanbali legal theory and method. He arrives at three main findings. First,
contemporary muftis are more prone to rely on analogy (qiyās) on the basis of necessity and public interest (al-maṣlaḥa al-ʿāmma) than is customary in the Ḥanbali law school. Second, they often draw on other Sunni law schools for their rulings. Third, in deliberating on complicated technical questions such as organ transplants and financial transactions, they enlist the expertise of scientists and specialists to shore up their understanding.

In Chapter Five, Al Atawneh explores how Wahhābī jurists define illegitimate innovation, or bidʿa, and approved practice, or Sunna. He describes the history of innovation as a problem for Sunni jurists, who divided into two camps that cut across the four madhāhib. One camp maintained that innovation could be either good or bad, depending on its compatibility with Shariʿa. The other camp argued that innovation is categorically prohibited in ritual and matters of faith. Ibn Taymiyya held the latter view, and Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb embraced it, passing it down to today’s Saudi muftis. They are, therefore, rigorous in warning against any whiff of ritual innovation, issuing prohibitions against religious festivals like the Prophet’s Birthday and insisting that the only valid religious holidays are the festivals concluding Ramadan and the Pilgrimage. They also ban holidays like Mother’s Day, not only because they are innovations but also because they violate the general prohibition against imitating infidels. When it comes to gender relations, the muftis resort less to the argument against bidʿa, but rely instead on a broad interpretation of the concept of khalwa (which raises the question of why the topic is included in a chapter about bidʿa). Al Atawneh notes that while most jurists confine khalwa to private or secret interaction between a man and a woman, Wahhābī jurists stretch the concept to encompass any interaction, public or private, between unrelated men and women. (Would other Muslim jurists regard such a definition as an instance of bidʿa?) Their definition of khalwa underlies the blanket prohibition on coeducation and gender mixing in the workplace. Wahhābī jurists hold a similarly broad definition of nudity that results in their insistence on covering the entire body except for the eyes. As for their famous opposition to women driving, that stems from the imperative to prevent illicit interaction (ikhtilāṭ) between genders, not from the ban on bidʿa.

In Chapter Six, Al Atawneh traces the reasoning behind fatwās on visual media, financial transactions, and medical procedures. When the muftis address questions related to photography and film, hadiths prohibiting the creation of likenesses of living creatures incline them to a cautious, if not suspicious, attitude tempered by pragmatism. The muftis have basically decided that when properly used, say, to propagate religion, television and the Internet are allowed. The deliberations of the ‘ulamāʾ on interest-bearing financial transactions and risk-bearing insurance operations are a second area in which Al Atawneh finds evidence of flexible adaptation. As for birth control, the muftis note two kinds of special circumstances under which it is allowed. One, based on the general Shariʿa principle for preserving human life, is to hold that birth control is allowed if a woman’s health may be jeopardized by a pregnancy. The other is to safeguard family welfare, which is such a vague notion that one wonders whether the jurists—never shy about setting minute limits on ritual and gender relations—simply