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Digitally Mediated Art in the War Zone: The Aesthetics of Resilience in Yemen

Nurgul Oruc

Abstract

The current civil war in Yemen has been largely ignored by mainstream media, with the majority of coverage spotlighting the military aspect of the conflict. Yemeni artists challenge this absence of narratives reflecting the suffering of thousands of Yemeni men, women, and children by exposing the actual situation to the outside world through various artifacts shared on digital media platforms. Despite the significance of contemplating creative endeavors in conflict zones and the burgeoning interest in cultural production both during and after the Arab Spring in the Middle East, contemporary Yemeni creative expressions have been largely neglected by scholars working on the Middle East. This article traces how Yemeni artists have intervened in the representation of the conflict and war in Yemen since 2011. It analyzes the heterogonous artistic forms, contents, and representational strategies that Yemeni artists and filmmakers have employed to express their collective concerns over war and destruction. The constraints and limitations imposed by the conflict have also shaped the creative expressions of Yemeni wartime artists, especially in terms of sharing their work both with their own communities and with the wider world. While their creative work manifests the suffering of a nation, it also constitutes a refusal to live under weakness and lack of hope for the future. The concepts of tactical and participatory media and socially engaged art are used to refer to the production and dissemination of a variety of creative responses to the ongoing crisis in Yemen, as illustrated through selected art media forms.

Keywords

Yemen, digital activist art, street art, art and film in conflict zones, resilience through art, art and civic engagement, tactical and participatory media

“Art gives hope and expresses the situation in which people are living. It is the voice of people. In war, all voices are voices of hatred and destruction. What we do is to show that there are other voices people can listen to. In times of war, even the smallest voices may save lives” (Masri 2017). These

are the words of Murad Subay, a graffiti artist and activist in Yemen, who, like many other Yemeni artists, uses his creative skills as a civic engagement medium to narrate and disseminate the unseen (and untold) realities of the ordinary people of Yemen and their experiences of a brutal conflict. The current civil war in Yemen – an area previously known as *Arabia Felix* or *Happy Arabia* – has been largely ignored by mainstream media, with coverage spotlighting the military aspect of the conflict and the humanitarian disaster (Bonney 2018). Yemeni artists have challenged this absence of narratives reflecting the suffering of thousands of Yemeni men, women, and children by exposing the actual situation to the outside world through various productions shared on digital media platforms. In the absence of any state-mediated sources of national belonging (Wedeen 2009), grassroots creative art expressions in Yemen have played an important role in sustaining and performing collective solidarity and identification in a war-torn state.

A plethora of art forms has thrived in conflict zones of the Middle East and North Africa, especially in Palestine, Egypt, and Tunisia, as a means to communicate the despair of impacted individuals and communities in times of crises (Gröndahl 2012; Omri 2012; Downey 2014; LeVine 2015; Schriwer 2015; Kraidy 2016a; Slitine 2018). One of the most distinguishing features of the artistic expressions that have emerged from and responded to political and military conflicts of the past decade across MENA is the wide range of use of digital media technologies, tools, platforms, and creative forms. Civic activist art and media expressions are increasingly shaped by digital affordances. These affordances enabled individuals to not only document, represent, and disseminate the given political crisis but also to generate awareness and galvanize civic activism around it. They “served to create a space in which citizens appeared in public, came before each other, and entered into forms of civic dialogue by means of images” (Elias 2017, 20). The endurance and traveling capacity of the digital image has strongly shaped the image politics of conflict, dissent, and protest in the Middle East (Khatib 2012).

However, despite the significance of contemplating creative endeavors in conflict zones and the burgeoning interest in cultural production both du-

ring and after the Arab Spring in the Middle East, contemporary Yemeni creative expressions have been largely neglected by scholars working on the Middle East. This article traces how Yemeni artists (mostly self-taught amateurs), working across rich arrays of art and media, have intervened in the representation of the political, economic, and social struggles Yemenis have suffered as a result of conflicts and war since 2011. This article argues that prominent Yemeni artists have employed heterogeneous artistic forms that they have digitally mediated to the public in order to express their collective concerns over war and destruction. The constraints and limitations imposed by the conflict have also shaped the creative expression of Yemeni wartime artists. While their work manifests the suffering and struggles of a nation, it also constitutes a refusal to live under weakness and a lack of hope for the future. The concepts of tactical media, participatory culture, and socially engaged art are used to explain the production, dissemination, and digital mediation of a variety of creative responses to the ongoing crisis in Yemen, as illustrated through selected art media. Personal websites and social media accounts of the artists, YouTube videos, and interviews (via skype and email) are used as primary sources of assessing the scope of their creative works. In addition, the article draws on scholarships that have been produced on art and media production in conflict zones, with a particular focus on the Middle East.

Yemen since 2011

As with many Middle Eastern countries that have experienced the upheavals generically known as the Arab Spring, the uprising in Yemen in 2011 stemmed from years of dissatisfaction with longstanding political, economic, and social conditions. The deposed president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who remained in power for 33 years, was succeeded by his previous deputy, Abd-rabbuh Mansoor Hadi, with the stated aim of holding legitimate presidential and legislative elections within a year as the head of the interim government. However, the previous president continued to cling to power by establishing an alliance with a former enemy, the Houthis – a group with a history of uprisings against the government over the previous decade. In September 2014, the Houthis forces, backed by Saleh, captured the city of

Sana'a, followed by the seizure of Hadi's palace, thus forcing the interim government to resign. A coalition of Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia and with the support of the United States of America subsequently supported Hadi, providing logistics, arms, and intelligence, as well as launching airstrikes against the Houthi–Saleh alliance in March 2015 (Hill 2017).

The escalation of the armed conflict following the intervention of the coalition forces evolved into a war that has taken a considerable toll on Yemen. The war in Yemen has been called “The world’s worst man-made humanitarian crisis” by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED 2019), more than 100 thousand Yemenis had been killed by the fighting and bombing since 2015. In April 2020, approximately 24.1 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance out of an estimated population of 29 million, with half the population in acute need (OCHA 2020). With over a million cases of cholera and facing the threat of the COVID-19 epidemic, only half of Yemen’s health facilities were functioning (WHO 2020). The World Food Programme estimated in December 2018 that 20.1 million Yemenis were “severely food insecure” (WFP 2020). Two million children under the age of five are suffering from acute malnutrition and seven million children are out of school (UNICEF 2020). Yemen is thus at the brink of total social and economic collapse, with the majority of ordinary Yemenis entrapped in violence and the power games of the parties involved in the conflict. Despite the magnitude of the war and the uncertain future of the country, Yemeni activists, artists, and amateurs discussed in this article project resistance and hope through alternative tactical and participatory art media.

Tactical and Participatory Media

Tactical media, coined by David Garcia and Geert Lovink (1997), refers to the “crisis, criticism and opposition” media that have emerged thanks to affordable technologies and communication outlets. They are the kinds of media used by social groups that are invisible in mainstream narratives such as activists, hackers, and protestors. According to Garcia and Lovink (1997),

tactical media deploy all forms of media (old, new, lucid, and sophisticated) and utilize free spaces in the media landscape to draw attention to pressing political issues and transcend rigid dichotomies such as amateur versus professional, alternative versus mainstream and private versus public. Tactical media, in other words, is “the media of states of emergency. When certain social groups, for whatever reasons, are excluded from mainstream narratives, they employ alternative media to get their message across without falling prey to state censorship or the power-laden gatekeeping practices of establishment media” (Karimi 2017, 733). Even though tactical media contribute to social and political change by drawing attention to existing problems and thus provide an alternative to mainstream media content, however, they do not challenge all forms of social, economic, and political domination or lead to revolutions. As Rita Raley (2009, 28) states: “With the recognition that there is no getting outside the global techno–military–economic world order, tactical media thus performs a sociopolitical intervention by gesturing only obliquely toward a better world in the future.”

Another concept that is central to user-generated content is that of participatory culture. Initiated by media and communications scholar, Henry Jenkins (2006, n.p.), participatory culture refers to “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.” Participatory culture thus enables individuals to engage with the production, as well as the consumption, of artistic artifacts. Its pluralist approach offers opportunities for self-representation and the documentation of individual or collective stories. It also encompasses “alternative media in which individuals and communities share personal stories and collective experiences, often with the goal of raising awareness about a specific issue” (Norman 2009, 273). Participatory art forms generate (real and virtual) spaces in which citizens and communities can shape and unfold the interpretation of the events that take place in their country and project their visions of the future.

Tactical and participatory media have become a new and innovative venue for artists concerned about the world they live in. Socially engaged arti-

sts are those committed to social justice by means of their creative work, and that, in order to intervene, they need to trespass on a complex field of power (Thompson 2015, 20). The gains of participatory culture, as well as the affordances of digital media technologies, enable artists to extend their visibility and social connectivity. This is particularly significant for socially engaged artists within zones of conflict with asymmetric power dynamics, in which inequalities and injustices prevail. Examining production and dissemination of art in the midst of a conflict demonstrates how “older and newer mediums of communication for relaying political claims intersect to formulate a synthesized – though still polyvocal – narrative of personal and national experience” (Li and Prasad 2018, 494). The conveniences of digital media technologies (low production costs, free space, ease of content dissemination and network formation) consequently have enabled an increase in artistic civic engagement and a wide array of creative expressions of social problems in Yemen.

Through a convergence of politics, traditional and global art practices, tactical media, and participatory culture, Yemeni activist artists responded to the current crisis in Yemen, particularly addressing (1) the destruction and rupture resulting from the war; (2) the despair and hope of the population; (3) the increase in political consciousness as well as individual and social endurance; and (4) the imagination of restoration and awakening. The following sections discuss the creative expressions of Yemeni activist artists in selected art media forms.

Street Art: To “Plant a Flag” in a Public Space

Street art consists of visual entities “planted”¹ on street walls in the form of graffiti, stencils, and murals to address social and political issues. Its political origins are rooted in the counterculture movements of the 1960s and it has been welcomed in some communities as an attempt to beautify urban landscapes and as a community-building activity. However, it has also been criticized as illegal and associated with crime and vandalism, since it can damage public and private property, break the law, and disturb the social order (MacDonald 2014). This raises the issue of the use of street art in spaces already destroyed by violence, war, and conflict. The emergence of

street art as a communicative space in the Middle East dates back to the Lebanese civil war and the first Palestinian intifada in Gaza and has been widely deployed as a protest aesthetic, a counter-narrative tool, and a community-centered art form in the region (Kraidy 2016a; MacDowall and de Souza 2018; Sinno 2017; Peteet 1996; Gruber 2008). Scholars studying the use of street art in conflict situations in Northern Ireland, Palestine, and Egypt have suggested that street art in conflict zones becomes “a means of political resistance by envisioning competing futures, inscribing memory and critically commenting on political events” (De Ruiter 2015, 582). Digital communication technologies have given street art an unprecedented level of visibility, popularity, and virality across the globe to the extent that some scholars have claimed that street art has not only been “revolutionized” (Molnár 2017, 400) by the proliferation of digital tools and platforms but also has emerged as “the first truly post-Internet art movement” (Taş 2017, 802) in terms of utilizing the affordances of the digital space to shift from “a local, context determined form of expression [to] a translocal spatiality” (Kraidy 2013, 18).

In Yemen, street art has surfaced as a vehicle for the expression of grievances and hope as well as reclaiming order and peace in landscapes that have been destroyed by the war. Moreover, it has served as a means of civil disobedience and political participation that brings the community together in solidarity in the creation of visual narrations of conflict experienced by Yemenis themselves (Alviso-Marino 2013). Following the uprisings of 2011 and the destruction from bombing in Sana’a, Yemeni self-taught painter, Murad Subay, took his art from the privacy of his home to the streets, transforming it into a communal project (Alles 2015, 9). Subay chose street art because of its ease and power for communicating messages to local and international communities (Alviso-Marino 2017, 5). “The spirit of ours,” states Subay, “is damaged and this is what led me to launch the street art campaigns and this is the reason why people participate. Walls now are the voice of us” (Another Scratch in the Wall 2014). His decision to undertake street art campaigns, in other words, results from the impact of the destruction on the souls of Yemenis and their need to heal from the grievances by means of art.

In 2012, Subay launched his first public campaign on Facebook, which he called *Color the Walls of Your Streets*, and invited ordinary Yemenis to paint spaces left in ruins by violent confrontations between regime forces and protestors during the uprisings. The campaign became highly successful. Not only did it attract participants from all walks of life to participate in painting collectively but also it fostered media coverage (Alviso-Marino 2017, 6). Following the first campaign, Murad Subay later continued to organize more art campaigns. In 2013, he launched *The Walls Remember Their Faces* campaign in which he stenciled on the walls of streets in Sana'a the portraits of forcibly disappeared activists, journalists, and citizens. The participants contributed to the campaign in various ways, such as painting stencils, bringing images of disappeared family members and friends to create new stencils, and to demand an explanation from authorities about the cases of enforced disappearance. This contentious campaign, thus, "not only served to point out an issue of social concern but also triggered a larger process of collective memory recovery" (Alviso-Marino 2017, 7). In his subsequent campaign *12 Hours* in 2013, Subay continued to draw attention to Yemen's dreadful political and social issues, while advocating for national unity and a civil state.

Since the start of the conflict in March 2015, a large number of buildings in Yemen have been destroyed and have thus lost their practical use. However, the artistic intervention has enabled Sana'a's ruins to become charged with metaphors for the fate of the Yemeni nation and its land. In May 2015, Subay launched another campaign, called *Ruins*, in the Bani Hawwat area of Sana'a, where airstrikes had resulted in the death of 27 civilians, including 15 children (Figure 1). This campaign addressed pressing social and economic problems deepened by the recent airstrikes, including sectarianism, poverty, hunger, diseases, and the destruction of houses, schools, and hospitals. Equally important, the *Ruins* campaign aimed at drawing attention to the devastating consequences of the conflict on children and families. Subay placed his stenciled art on the ruins of a neighborhood school that was destroyed by airstrikes led by coalition forces. A painting that depicts a child handling a bomb is circled with the statement "Children Without School," thus suggesting that children who lack schooling can easily beco-

me targets for extremist groups. Similarly, in *Family Photo*, Subay inscribed the image on a house destroyed by an airstrike in North Sana'a, where the only survivors of the family who once lived were a father and his one-year-old daughter (Alfred 2016). Subay's street art not only communicate messages of resilience but also inscribe loss and hope on buildings damaged by a brutal war.





Figure 1. Murad Subay, *Ruins*, street art, digital images. (Subay 2015–17)

Paintings in the streets and on damaged structures display the devastating impact of the conflict and the trauma that Yemen has suffered as a result of the war. Murad's subsequent campaign *Faces of War*, launched in 2017 is another attempt to visualize the toll the war has taken on the lives of what he calls "lost generation." In this campaign, he uses the human body as a communicative medium, symbol, and metaphor and places his artistic activism (like his counterparts in other conflict zones in the Middle East) in the "seesaw of bodies-in-pain and bodies-in-pain" (Kraidy 2016b, 207). The murals in this campaign consist of portraits of faces that suffer from hunger and paintings of bodies with lost parts and wounds (Figure 2). Referring to one of the murals which he painted as part of this campaign on a wall in one of the streets in London, which he titled *Hollowed Mother* (Figure 3), Subay (2020) states that he has nothing left to say about the "silenced catastrophe" in Yemen and that the naked mother represents Yemen, "a naked country left with nothing, but factions backed by regional and international powers fighting with each other." That is why Subay has shifted his focus to cam-

paigning against the arms trade. After leaving Yemen in 2018, he launched another campaign in 2019 called *Bon Appétit*, with murals painted on the streets of the UK and France – two European countries that are known to have supplied arms to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. The campaign aims to draw public attention to Western governments' arms trade that continues to fuel the war in Yemen (Figure 4).



Figure 2. Murad Subay, *Faces of War*, street art, digital images. (Subay 2017–19)



Figure 3. Murad Subay, *Hollowed Mother*, street art, digital images. (Subay 2017–19)



Figure 4. Murad Subay, *Bon Appetit*, street art, digital images. (Subay 2018–19)

Murad Subay envisions his artistic endeavors as a source of resilience, determination, and hope in a time of hardship. While he acknowledges the limits of his work to remedy the catastrophic situation in Yemen, he regards his

artistic endeavors as a means of maintaining hope and breaking the silence. “To see the reality on the ground,” he points out, “makes one feel pessimistic; but we cannot live without hope... Art is like breathing” (Subay 2020). Subay’s statement reveals the urgency and significance of the communicative power of street art for a country like Yemen, which has been pushed to invisibility by the regional intervening actors.

Subay’s street art campaigns have also elicited civic engagement and public participation. Since 2015, Subay has organized an annual open day of art events in March during which community members come together to paint the walls of their streets (Figure 5). Commenting on the reception of his art events by local communities, he states: “I would not continue without the support of the communities in Yemen. They see street art as something that belongs to them and as something that tells their realities. It is for the people, by the people... There are now street artists who started by attending these community events... Street art also spread to other cities.” Thanks to the growing public interest and trust, by 2018 these community art events were held in six cities (Aden, Ibb, Taiz, Sana’a, Ma’arib, and Hudaydah) that are located in various regions of Yemen and are controlled by separate political factions.² In addition, since 2017, the open art day event has been organized outside Yemen in different cities in France, UK, India, South Korea, Madagascar, and Italy simultaneously (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Picture from Murad Subay’s Facebook account showing community participation in an *Open Day of Art* event, in Sana’a, Yemen, March 15, 2017. (Hani 2017)



Figure 6. Picture from Murad Subay's Facebook account showing community participation in an *Open Day of Art* event, in Seoul, South Korea, March 27, 2018.

(Subay 2018)

Digital media technologies moreover have been instrumental in Murad Subay's training and the circulation of his art. Not only did he first learn street art techniques through the Internet but also, he has relied on social media to connect with people and organize art events locally and internationally. Digital affordances enable him to overcome travel restrictions, too. When, for instance, he could not travel to the UK due to the difficulties of Yemeni passport holders in obtaining a travel visa, he collaborated on Skype with a British artist to install his mural on the wall of the Imperial War Museum in the UK.³ In another instance, his mural *Yemen Needs Peace* was projected on the building of the National Mall in Washington, DC in the USA.⁴ Subay also shares images of his art across various digital platforms including his personal website, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. By spreading the digital images of his artworks, he extends their political statements from the streets of Sana'a to a wider national and international community, which in turn fosters visibility and media coverage.

Restoration of Loss Through Art

For artists living in zones of conflict, art becomes a medium that is "strongly connected to the collective nationalist imaginary and salient episodes of local history" (Slitine 2018, 51). In war and conflict zones of the Middle East, *smoking art*, which is based on the principle of transforming the smoke

released by bombings into certain representational figures, and emerged as a popular art form among young activist-artists in Palestine (Slitine 2018; El-Haddad 2014). By the same token, Yemen-based artist Saba Jallas transforms real images of the war into works of art that reflect her desire to symbolically restore her country, using merely her smartphone. Although as an artist in the war zone, she has to cope with the shortage of even basic drawing tools and has to rely on her friends outside Yemen to send the necessary equipment. Jallas (2017) defines her digital artwork as a contribution to restoring peace in Yemen. Inspired by the smiles and optimism of Yemeni people living under the threat of conflict, Jallas' work aims to keep the hope alive that one day the war will end and that Yemenis will be able to rebuild their country (Globe Backyard TV 2016). Motivated by the enthusiastic response from her compatriots, Jallas is also invested in art pedagogy by instructing those interested in drawing arts as well as community charity work by auctioning her work and contributing the proceeds to humanitarian projects such as repairing schools damaged by war, buying school supplies and shoes for children, or opening a bakery that provides free bread for the needy families (Jallas 2020). Thus, the virtual restoration that she enacts in her art also channels into actual concrete restoration.

Jallas superimposes images of Yemeni women, men, and children over pictures of smoke and explosions. In Jallas' art, smoke from military airstrikes is transformed into "beautiful" images. By placing side by side the original picture and the one she has drawn over it, Jallas invokes a contrast between the destructive nature of the war and the beauty of love, life, and hope. In her drawings, Jallas frequently uses traditional Yemeni costumes, decorations, and symbols to reclaim the national unity destroyed by war. She transforms smoke into imageries, for instance, of happy and peaceful people dancing or playing an instrument. Thus, she invites her audience to imagine the Yemeni people as they used to be and as they deserve to be (Figure 7). She expresses her intent in one of her posts on Facebook as follows: "Dance like you have never hurt... Like you have never been sad" (Jallas 2018).





Figure 7. Selections from Saba Jallas' Smoking Art. (Jallas 2015–16)

Jallas also uses real-life images of those affected by war and artistically restores their wounds or reconstruct ruined spaces. *Covering* appears as the key trope of her work: covering the wounds of a young girl with traditional henna art, the demolished walls of a school with paint and decorations, or a bomb-shelled area with a heart-shaped Yemeni flag. Jallas posts her artistic works on her personal Facebook and Instagram accounts, accompanied by textual invocations such as: “What will separate us if the love of the homeland unites us?” (Jallas 2016). In effect, Jallas appropriates photojournalistic images of war, violence, and destruction and gives them a new life charged with beauty, love, belonging, and togetherness. In the “posthumous images” (Elias 2018) of her art, Jallas “resurrects” those individuals and communities that were wounded and destroyed and restores them the life that was taken away from them. Her art invites all of us to remember the potential futures of those whose lives were suddenly interrupted by war.



Figure 8. Selections from Saba Jallas' Art. (Jallas 2015–16)

Invocations of Yemen's Collective Spirit in Film

Pervasive violence and conflict in Yemen have also fostered the use of digital short films, mostly produced by a team of self-taught amateurs as another artistic medium to inform the world of the suffering and loss experienced by the people of Yemen. Young Yemeni film artists use both documentary and fictional forms. Some of these films are produced with modest financial and training support by international donors. In addition, often they rely on volunteer work by the locals, who, for instance, are given a camera to shoot a

remote location to which the filmmakers cannot access (Hashim 2017). The films are disseminated via social media platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter) and online streaming platforms such as YouTube or Vimeo. These filmmakers frequently produce their films with English subtitles as a strategy to appeal to the wider international community. Some of these artists work independently, while others work with international organizations or collectives, including the British Council, the BBC, and #SupportYemen. More advanced filmmakers such as Hashim Hamoud Hashim and Abdurahman Hussain also organize training workshops (often in collaboration with local NGOs in Yemen) to offer workshops and tutorials in different aspects of filmmaking such as graphic design, editing, and animation (Figure 9). Hashim places civic engagement at the core of his artistic work by casting ordinary people as actors, recruiting them to the production crew, providing them training and support (Hashim 2020). These efforts have become particularly valuable as it has been extremely difficult for Yemenis to go abroad for studying film (Hashim 2017).



Figure 9. Picture from a filmmaking workshop taught by Hashim Hamoud Hashim, organized by YWT, a Yemeni nonprofit organization dedicated to encouraging youth to create social change through art, culture, media, and technology. (YWT Org 2017)

Yemeni short films appeal to the audience's sense of outrage through shocking images of violence, despair, loss, destruction, and individual stories. Yemeni filmmakers, moreover, frequently resort to poetry as a tactical means due to its traditional popularity in Yemen as well as its power to move. Poetry has served as a socially embraced means of expressing not only "feelings of sorrow, joy, and concern" but also "conflict resolution and political discourse" (Adra 2004, 231). Making use of the circulatory efficacy and public reception of poetry (Miller 2005; Caton 1990; Caton, Aryani, and al-Eryani 2014), these films sow seeds of hope and resilience into the hearts of Yemenis who have experienced the harsh consequences of the conflict and violence firsthand. Yemeni filmmaker Abdurahman Hussain (2015) expresses this dual purpose as follows: "I have found in storytelling through film-making a reason to continue no matter how bad things can get knowing that art is what we need to make peace and spread love in people's heart." Through their films, these artists also make a statement against the disappearance of individual stories in the grand media narrative that covers only the military aspect of the war in Yemen. In what follows, I examine a sample of films by a number of directors to demonstrate the formal variety of the representations of the conflict.

Winner of the United Nation's Yemen Creativity Competition *Your Rights-Your Future*, Hashim Hamoud Hashim's short film *Blind Eyes* (2014) addresses the long-term problem of widespread violence and death in Yemen in a powerful poetic language and symbolism. An old woman, dressed in traditional Yemeni costume and symbolizing Yemen, narrates how a land once called "happy Arabian land and land of civilizations" has become a "land of grief and sorrow" as a result of conflict and violence (Figure 10). The film uses a palette of shades of black, white, and brown to convey a sense of gloom. The film condemns all forms of violence and use of arms, from primitive fights on battlegrounds using swords and spears to military attacks involving tanks and planes, and suicide bombings in the name of politics and religion. The old woman reminds her people of their beautiful tradition, in which shedding blood was once rejected and considered shameful. In the tone of a mother talking to her children, she asks: "Why do you insist on making me suffer?" She is also shown shedding tears of blood,

and concludes with the following appeal to Yemenis: “I am entirely tired of keeping wondering, who is the last victim?”



Figure 10: Screenshot taken by the author from Hamoud Hashim, *Blind Eyes*, 2014. (Hashim 2014)

In his other award-winning film *I want My World as I see* (2016), Hashim once again strives to reclaim Yemen’s lost “colors and beauties.” In the opening of the film, everything is black and white (Figure 11). A child inserts a tape into the recorder and the narrator starts describing his dream. Then, in a prophetic voice, the narrator informs the audience of the coming of the light. The camera zooms momentarily onto the beam of light breaking through branches of a tree. It then follows the dreamlike restoration of the land to its true order and vibrant colors and the population to their peaceful and happy times. Particularly striking are the black and white images of a young Yemeni man shooting at another with hatred and a close-up shot of a girl who is crying. Peace and happiness prevail over hate and sorrow as their images become suffused with color and their faces smiling. For Hashim, the energy of his films stems from depicting “the conditions of real people by real people and through real footage.” He believes that this commitment to realism has found strongly positive support among the Yemenis, who embraced his films as “touching and speaking directly” to them. In his own words, the major goal of his films is “to create the spirit of responsibility for the citizens to rise and support each other” (Hashim 2020).



Figure 11: Screenshot taken by the author from Hamoud Hashim, *I Want My World as I See*, 2016. (Hashim 2016)

Produced as part of the #SupportYemen collective⁵, Abdurahman Hussain's *The Color of Injustice* (2015b) features the Yemeni poet Jaafar Aman's poem *Night for How Long*. The poem depicts feelings of fear, grievance, and despair resulting from a devastating war, which resembles "a prison of insanity and revenge in a rock of fire." To draw attention to the visceral feelings of destruction, and the impact of the war on individuals, Hussain also superimposes photographic images of the devastation of the war on the bodies of Yemenis who demonstrate expressions of sorrow, fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and despair (Figure 12). Shot in black and white, the film ends with the following lines of hope from the poem: "This weakness will not last... and injustice will not... No matter how long it lasts."



Figure 12. Screenshot taken by the author from Abdurahman Hussain *The Color of Injustice*, 2015. (Hussain 2015b)

In his documentary short film, *A Broken Home* (2015a), Abdurahman Hussain addresses the issue of sectarianism, which has become another serious consequence of the war on the Yemeni nation. Narrated from the perspective of two Yemeni women (a researcher and a journalist), the film discusses how the civil war that started in 2015 has fueled divisions and sectarianism and has torn apart the diverse social fabric that was once a source of pride for the Yemenis. “A home country is not a place defined by geography, to me a home country is the people,” says researcher Suha Bashren, as her car travels through the ruined streets of Yemen. Her voice-over continues to narrate the kindness and generosity of the Yemeni people she has met while working in various parts of the country, while the camera moves through the roads and streets to show the extreme level of physical destruction. Journalist Bushra Alamani tells the audience that she has lived her whole life not knowing her sect or religious group, despite having family members from various ideologies and backgrounds. Bashren is concerned that, although infrastructure can be rebuilt, it might not be possible to rebuild broken relationships. She warns her compatriots: “The crack is wide and it’s getting wider every day... If we do not prevent the expansion of this crack, we will lose a home that was once called Yemen.” Abdurahman Hussain and other creative artists, therefore, aim to bring the nation together through mourning the losses and injuries that Yemen and Yemenis had to go through. “This act of mourning is an invitation to all Yemenis to reflect on their shared social vulnerability and the possibility of exposure to violence” (Al-Eriani 2020, 237). Mourning loss invigorates hope for a new national unity. The remembrance that mourning enables paves the way for reclaiming national unity, overcoming political sectarianism, and envisioning new horizons for the country.

Another film highlighting the devastating impact of the war on Yemen is *Bara’ah* (Innocence). Made by Comra⁶ students and financed by the #SupportYemen collective, *Bara’ah* focuses on the heavy toll that the war in Yemen took on children. It tells the tragic story of a young girl from Sana’a, who died as a result of third-degree burns over 90 percent of her body after a Saudi-led coalition’s allegedly mistaken air raid that destroyed her neighborhood. The film starts with a voice-over of her singing with joy, which

is abruptly cut off by the sound of ambulance sirens and followed by real footage of a razed house in flames and smoke. The camera then surveys the interior of Bara'ah's house, completely destroyed and items once belonged to its residents scattered around in pieces. The camera zooms on a smashed scooter, once a favorite toy of Bara'ah (Figure 13). Footage from previous videos and accounts by her uncle reveals a curious and high achieving school-girl, full of joy and dreams. As the film shows her burial, the voice of her uncle reacts bitterly to the rumors that they may be offered compensation: "What good will their money do for us when we have lost the people we love?" The story of *Bara'ah* commands the attention of the spectators to the story of an innocent child at a time when mainstream media outlets depict conflict victims across the region as piles of bodies, with no names, lives, or future.



Figure 13. Screenshots taken by the author from *Bara'ah*, #SupportYemen, 2015. (Al-Yarisi 2015)

Finally, Mohamed Samy, a film director and founder of Aden Freerun, weaves the narrative of his documentary film *Rise* (2015) around the extreme sport parkour. Parkour is a form of anarchic free running that disturbs the order of public spaces. Parkour has emerged as a subversive act of re-imagining space (Saville 2008), overcoming urban obstacles and physical structures with athletic and artistic movements (Kidder 2013). Samy's documentary takes this element of global youth culture and uses it to narrate the extreme challenges faced by Yemenis in their daily lives as a result of the war and to convey their determination to reclaim the city. The documentary starts with real footage from the war, including images of destroyed buildings, and military tanks that have become part of the landscape, as well as images of ordinary Yemenis (Figure 14). The energy, dexterity, and determination of the athletes create a powerful contrast against the images of spaces and structures ravaged by war.



Figure 14: Screenshot taken by the author from Mohamed Samy, *Rise*, 2015.
(Samy 2015)

Rise urges the audience to reflect on the meaning and psychological impact of practicing a sport defined as anarchic in spaces demolished by weapons and bombs. As one of the narrator athletes in the film states: “I want to send a message to you. Aden is a city that will never lose hope despite what we suffered and still do. We’ll not lose hope. Maybe the thing we do could be just movement. However, we will send with our movement that Aden

and its people are still standing. And we'll rise again!" It must be noted, however, that the hope that Samy and other filmmakers invoke is "a form of hope that vests its power in the community," not in foreign intervention in the name of saving the Yemenis (Al-Eriani 2020, 236). Hope, in other words, lies in the Yemenis themselves who are ultimately the sole agents of claiming their country from the grips of war, violence, and conflict.

Conclusion

The war in Yemen has resulted in casualties, disruption of livelihoods, pervasive poverty, hunger, economic instability, psychological trauma, and the rise of hostility and divisions between communities. Individuals report that they are desperate and have lost all trust in the political elites involved in the conflict (Al-Dawsari 2016). Yet the international community has remained silent about this humanitarian drama. The little coverage made by mainstream media only offers news on the military aspects of the war, but almost nothing about the vanishing of the Yemenis themselves. This is the gap that the wartime generation of Yemeni artists aim to fill, deploying a set of artistic practices and strategies that they share with other artists who experience destruction in the Middle East and elsewhere. As recorders and archivers of the collective experience of ordinary civilians, they employ diverse forms, content, and techniques to intervene in the representation of the conflict through participatory media. Through their creative work, they not only expose the ills of the war but also promote social cohesion, resilience healing, and inspiration for hope for the future.

While technologies in the digital age offer these artists free space and easy routes for advocacy, they still need to navigate certain power dynamics. As Viola Shafik (2015, 234) notes, "neither the collective spirit, nor the space and opportunities offered by new media, can hide the fact of financial dependency and transnational embedding." Some of these artistic productions still depend on financial support from international donors (as in the case of the British Council's sponsorship of the #SupportYemen collective) to organize filmmaking workshops and produce advocacy films. Some depend on the help of family and friends to buy materials they need for their work and others engage in commercial and commissioned work to finance their

activities. Equally important, given the current meager supply of electricity and Internet connection due to the ongoing war, Yemen presents a stark case of the digital divide, of the systemic inequality of access to the Internet between rich and poor countries. Among 201 countries around the world, Yemen's Internet ranks 200th in terms of broadband speed (Cable 2020). In addition to extremely poor Internet connectivity, a battle between political groups over the control of Internet services, high Internet prices, sabotages to Internet infrastructure by militias and other groups, blocking access to social media, online censorship, and surveillance are some other challenges that Yemenis have to face (Coombs 2020).

Despite these drawbacks, however, Yemeni artist-activists convey critical and alternative content about the dire realities of Yemen. In the words of Lanfranco Aceti (2009, 23), the primary role of artists in places where identity and psychology are shaped by war experience is “to engage with the events as a witness of war, as a carrier of past, present and future possibilities, as a narrative decoder and reconstructor of the scars of war’s destruction.” Therefore, despite their considerable political and economic challenges, Yemeni artists of the digital age remain agents of hope, holding out the promise of socio-political change, as well as narrators and recorders of the physical and psychological suffering of a nation in a disordered land. They document the devastation of the conflict with affective intensity and depth that mainstream media cannot contest.

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Notes

¹ The term is borrowed from Egyptian artist with a pseudo name *Ganzeer* to refer to graffiti art's power to transform a space into a place outside of the control of political powers.

² Yet in 2019, the local authorities in the cities of Ibb, Ma'arib and Hudaydah were apparently threatened by the symbolic unity and solidarity that street art had fostered; and as a result, they did not allow the events to take place (Subay 2020).

³ See Imperial War Museums (2019).

⁴ See Subay (2019).

⁵ The #SupportYemen collective, initially started during the 2011 uprisings as a twitter hashtag to disseminate tweets about the uprisings. It subsequently evolved into an independent media collective of filmmakers, bloggers, journalists and videographers, whose aim is to achieve social and political change in Yemen.

⁶ Comra is an intensive two-week film-making camp to train young people in film making and storytelling. The project is led by the film makers and co-founders of #SupportYemen collective, Sara Ishaq and Abdurahman Hussain, who also provide the training.

“The Script Does Not Respond” – Arabic Script’s Difficulties in the Digital Realm. A Visual Approach

Alina Kokoschka

Abstract

This article examines different layers of the problematic visual representation of Arabic as a writing system in the digital realm. It starts with the often false, sometimes severely distorted representations of Arabic script. Although most obvious in daily office work and strolls through Latin-Arabic Linguistic Landscapes, this phenomenon has not yet been systematically looked into. The many unintended and often unnoticed misrepresentations that lead to illegible texts and reader-unfriendly websites are only the tip of the iceberg. They give visibility to a fundamental lack of script-specific visual organization of knowledge in digital surroundings and the virtual absence of Arabic-based digital infrastructure. These phenomena may be examined as a case in point of Latin dominance.

This article is a visual account. It investigates the common faults from a typographic and aesthetic perspective against the background of different layers of Arabic scribal tradition. It, therefore, moves from single letters and Arabic script’s specificities over to bi-scriptual encounters and then to more complex text arrangements in websites, programming, and manuscripts. While research in this very field necessarily focuses on deficiencies and problems, possible solutions will also be presented and discussed.

Keywords

Arabic script, linguistic landscapes, bilingual typography, digital divide

The visual qualities of the works, when properly displayed, and when gazed upon with care, would help the viewer to move from pleasure to learning (Fetvacı 2015, 136)¹

The starting point for the reflections set out in this article is a simple observation: there seem to be many obstacles when it comes to writing in Arabic script with digital tools. They cause false representations of letters and words. And these obstacles remain, despite updates and online forum

discussions. Other than in obvious bi-scriptural encounters such as bilingual signs, this phenomenon suffers from an invisible relation to the Latin script that needs exploration.

In contrast to pseudo-Arabic writings that do not aim for a correct display of the script, the incorrect renderings often turn out to do the opposite of what was intended: where content is meant to be forwarded, knowledge shared, and messages promoted, words become hard to read if readable at all (Figure 1). While in Islamic calligraphy, illegibility has been used as a tool and expression of higher, transcendent reading practices (Beinhauer-Köhler 2011, 42), in the digital realm of word processing and websites, content is meant to be comprehended quickly and without obstacles.



Figure 1. Anti-Frontex poster in English and Farsi by Watch the Med, who offer a hotline for boat people in the Mediterranean. Photographed by the author in Berlin (2018).

Through a “multi-disciplinary ‘reading’” (Dominguez 2018, 190), this article will examine the problematic relationship of Arabic and the digital, integrating approaches used by graphic design through Islamic Studies to computing and philosophy. Questions need to be raised about the significance of errors, the relationship of script and scripture, and invisible forms of Latin and thus the dominance of Western thinking. In the end, we must also address issues of equal access – to knowledge, but also to means of transmitting knowledge.

I write this as a researcher of Arabic script in an Islamic framework, as an operator of a partly bilingual website, and as a trained observer of the Linguistic Landscapes (Rodrigue and Bourhis 1997) of bi-scriptual cities across Muslim cultures and societies world. Last but not least, I am a user of digital tools, just like almost everyone, depending on them for work and leisure time. Hence, I will not ignore the perspective of lay users. The reader will not find a comprehensive account of all programs or tools, nor can I guarantee a cutting edge view of these, since changes happen too quickly, and older versions and methods remain in the user world. Rather, this article expounds the problems that a very special script and its writers and readers face in a world where long traditions of manual writing are being marginalized and digital workflows have become mandatory for specialists and laypeople in almost every field.

The significance of the Arabic script

Distortions of text in writing systems other than Latin are by no means limited to Arabic script. Faulty renderings in the digital realm happen to writers and readers of several languages and their systems of writing. The phenomenon of *Mojibake* (Japanese for “garbled”) might be the most extreme: a systematic replacement of symbols with completely unrelated ones, many times from other scripts.

While every single language and writing system deserves correct representations and equal access, there are three facts that justify a special interest in Arabic as a writing system. First, Arabic is the second most widely used alphabetic writing system in the world. Beyond Arabic, various other langu-

ages use Arabic as a script, among them Persian, Kurdish, Sindhi, Balochi, Pashto, Urdu, Kashmiri, and Mandinka.²

Second, this wide circulation can partly be traced back to the fact that Arabic is the script of scripture, the Quran. Arabic, as a language and a script, is fundamentally linked to the Islamic revelation; it *is* the script of the revelation. In the Muslim faith, this script is widely believed to carry special powers, like the ability to heal through the transmission of *baraka*, a divine blessing. As a faith-related script, Arabic is present and used in countries with Muslim communities around the world, even if they have a different official writing system. The close connection between writing, faith, and religious practices might not be constantly present to every writer or reader of Arabic. It has to be considered, though, when looking at distortions of the script.

Not least, Arabic is characterized by an outstanding *script grammar* (Milo 2013; 2011). It is the basis not only for complex manners of applying this script, in Islamic calligraphy for instance but also for “complex mistakes,” as will be explained.

Coming to terms with writing about Arabic writing

This multilayered significance of Arabic for Islam led to outstanding scribal production. What is more, the Arabic script has literally shaped what is considered “Islamic Art” to the greatest extent. Arabo-Islamic calligraphy and ornamentation are two distinctive features of “Islamic Art” across all genres. And they are closely linked since throughout “Islamic Art” history and across regions, words flow out of ornamentation and calligraphic phrases turn into an ornament. They embellish and even decide on the shape of material carriers as diverse as ritual objects, household items, textiles, and buildings.

While the content of texts written in Arabic has been studied quite intensively in Western academia, Arabic as a script has not received its share of attention. Despite its unquestionably salient role in historical and contemporary Muslim cultures and societies, time and again we witness “Western

failures to come to terms with Arabic writing,” to the extent of depriving it of basic script qualities. The leading academic force in linking historical and contemporary Arabic script issues, Thomas Milo, states that these “Western failures” are even “presented as a defect of that script and its users. The real problem is that Arabic script structures and aesthetics remain an intriguing black hole in Western perception of the Middle East” (Milo 2011). Gharipour and Schick describe Western ignorance from the viewpoint of Islamic calligraphy: “The orientalist scholarship held (...) that texts were often meaningless, full of errors, and/or illegible; and that those that had a discernible meaning, such as Qur’ānic verses, were haphazardly chosen, formulaic, and seldom constituted a coherent epigraphic program” (Gharipour and Schick 2013, 1). Latin dominance, it seems, concerns not only typography but even our thinking – but we will get back to that later.

Many of the recent studies and accounts that deal with contemporary issues tend to focus on applied research and techniques. In the field of IT, this touches upon topics such as (machine) readability, that is, software-based recognition of text in Arabic (Elanwar, Qin, and Betke 2018; Razzak et al. 2012). The field of Arabic-language graphic design is prolific, most likely due to the calligraphic tradition and its vast number of historic script manuals (Sperl and Moustafa 2014) and the ever-growing need for bilingual or bi-scriptual representations of corporate identities and logos. Abdel Baki (2013) has researched “bilingual design layout systems” with a focus on examples from Beirut; from her, I borrow the term “Latin dominance.” Shayna Blum offers an overview of bilingual typography in Saudi Arabia (Blum 2020). A lighthouse in studies of contemporary Arabic and bilingual graphic design is the Dutch Khatt Foundation with its own publications and Huda Smitshuijzen Abifares in the background. Her early foundational work on Arabic typography (2000) laid the basis for this graphic think tank. The edited volume “Bi-scriptual” offers a comparative view of bi-scriptual encounters from the point of view of relevant graphic design practitioners (Wittner, Thoma, and Hartmann 2018).

In her examination of the iconic Dubai logo designed by Tarek Atrissi Shannon Mattern (2008) gives a fine example of bridging practice and theory. A

study of pre-digital bilingual branding in Kuwait is offered by Al-Najdi and Smith McCrea (2012). The typographic issue of text justification and hyphenation is profoundly addressed with regard to the ability to stretch a line (*kashida*) by Benatia, Elyaakoubi, and Lazrek (2006). Forum threads dealing with practical issues must not be left out here, since they serve practitioners and bring together broad technical knowledge, as well. A very comprehensive and ever-growing account of text layout requirements for Arabic script is the thread on the open-source community platform Github on *Text Layout Requirements for the Arabic script* (Esfahbod et al. 2020).

The trend, though, seems to be that academia lacks user and application experience and perspective, and users lack background knowledge for putting the script in a historical and societal perspective. Here and there, though, well-lit spots can be found. First and foremost, Milo (2013, 2011) has to be mentioned, with his bridging between the earliest manuscript culture and cutting edge digital phenomena. Osborn (2017) undertakes an analysis of Ottoman script use extending to contemporary issues of Arabic script on computers. Among the rare historical examinations of script encounters is Eldem's analysis of script change in Atatürk's Turkey with regard also to its effect on a letter-page layout (Eldem 2013). Nemeth presented an extensive study of *Arabic Type-Making in the Machine Age* (2017), shedding light on the issue of (late) printing in Muslim cultures and societies with a strong background in graphic design. He also tackles contemporary digital writing forms. Islamic art historian Auji examines 19th-century printing practices in the context of the American Mission Press (Auji 2016). Little can be found on the historical development of formatting practices, whether handwritten or printed (Rustow 2020; Wollina 2019; Dédéou and Jeppie 2017; Daub 2016).

Explorations, criticism, and creative solutions from actors in the Islamic sphere could not yet be examined. Since typography and graphic design are highly internationalized, but English-based work fields, I do not expect to find a vast number of studies here. Recent manuscript studies approaches raise my hopes for forthcoming studies on the traditions of visual organization and layout. In the following section, the most common and obvious

mistakes that Arabic script users have to face in word processing programs will be examined against the background of the distinctive features of the Arabic script.

On faulty renderings – Common mistakes and their background

Probably everyone slightly familiar with the Arabic script has come across some distorted renderings of text written in Arabic, especially in multilingual surroundings. Although “computerized and digital systems eased, to some extent, the persistent challenges of typesetting Arabic script” (Osborn 2017, 164), we encounter renderings of Arabic script that signal ignorance of the most basic rules of correct writing in Arabic. What is it that makes Arabic as a script in digital surroundings so prone to error? To answer this slightly provocative question, some peculiarities of the Arabic script have to be elucidated and put into the context of Latin-Arabic encounters.

Some notes on Arabic as a writing system

The rules for writing Arabic correctly are complex. This does not mean spelling as understood in the context of Latin script: “It is ‘mistake’ not ‘mistake.’” It starts with the correct way of placing individual letters in their position in the text and touches upon the graphic representation of certain letter sequences. It extends to assimilation and dissimilation, vertical and horizontal dimensions, and stretching. Thomas Milo has brought into focus a precise understanding of the Arabic term *qarwa'id al-haṭṭ* to do justice to Arabic as a writing system. Instead of the common translation as “rules of calligraphy,” which implies aesthetic considerations only, he translates it as “script grammar” (Milo 2011). Different styles of writing “differ not just in shapes, but also in system. Western Oriental Studies does not have a tradition of analyzing and describing these systems. The lack of analysis of the style-dependent systems inescapably leads to misunderstandings” (Milo 2011). In order to avoid these, some basic shared rules will be explained now.

Arabic is written and read from right to left. While Latin characters may be capitalized or not, most Arabic letters take different shapes depending on whether they stand at the beginning of a word, appear in the middle, or form the end.³ Arabic is a consonantal script (*abjad*). This means that (almost) only consonants are written and readers are required to carry out a “simultaneous linguistic reconstruction” (Gründler 2001, 140), which alre-

ady presupposes a certain knowledge of the word structure of the language. Vowels that are not represented with letters may be noted with vocalization marks. What Gründler calls *miniature letters* (Gründler 2001, 141) adds another dimension to the already nonlinear script (Figure 2). Arabic, furthermore, is a cursive script. This means that letters are connected and there is no alternative, block letter writing. What initially looks like a strange limitation turns out to be *the* fundamental characteristic of the script. It is the line (*al-khatt*) that links script(ure), calligraphy, ornamentation, and architecture in Islam. As noted above, this is the basis of the very distinct graphic quality of many items of what has come to be called “Islamic Art.” The line, therefore, is a fundamental component of the Arabic term for calligraphy: *fann al-khatt*, which literally means “the art of the line” and, unlike the Greek term *calligraphy*, not “writing beautifully” (Kokoschka 2019). Why is that? Because the line in Arabic script is – within a set of rules dependent on the style – free to stretch and shrink according to the context (Benatia 2006, 143), that is, the length of the text line and the measurements of the writing substrate, be it paper, bowl, or facade. At least in contemporary contexts, this is usually referred to as *kashida*. Lines may be extended or reduced not only horizontally but in every direction. This allows for most figurative calligraphy.



Figure 2. Circular calligraphiti with extensive use of “miniature letters.” Photographed by the author in Gemmayze, Beirut (2017).

The meaning of the line becomes visible in Arabic script's many ligatures. These connections appear between most letters, as 22 out of 28 letters are necessarily connected to the surrounding letters, and they are completed by particular letter combinations that form an independent ligature. Within the framework of the Islamic use of Arabic, even complete sentences appear as ligatures of their own, in particular phrases that are mandatory and thus frequently used: eulogies (*taṣliya*) that are meant to praise Allāh or to invoke God's blessing upon the Prophet Muḥammad. These ligatures can be considered ideographic – and are only a small hint at the “iconic capacity” (Campo 1987, 295) of the Arabic script. They contribute to the intellectual structure of a text, and they visually organize the content (Krämer 2005, 36). Thanks to Unicode standards, which have been widely adopted since 1993, they are easily integrated – free of errors – even in Islamic texts written in Latin script.

How many errors fit in one letter?

On the level of letters, the most usual mistake we witness is threefold: instead of right-to-left, writing is from left to right. Ligatures do not appear; all letters are unconnected. The individual characters are mirrored (see Figure 2). Words can no longer be identified without hard work. Companies like Microsoft or Adobe might argue that these problems have long been addressed or even solved. But this is in theory. In practice, administrations work with outdated program versions. They produce leaflets on childcare or domestic violence that are barely legible. Civil society groupings produce campaigns in Arabic or Farsi to reach migrants but fail to recognize that slogans require the reader to reconstruct the script. “Faulty renderings” like these are a frequent phenomenon of the nonprofessional use of Arabic script. Many lay users are just not well versed with computers in general, and thus installing extra packages demands too much of them. But this problem also appears in contexts that demand professionalism. The Bauhaus, famous for its typographic revolution, advertised its new museum building in the German town of Dessau with the same threefold error (Figure 3). Although still recognizable as Arabic script, interviews on-site have shown that native Arabic speakers and readers find it hard to read it at all. This contradicts Sherry Blankenship's statement that “distortions of the letter-

forms rarely affect [*sic*] legibility. In Arabic, the reader understands first, and then reads” (Blankenship 2003). This is true for calligraphic representations of Arabic script and some iconic names and phrases that appear in an Islamic framework (Kokoschka 2019). In the case under discussion though, the errors have no tradition. In addition to that, they destroy the script grammar and thereby destroy a proper reading context.



Figure 3. Construction fence around the now opened Bauhaus Museum with the slogan “Bauhaus Museum in the city of Dessau.” Photographed by the author in Dessau, Germany (2017).

This is the basic and most obvious problem Arabic script faces in the digital realm and happens with the most common word-processing programs. I put the most obvious at the forefront because letters and words that cannot be read cause misunderstandings about the text itself. They also have a symbolic dimension and thus societal implications: what does it say about a practically multilingual society like the German one when official institutions, as well as social activists, fail to address Arabic- (or Farsi-) speaking groups in a comprehensible manner? The relevant actors might have good intentions. From the viewpoint of Linguistic Landscape research, though, this indicates the low status and societal power of the Arabic script commu-

nity (Landry and Bourhis 1997, 25; Wachendorff 2016, 58), which is most likely quite perceptible to the Arabic script communities. Studies of their perspective are missing so far. But let me put forward some reflections on the significance of errors in this very context.

Significant errors? – Thoughts on Arabic script’s fault tolerance

A script – be it a writing system or a cultural or programming script – has a certain fault tolerance beyond which it cannot be recognized or understood anymore. Scientific approaches can measure this tolerance in a particular case, like word recognition in Arabic (Maroun and Hanley 2017). What I am interested in, though, are the social, cultural, and religious conditions for handling errors. In the present stage of research, this matter can be addressed only speculatively.

It has become clear that Arabic script grammar has the potential for making mistakes – in writing and reading. The Arabic Studies expert Beatrice Gründler crucially notes that the script’s complex set of rules not only contributes to an exclusiveness but at the same time also “safeguards the inclusiveness of Arabic script, for it tends to veil the mistakes and hyper-corrections of uneducated writers” (Gründler 2001, 140). The same grammar then makes it possible to prove knowledge (for instance when reading texts with case endings) and hide ignorance. Through its ambiguous structure, Arabic script might train users in “error competence.” It has been mentioned that Islamic calligraphy does not aim for readability. It rather hinders instant reading in order to open a gaze that sees beyond the script, and many times calligraphies are legible only for those who already know what is written (Kokoschka 2019). In pre-print times, diacritics were left out even in business and private correspondence, “an entirely unmarked epistle conveyed a writer’s respect for the learning of the addressee” (Gründler 2001, 140).

It could be argued that this long-term training by a script community in deciphering and recognizing led to an ability to recognize, tolerate, or even not notice mistakes. The remaining question is if this ability to overlook mistakes in favor of the bigger picture is a factor also in accepting the continuous deficiency of digital tools to handle Arabic script without mistakes. A complex script grammar has been identified as one condition for the

prevalence of faulty renderings of Arabic. Another factor is the Latin-Arabic relationship underlying digital typography, word-processing programs, and programming in general.

Latin-Arabic graphic encounters

Examples from bilingual or bi-scriptual Linguistic Landscapes illustrate the effect Latin script has on the way Arabic is represented: it appears to be smaller and is thus less pleasant and less easy to read. The reason behind this is that graphic designers take the x-height in the Latin typeface as a unit of measurement. So, Latin's letter "l" presets the height of the verticals in Arabic, like the letter *alif*, even though the proportions of upper case and lower case in the Latin alphabet are not applicable to proportions in Arabic (Figure 4). The graphic designer and script researcher Randa Abdel Baki calls this a *Latinization* (Abdel Baki 2013, 46). And this is found on most bilingual signs that are *not* based on a manual outline but done digitally. In contrast to that, manually designed and cut signs often show typographic equality (Figure 5, 6).



Figure 4. Bi-scriptual Nivea-logo on the iconic blue can. From the author's collection, photographed by the author (2016).



Figure 5. Manually designed and cut bi-scriptual shop sign by the aged Lebanese commercial artist Kassab. Photographed by the author in Beirut (2017).



Figure 6. Pre-digital bi-scriptual shop sign. Photographed by the author in Beirut (2017).

The renowned graphic designer Tarek Atrissi states that the Arabic and Latin alphabet “are ‘not compatible’ – aesthetically, logistically, linguistically” (Mattern 2008, 489). Still, he himself and others have been trying to find ways to make the two scripts’ encounters equal in some way. First, Arabizing Latin typefaces is an option famously practiced by the type designer Nadine Shahin, who produced an Arabized Helvetica typeface. But “the problem with her adaptation is that Arabic type looks westernized” (Ajeenah 2018). Then, the script-responsive bi-scriptual design is a possible solution, “giving the two types equal size and weight” by applying “glyphic-geometric syn-

chronization” (Ashrafi 2015, 149). This has led to graphic experiments, for example by the Khatt Foundation’s 2009 *Typographic Matchmaking in the City*, which can also be witnessed in bilingual examples that were produced before the contemporary graphic design debate. (Figure 7). “Sensitivity to individual scripts,” though, might be of greater importance than “stylistic uniformity across scripts,” leading to what David Březina calls “loose harmonization” (Wittner, Thoma, and Hartmann 2018, 17). In line with this “loose harmonization” lies the third variant. Hence, lastly, there are approaches that value the two scripts’ differences. Atrissi’s famous bi-scriptual Qatar logo is “a mix of the qualities represented by each” (Mattern 2008, 490), leading rather to two independent graphic entities. In this way, at least theoretically, the two writing systems can keep their script-specific connotations and enrich each other and the practitioner and reader with their respective peculiarities. Latin dominance influences the design of characters, but it also applies to wider text settings such as spacing: “While the approach to spacing in the Roman Script is thus dissecting and analytical, the Arabic script lacks this dissecting function of spatial intervals and thereby produces the opposite effect. Rather than singling out words and letters as separate entities, its spacing mirrors the continuous flow of human speech” (Sperl and Moustafa 2014, 42).



Figure 7. Pre-digital bi-scriptual shop sign. Photographed by the author in Beirut (2017).

Besides, the two scripts can be merged with the goal of being graphically most effective, but this assumes that readers are fluent in both scripts (Figure 8). Arabizi and, earlier, Franco are scripts that emerged due to script restrictions online. In both, characters from two scripts (Latin and Arabic) appear in the same word. Franco shows a mix of Arabic letters and Latin script numbers in order to omit diacritics (Panović 2018; Yaghan 2008). The latter case is of special interest when we consider that the numbers used in Latin typefaces originated from the Arabic script.



Figure 8. Advertising with merged scripts. Photographed by the author in Beirut (2017).

The script behind the script – toward a script-specific visual organization of texts online

Latin script's dominance is not limited to the digital realm, but here it becomes most evident and hindering. It has been shown that programs like MS-Word have had difficulties displaying Arabic letters with the necessary ligatures and orientation. Beyond that, many applications, let alone pro-

programming languages, just cannot “read” Arabic letters. Users receive standardized pop-up messages like “A relevant disclaimer: The Arabic spelling won’t render in our CMS (Content Management System).” This is the focal point of the digital divide. A lack of hardware and Internet connection is one thing. Finding next to no Content Management System or programming language in Arabic script is another. It not only excludes a vast number of possible practitioners but also deprives the digital community worldwide of the insights and advantages that alternative writing systems have to offer. When it comes to multilayered text arrangements online, for example on websites, the outlined approaches toward equal representation of scripts seem to disappear. Behind this lies a structural problem: Latin as a standard is much more hidden in web design than it is in typeface design.

Allow me to take an essayistic approach in view of the scarcity of preliminary works. A small excursus on handwritten Arabic mise-en-page will highlight alternative forms of visual organization in multilayered text conglomeration. This is not an attempt to draw a direct line from Arabic manuscript cultures to web design, but an attempt to make something visible. I consider this a necessary step to provoke a discussion on expanding “visual literacy” (Dominguez 2018, 190) and thinking about its roots in century-long habits of organizing content, on the one hand. On the other, “Western” and thus Latin fixation on linearity has to be debated, especially once we realize that linearity is held onto even in contexts that are by definition not linear, like the web. My questions here aim at a general reconsideration of how conditions of thinking and of putting these thoughts down influence each other. In the end, this leads to a necessary reevaluation of typography. The way we note verbal content is not only a nice gown for words but also a fundamental tool of communication as much as of cognition.

This script runs on Latin

Programming languages are indispensable to build information architectures online. When MS-Word, Adobe InDesign, and the like hinder the proper readability of Arabic words and sentences and when websites designed with a Latin oriented template make multiple text arrangements hard to absorb, then the absence of Arabic-based programming languages excludes

people from constructing the medium itself that carries the textual content. Linguist Gretchen McCulloch (2019) explains:

It's true that software programs and social media platforms are now often available in some 30 to 100 languages – but what about the tools that make us creators, not just consumers, of computational tools? (...) Even huge languages that have extensive literary traditions and are used as regional trade languages, like Mandarin, Spanish, Hindi, and Arabic, still aren't widespread as languages of code. (...) I've found four programming languages that are widely available in multilingual versions. Not 400. Four (4).⁴

The artist and programmer Ramsey Nasser has identified this problem and developed a programming language based on Arabic. And yet, experiments like Qlb (*qalb* meaning “heart” in Arabic) will never be able to run properly, because “once they start trying to interact with the rest of the web, everything falls apart. File names can't be read, the operating system rejects the syntax (...) But a side effect to that is that it's all in English – the standards we've adopted have encoded that alphabet” (Smith 2015). So, if we aim for script alternatives in the digital realm nothing less than a redefinition of its standards is needed. This seems to be true not only for programming but also for web design.

Staring at Arabic Websites

Websites should “communicate the functions and data, or tools and content, of computer-based media” (Marcus and Hamoodi 2009, 387). According to expert interviews with Arab web designers and website operators, users often experience Arabic websites as confusing, without clear hierarchies, and without visual balance and rhythm, both of which are important to properly grasp content (Aspillage 1991). The complexity of Arabic script grammar makes it highly questionable if a simple right-to-left (RTL) mirroring of standard templates is sufficient for Arabic web design. RTL websites “require a different structure, typography, and imagery,” whose development is costly (SteelKiwi 2017). Also, the typefaces in use often show a Latin orientation, and the reduction in size affects the decisive graphic entities

around the baseline that help viewers recognize the words. In the meantime, creative tools to improve Arabic websites' looks have been developed, like the browser extension *huruf* (Arabic for "letters") that makes Arabic script appear larger on websites (Scullion 2018). Again, there are persuasive forerunners in Arabic-friendly web design, as can be seen on the websites of Al-Jazeera and Al Arabiya, including a font that shows no Latin orientation. I hope that future studies will take a closer look into this seemingly strictly technical subject, a look beyond questions of tools and techniques. Hence, "the universal practice of selecting and excerpting, summarizing and canonizing, arranging and organizing texts and visual signs (...) never has neutral outcomes" (Bausi et al. 2019, vii). The "strict 'division of labour' (...) between the Arabic and Latin scripts" (Eldem 2013, 467) – content only on one side and content, aesthetics, and technique on the other – needs to be questioned further.

Linear self-restrictions? – Web layout and the visual organization of knowledge in a manuscript culture

Just like manuscripts, websites consist of "different visual devices, such as symbols, blank spaces, colors, and writing styles. However, a visual organization is not always just a mere device used for dividing the various levels of a text; it may be the effect or the manifestation of religious and literary textual traditions" (Bhattarai 2020, 3). When (Marcus and Hamoodi 2009) analyze "the impact of culture on the design of Arabic websites," they apply Geert Hofstede's culture dimension, including categories such as time orientation, gender role differences, and the level of individuality. Without wanting to discuss Hofstede's approach as such, I propose to more fruitfully consider script-specific manners of visual organization in order to critically look at existing and constructively talk about future website design.

Western-inspired mise-en-page found its way into Arabic script documents with Arabic mechanical print.⁵ Bringing all the varying shapes and combinations of Arabic script's graphic entities to mind, one just has to imagine how "the sheer number of metal glyphs needed to form a complete set

of type made early Arabic printing endeavors technologically difficult and costly, where most efforts could not compete with the refined aesthetics of centuries-old calligraphic conventions” and, thus, “manuscript traditions were still central to authorship and printing at Arabic presses in the nineteenth-century Middle Eastern and Islamic worlds” (Dominguez 2018, 187–188). I propose that the visual organization of manuscript traditions is still valid in the visual cultural memory of cultures and societies that are strongly influenced by Arabic script.

Some recent research on Multiple-Text Manuscripts (MTM; Ciotti et al. 2018), “multiple production units collected in a single volume” (Bausi et al. 2019, x), proves to be stimulating when we think about script-related visual organization of knowledge in the digital realm. What Bausi et al. declare for MTM is truly a goal for websites: “putting in direct, physical contact, and consequently in conceptual proximity, different knowledge from different times, places, and contexts, causing hybridizations, new alchemies, and new interpretations, by transferring mental assumptions to the physical level and vice-versa” (Bausi 2019, ix). This description can be considered the ideal of online information architecture, and it becomes even more valid in the light of Konrad Hirschler’s adding definition of MTM “not as ‘production units,’ but as ‘circulation units’” (Hirschler 2019).

The visual organization of “core content” and “paracontent” (Ciotti et al. 2018)⁶ of Arabic manuscripts is mostly nonlinear. Paracontent, just like exegesis commentaries (*tafsir*), almost revolves around the core content. These text units, building up through annotating processes, frame the core content from all sides.⁷ The added units often seem bent with no straight baseline. There is no grid as in Latin *mise-en-page* that divides a page into square fields with a visually top-down hierarchy. Although digital techniques and the Internet finally allow for a rather free way of allocating and linking information visually, none of the nonlinear visual organization features described above for MTM can be found on Arabic-script websites. Rather, the square-and-grid style is predominant, as can be seen in the extreme case of Al-Azhar’s online presence (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Homepage of the Al-Azhar University. Screenshot (2020).

For reasons that still need exploration, “physical design constraints are continued in the new virtual environment (...) in spite of the fact that in a digital environment simpler solutions are possible” (Milo 2011). The ignorance of “simpler solutions” goes beyond questions of handling and user-friendliness. Omitting the outstanding visual qualities that Arabic manuscript layout traditions have to offer for arranging multilevel text also means omitting a chance for alternative ways of organizing and transmitting knowledge. This has to be taken into account in order to design contemporary layout structures that are responsive to the writing system and context as much as the “visual literacy” of the users. Otherwise, web design based on Arabic-script content might well fail to reach the second-largest reading group. In line with what has been said on the missed chances that result from Latin-Arabic encounters with no equal footing, looking at Arabic script mise-en-page or layout traditions would be most enriching also to web design beyond websites in Arabic script. Hence, Arabic typographic and mise-en-page traditions mirror a specific and rather nonlinear way of reasoning that matches the associative character of thinking itself. They are an example of how a script – as a tool – shapes our way of arranging thoughts, arguments, knowledge: the script behind the script.

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Notes

¹ Unfortunately, not only pleasure, but also learning is hindered.

² Historically, languages as diverse as Medieval Spanish, Ottoman Turkish, Azeri, Serbo-Croatian, Malay, Swahili, Hausa, Fulani, and Afrikaans have been spelled with Arabic characters for a while (Gründler 2001, 136).

³ For a differentiation in graphemes, allographs, letter blocks, and archigraphemes, see Milo (2013).

⁴ In more detail: "The four widespread multilingual programming languages have had better luck so far with fostering that community than the solitary non-English-based programming languages, but it's still a critical bottleneck. You need to find

useful resources when you Google your error messages. Heck, you need to figure out how to get the language up and running on your computer at all.” (McCulloch 2019)

⁵ Although not from the beginning, as Hala Auji has shown. First, scribal conventions had been emulated in printing. In the case of Lebanon aesthetics changed by the mid- to late 19th century (Dominguez 2018, 175, 185).

⁶ “Paracontent is a set of visual signs (writing, images, marks) that is present in a manuscript in addition to the core-content(s). It provides data either on the manuscript and/or its core-content(s). This distinguishes it from guest content(s). Its three main functions are structuring, commenting, and documenting.” (Ciotti et al. 2018)

⁷ “It can sometimes be assigned a predetermined place within a manuscript as well as specific properties according to the patterns of the relevant manuscript culture. These properties may range from null-highlighting over segmentation marks to elaborate visual organization. It can be part of the original production plan of the manuscript in which it is found or be a later addition. It can be optional or mandatory according to the patterns of a particular manuscript culture.” (Ciotti et al. 2018)

Muslim Online Prayer in a Sociocultural Context

Wael Hegazy

Abstract

The article argues that the debate over the online prayer is not just an ordinary fatwa issued by religious scholars for the Muslim Ummah, but it rather goes through a complicated process of social, identarian, cultural, authoritative, and transnational caveats. The physicality entailed by this debate over the online prayer shows how the place of worship along with the physical presence in it while performing the prayer is considered as an identity marker, a tool for sustaining the social fiber and the culture of the Muslim community. The article concludes by situating the debate over the online prayer within a broader framework of online religion versus religion online and the impact of the virtualization of rituals on the perception of the religious experience.

Keywords

Online Islamic Rituals, distanced Islamic Rituals, Cyber Islam, Digital Islam, Online Prayer, Islamic Response to Covid-19, Online Islam, Virtual Islamic Rituals, and Prayer over Broadcasting.

Based on the constructivist theories, reality cannot be acquired by cognition or given objectively, since it “is always constructed” through observing “the way people, organizations, the media, and others construct” it (Bräuchler 2003, 136). So, virtualization – or virtual performance – of rituals as a product of the Internet revolution and most recently by the COVID-19 pandemic disaster has created new religious, social, and even political realities.

Online prayer is one of several issues that have recently brought to the fore under the urgency of the contemporary pandemic, COVID-19. Contextually, this issue is part of a dozen necessity-driven inquiries addressed to Muslim scholars and *fatwa* (juridical verdict) – issuing centers in the Muslim and diasporic worlds. For instance, inquiries about life and death situations and ethical questions about prioritization of medicine-serving between the young and the aged patients in case of shortage in medicines

are raised. Other questions arise about whether ritual bodywash should be performed for those dying from COVID-19, an issue that is still largely debatable among scholars, and whether it is allowable for infected people to observe the fast. All of these questions necessitate that the *mufti*¹ act as a sociologist and a physician besides being a scholar.

Online prayer shall be intensively discussed in different respects – spiritually, socially, and juridically in the field of Islamic Studies. This article examines first the juridical debates which have noticeably intensified following the global outbreak of COVID-19. Intriguingly, this juridical discussion, if we broaden our conceptualization of the virtual sense of worship, can find classical roots of it in medieval juridical minds. The article argues that the debates around online prayer are not only about performing a religious ritual per se. It is a new episode of power tension and social dynamism in Muslim communities. Religious scholars used it to improve their status as social actors after their position was declined in the last decade for different reasons. In terms of social dynamism, the online ritual debate reflects the dynamics of the prioritization process regarding collective and individual needs. In other words, the article argues that online prayer is not just an ordinary ruling issued by religious scholars for the Muslim *Ummah*, but it rather goes through a complicated process of social, identarian, cultural, authoritative, and transnational caveats. The article concludes by situating the debate over the online prayer within a broader framework of online religion versus religion online and the impact of the virtualization of rituals on the perception of the religious experience.

In terms of scope and method, the article limits its analysis to the *Sunni* literature and exclusively discusses the *Sunni* scholarly positions towards online prayer. The data are primarily collected from the original references and official platforms of the concerned religious authorities or institutions. The study uses a textual analysis approach that helps to explore the juridical attitudes towards online prayer. It is further supported by empirical data analysis for the proper situation of this Islamic online prayer within the broader framework of sociopolitical tension as well as the question of the virtualization of the religious experience.

Primarily, obligatory prayers in Islam is mandated to be done individually or in the congregation. Supererogatory prayer is an individual prayer except in some cases such as in the *Taraweeh* (night prayer in Ramadan), when it can be done in the congregation at a mosque or at home. During emergencies, natural disasters, or pandemics, Muslim jurists gave *fatwas* to suspend congregational prayers in mosques and even sometimes advised to close mosques (Sabri 2020). The current pandemic brought the jurists' discussion on the suspension of congregational prayers and the closing of mosques to the fore again. This time, however, the discussion got complicated as the current technology advancement opened the space for virtual gatherings and performances. Some contemporary scholars declared that online spaces should not change the ritual format and gave *fatwa* for holding prayer at home until the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Other scholars, however, gave *fatwa* for having an alternative online prayer. Both groups of scholars gave their own reasonings and justifications, be legal or otherwise. How to understand their complex reasonings and subtle positions within the larger framework of religious, social, and political experience is the focus of the ensuing discussion.

By analyzing the contemporary debate on this issue, it seems that there are two juridical stands: defendants and opponents. The defendants of this online prayer support it based on one fundamental principle of *Shariah* (Islamic Law) which is "protecting the religion." On the other hand, the opponents of online prayer base their opposition on the same *Shariah* principle of "protecting the religion" but through another approach.

I will start by explaining the authenticity question of online prayer and its impact on the discussion between the two parties. The point of authenticity does not concern many researchers involved in an analysis of the debate over online prayer. However, it occupies a huge space in arguments of both the opponents and the proponents of online prayer, as the authenticity by tracing the predecessors' *fatwas* has been noticed in both discourses. The proponents refer to the predecessors' *fatwas* when they defend the legitimacy of performing this new form of the congregational prayer. It may represent the point of strength that supports their argument. They trace the issue

back to the 9th century when Sahnoun² (Al-Dhahabi 1983, 64) ascribed the *fatwa* of the legitimacy of having prayer by people who follow an Imam in a separate ship. Sahnoun says: “as for a group of people in a ship who perform prayer while their imam who leads the prayer is in a separate ship, Malik (said) if the ships are adjacent to each other, (the prayer) is allowable.” (Sahnoun al-Tanoukhi n.d., 82)

While all proponents of online prayer use the Maliki *fatwa* of the prayer behind an imam in a separate ship, the opponents of online prayer believe this issue did not even come to the minds of Muslim jurists in premodern times and has no equivalent or corresponding issue today. They base the authenticity of their argument on the lack of having similar *fatwas* from the predecessors.

Basically, building a ruling on the opinion of previous scholars is acceptable, but building respective authenticity on the recurrence of similar precedents is somewhat disputable. It is well-known that *fatwa* is like a living being that evolves to accommodate the space and the time. It shall not be constant and fixed for everyone at every time and everywhere except in rare cases. One may acknowledge conservative scholars’ avoidance of *fatwa* renewal under new circumstances as a preference of *Taqlid* (imitation), which implies prioritizing the precautious and the easier option, though without agreeing with such argument. Scholars may refer to the social reservation which will be discussed in detail later. But they left a vacuum for the laypeople to follow. By blocking the door for renewing *fatwas* based on new circumstances, they create a method of necessitating the following of predecessors.

This debate also raises the authority question that revolves around the text and the predecessors. It has led me to raise this question: why shall every *fatwa* have a similar precedent to acquire authenticity? This is not an issue of juristic rulings formulation in the Islamic jurisprudence for some of those who adopt *Taqlid* (imitation) and attack the *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) only but it extended to most of the social sciences which go back and quote from the past to authenticate the present attitudes. I argue based on the *Hanafi* basic rule: “what came from the Prophet (peace be upon him) is absolutely accepted as we never go against Him, what came from His

companions is optional for us that we choose from, but otherwise we cannot absolutely accept it as they are [competent] men and we are [competent] men as well”³ (Ibn Hazm n.d., 188). What if we have an outstanding dignified scholar who competes with the premodern scholars in knowledge and intellectuality? Why is the past always better than the present? Why must the people from the past demonstrate the authenticity to interpret the texts while the more qualified scholars who may be more aware of the legacy and have extra tools for acquiring knowledge do not have such authority? The same voice resonates with Ibn Malik, the famous linguist and Andalusian polymath (died 1274), when he says: “if knowledge is a gift from God and an exclusive attribute given by Him, it is not impossible that God may save what was hard to be digested by most of the predecessors to some of the successors” (Ibn Malik 1967, 2). Therefore, the *Ijtihad* (legal reasoning) does not require any conditions of times to be provided in the *mujtahid* (a scholar who gives legal reasoning), but rather it is confined to the personal and scientific qualifications. As defined by al-Shatibi (died 1388), an Andalusian brilliant Islamic scholar, *Ijtihad* is “exerting one’s utmost efforts to reach out a legal opinion” (Al-Shatibi 1997, 51). Thus, the core idea of *Ijtihad* is about bringing something new, which does not mean to simply repeat the same past *fatwa* and apply it to a new situation. It implies a renewal and a reform of inappropriate inherited legal views, which are no longer suitable for the current times. In fact, Ahmad Atif elucidates the issue of belittling the contemporary time in favor of the past in the following lines:

Every age is characterized by a sense of “loss” of knowledge, the knowledge that used to be available to previous authorities. These previous authorities (as they present themselves to the imagination of their successors) are always better, more knowledgeable, and closer to some “origin” than their scholarly heirs. This is behind the saying that “contemporaneity serves as a veil” (*al-mu‘asaratu hijab*) – it makes scholars belittle the achievement of their contemporaries, perhaps for no good reason other than the fact that they share the same “corrupted age.” (Ahmad 2012, 40)

It is worthy of mentioning that being aware of modern technology as well as new medical, and social sciences has become a requirement of the *mufiti*. I also agree with Gary Bunt (2009, 84) that *Ijtihad* “is synonymous with

renewal and reform within certain Islamic contexts, although reevaluation and realignment may be appropriate alternatives.” For example, in his argument about the legitimacy of the online prayer, Mauritanian scholar Muhammad al-Hassan Ould al-Dadaw al-Shanqīti (born 1963), details how sound waves work to transmit the sound from the Imam to his followers having studied how microphones or radio transmit sound simultaneously to the followers. That is why his *fatwa* and other *muftis’ fatwas* about the legitimacy of online prayer were restricted only to online broadcasting not extended to recordings of prayers. (Al-Jazeera 2020)

In the same vein, the opponents’ position against online congregational prayer reminds me of the conservative positions of some religious leaders during the 1990s about the use of television in general. Some Islamic religious leaders issued *fatwas* about the prohibition of using the television at that time such as sheikh Ibn Baz (died 1999; Al Jawab Al Kafi 2015, 1:37). Similarly, the virtualization of rituals may be seen as a threat against religious authority and a collapse of the traditional religious community. However, the online community is thought to provide multiple sources and diverse religious authorities who give the follower freedom of choice and space to know different opinions. The religious authority is particularly a crucial issue here because online worship is seen as if it distorts the traditional religious authority and creates parallel authorities. It is plainly noticed that the *fatwa* of rejecting online prayer is adopted by mostly all *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) institutions all over the world (Sabri 2020; Resident Fatwa Committee 2020; The European Council for Fatwa and Research 2020). For instance, the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), The Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA), The Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia, Council of Senior Scholars of al-Azhar, and others were from these institutions. On the contrary, the *fatwa* of permitting the online prayer was from some individual muftis and jurists, however, they are considered more influential and outstanding jurists worldwide. For instance, al-Shanqīti Ayaat Said (a prominent Moroccan scholar), Mohammad Fawzy Abdul-Hay (a former head of Islamic studies at al-Azhar university and a member of Fatwa center at al-Azhar), Ahmad al-Ghamdi (the former head of the Commission of Promotion of Virtue

and Prevention of Vice), and Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl (one of the world's leading authorities on Islamic law and Islam and a prominent scholar in the field of human rights) were the famous defenders for online prayer.

This almost unanimous agreement among contemporary scholars was taken to express the collective identity of *Ummah*⁴ through the collective *Ijtihad*. In his *fatwa* about the illegitimacy of online prayer behind an imam through a broadcasting device, Khalid Hanafy (2020a), the vice president of the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), maintains that one of the strengths of this *fatwa* is that it enhances the unanimous agreement of the contemporary Muslim scholars than the individualized *fatwas*. He thinks that by doing so, the *Ummah* will preserve the collective identity of the Muslim community and support the unified religious authority of the collective *fatwa* institutions versus the individualized *fatwas*.

Although this is not the only issue being debated amongst contemporary scholars, the affirmation of religious authority when tackling online prayer reflects the fear of dismantling the traditional religious authority. But the question is, to what extent do the individualized *fatwas* represent a threat to the traditional religious authority? After analysis of the opposition's *fatwa* of online congregational prayer, it seems that traditional religious authorities feel threatened when opening the door for such online worship. Generally, the online religious world is thought to open the door for new competitive religious authorities who can compete with or even replace the traditional ones. This may happen especially when we shed light on the fact that the virtual world as a unifying atmosphere does not require uniformity (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009, 2). This discourse resembles the idea that the virtual world turns to be like *Souq* (Bunt 2009) – a “market-place” through which you can pick whatever religious practices you wish. This idea helps to turn even the religious bloggers into religious authorities who can issue *fatwas* and influence a range of followers. Scattering the religious authority is one of the Internet consequences when religious experience manifests in cyberspace. The matter does not stop at this point, but it extends to have a new conception of religiosity. This phenomenon is sweeping the virtual world and it has created what is called online religion.

Online religion is different from religion online in which the first concept denotes producing religious content for all people from different religions and affiliations while the latter is for affiliated rituals that target a certain audience (Helland 2005). The audience of the first kind of website seeks a spiritual experience more than theological or religious instructions. For instance, *Inyati* American Sufi group provides through their websites many programs for spirituality and even teaches people the techniques for involving in the mystical practices (Rozehnal 2019). The audience of this kind of website is a diverse audience which may include Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist followers. Further, Gary Bunt in his study *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority* (2018) refers to a substantial transformation and evolving in the religious authority through cyberspace. It is what he calls “machine-driven *fatwa*” authority. For most audiences of Muslims in cyberspace, this new form of authority replaces the traditional authority. The authority here is going back to either the text or the electronically issued *fatwa* process. “The relationship is between a digitally mediated interface and a person, which negates the need for face-to-face etiquette demanded in an analog context, such as a mosque, while also extending the public space beyond traditional political, religious, or geographical borders” (2018, 81).

Meanwhile, the concern of the European Council for Fatwa and Research about the authority for issuing the *fatwas* is shared by other voices (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009, 116) which always ask: “who speaks of/for Islam?” The same concern is issued by other juridical institutions such as Al-Azhar and Dar ul-Iftaa (Fatwa House) in Egypt, Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia, and others that keep telling people to seek *fatwa* from the institutions, not from individuals. But Muslim audiences turn a blind eye to these calls and choose their own religious authorities. It became difficult to direct people’s loyalty to official or governmental religious authorities. In this sense, we can imagine why the virtualization of religious experience as part of the Internet revolution, which is consequently an integral part of modernity as a whole, is a revolutionary step towards the new form of religious experience.

The virtual religious experience is mostly considered a fragmentation of religious authority. In general, the cyber world is seen as a tool that weakened the universality of the *Umma* by allowing for a volatile mix of competing opinions including serious divisions over who speaks for Islam (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009, 116). Although the virtualization of the religious experience is an ideal chance for diversity and pluralism, the problem lies in its anonymity (2009, 116), which can render much confusion for the Muslim audience according to the conservative theory that goes against the virtualization. In fact, this is not accurate, because the virtualization is not responsible for scattering or fragmenting the religious authority. The virtualization of the religious experience resembles the real religious experience with little nuances. The online space can produce unexpected results for the Muslim *Ummah* through the religious experience. Khamis and Al-Nawawy (2009, 116) give an example of the moon sighting issue which usually causes disagreements among Muslims whether in Muslim and non-Muslim countries. They said that several Islamic websites have coordinated data on the new moon sighting, and thus have unified Muslims' celebrations at the end of Ramadan. This has helped create a sense of "uniformity" within the virtual *Ummah*.

In the same vein, Islamic cyberspace which opens the door for contesting traditional authority has also helped to create a space for gender equality. Islamic cyberspace is a great opportunity for female religious authorities to challenge the traditional male ones. These new cyber environments may be considered to fulfill the female demands for having virtual spots led exclusively by female religious figures. These Muslim female leaders struggle for having "a just Islamic society . . . that strives for a recognition of and respect for compatibility between the sexes instead of competition between them" (Karam 1997, 21).

In terms of identity, the online prayer as an alternative solution for the problem of blocking mosques during urgent times is seen by the opponents as a threat to the identity of the Muslim community as a whole. Having prayer online is presented as an easy way to dissolve the fiber of the traditional Muslim community. Even if blocking of mosques would remain for years,

the prohibition of a virtual form of prayer is the absolute and unified *fatwas* recurred among the Muslim scholars in the conservative team. The answer that I received when I raised this question for a scholar⁵ from this team was that how we could prevent people from staying at home and leaving mosques after the end of the temporary situation of the current pandemic. He added that we do not have a remote control button to ask people to go back to mosques after we let them abandon these mosques by providing the alternative solution of online prayer during urgent times.

The striking question that came to my mind at that time is whether is mosque central in rituals to such a serious extent? If so, why? It is not only the mosque that has been considered as central in the worship life of Muslims but the physicality of rituals as a whole. The physical attendance in the place of worship is viewed as crucial as the worship itself. It is also seen as if it shall not be replaced by an alternative even in urgent cases. Then, the value is not only considered for prayer itself, but also for the place in which the worship is performed. It is argued that one benefit of physical attendance in the mosque is the societal goal achieved by the congregational physical prayer. While the online interactions compete with or even mostly replace the physical interactions among individuals as it creates extra spaces for communications, the insistence of the opponents of online prayer on the physical attendance as a form of supporting the societal bonds implies the centrality of the mosque in creating the collective Muslim identity. The *fatwa* of the prohibition of online prayer goes beyond the juridical caveats and into the social caveats. One implication that I noticed in the *fatwa* of the vice president of the European Council for Fatwa and Research about the prohibition of online congregational prayer through the broadcast of TV or the Internet was that the permissibility of such kind of prayer would threaten the existence of mosques in the Muslim community as it will degrade the role of mosque in shaping the Muslim community. (Hanafy 2020b)

For the opponents of online prayer authenticity, a mosque as an identity keeper is not only a sacred religious place for performing the rituals but its mission goes beyond that.

Historically, the first effort made by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to form a Muslim society and an Islamic state in Medina was to build a mosque. The Nabawi Mosque in Medina was the pulse of all important events during the time of the Prophet (pbuh), where he taught people to organize their lives and religion completely beginning from the individual to the family, community, and country. Thus, the mosque has played its role extensively covering all aspects of worship, science, politics, economy, military, administration, the establishment of national policy, relations between countries, and so forth. (Wahid 2011, 2)

Given the centrality of the mosque in the life of Muslims in rituals and social life, why do the opponents of online prayer accept the blocking of mosques during the pandemic, blocking which may be extended to years without having an alternative virtual mosque that holds the congregational prayer and provides other rituals even during this urgent time? The identity of the virtual is variable according to the opponents of the virtual mosque. However, virtual mosque services and rituals are a reality and are providing some acts of worship to Muslim homes with Internet access such as online Quranic sessions, *dhikr* sessions, *tajweed* (teaching rules of the Quran recitation) sessions, and even online sermons.

Obviously, the identity question through the virtualization phenomenon of rituals is particularly asserted in the diasporic Muslim context. It is clearly observed that most opponents of online prayer *fatwas* are resident scholars in non-Muslim countries. Their *fatwas* are actually influenced by an appreciation of the holistic Islamic existence in the West. This may explain the uniqueness of the identity-making process of Muslim minorities in the West. "Diasporic identities do not function in a vacuum, but they are, to a large extent, affected by the discursive contexts in which they are shaped" (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009, 117). In fact, there is an opposite perspective for the impact of virtualization on the identity-shaping process for diasporic Muslims. "These migrants' participation in the cyber world, with its discussion boards and chat rooms, can nurture a sense of belonging and common identity with those 'back home' and with fellow members of

the diaspora” (Wahid 2011, 2). However, I agree that the full absence of physical attendance and physical locality of Muslims particularly in rituals has serious consequences. The difficulties that Muslims face when trying to issue licenses for establishing mosques force them to take into account every possible issue that may arise in attempts by the Western authorities to prevent the establishment of mosques. In one *fatwa* of the prohibition of doing online congregational prayer through broadcasting, the chair of the Fatwa Committee in the European Council for Fatwa and Research maintains that the consequences of legitimizing the online prayer will affect the Muslim presence in the West. Because having this alternative of doing virtual rituals may make Western authorities stricter in licensing the mosques. (Hanafy 2020a)

Although the multiple advantages of performing the online prayer, its opponents are maximizing the risks of approving such *fatwa*. It may refer to two things: (1) identity shaped by the Internet is distorted and variable and (2) the crucial role of physical attendance in rituals is shaping a strong identity. Therefore, it leads us to wonder about the nature of identity that virtualization may shape. The answer comes through the study of Gary Bunt in his book *Virtually Islamic: Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (2000), that the virtual world may have identity-less participants. He explains that this wide space does not require affiliated participants but rather it is open for all audiences whatever their religions or affiliations. Because of anonymity, it is widely argued that the online identity is more fragmented and distorted than the offline identity. But in her study about a group of minority ethnic women in the UK, Helen Kennedy (2006) says:

We should move away from a preoccupation with the generalized, enduring claim that the internet identities are anonymous, multiple and fragmented – not only because, in some cases, online identities are continuous with offline selves, but also, more importantly, because common uses of the concept of anonymity are limited as starting points for carrying out analyses of internet experiences.

Furthermore, it is more appropriate to mention the argument that letting virtualization to sweep the Islamic world helps to formulate a collective identity that may resemble the identity shaped by the physical presence in rituals such as the *Hajj* (pilgrimage; El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009, 115). If we think about the virtual mosque as an idea that may simulate the actual mosque, it may be argued that this idea can bring Muslim individuals from different locations and creates a religious and social bond that may lead to shaping a form of collective identity. For the diasporic minorities, virtualization may be the ideal chance to make up the lost identity by forging a new one. Ideally, we should speak about the hope that virtualization gives to the hopeless migrants who have been scattered in different locations and they may lose their social bonds and links to their societies. “The Internet may be the only available means to reestablish the local communities they lost in the past decades or even in the past centuries. Here, it might be appropriate to speak of re-embedding instead of disembodiment” (Krueger 2004). This is the collective identity that Khamis and Al-Nawawy suggest and it goes in line with the definition provided by Saskia Witteborn that collective identity is “alignment between people who express and enact themselves as members of a group. Alignment can mean certain modes of action and lifestyles, orientations, and expectations of what it means to be a person and a member of a group” (Witteborn 2007, 559). In brief, virtualization is not the main factor for creating variable identity, but this is a product of a long-term process of dynamics of globalization, modernity, and postcoloniality. This non-fixed identity is very noticeable in the second and later generations of diasporic minorities on a worldwide scale.

On the other hand, the proponents of online prayer tackle the issue differently. For them, online prayer is an urgent alternative solution for preserving the symbolism of prayer in Muslim life. Protecting the congregational prayer in the consciousness of Muslims was crucial in their *fatwa*. Contrary to the opponent team of online prayer who think that there is no blame for such temporary stopping of the congregational prayer during this temporary pandemic, the proponent team seriously affirms the cruciality of having an online congregation and its impact on the Muslim individual and community as a whole. The basic *maqsid* (purpose) behind this *fatwa*

is a spiritual one that is embodied in linking Muslims with worship (as in congregational prayer). The argument of this *fatwa* is stronger than the last argument as they further drew similarity with *Tayammum* (Ritual purification using purified sand or dust) and wiping over socks (Fawzy 2020). They argue that although *Tayammum* and wiping over socks do not physically purify the organs of the body as water and as washing the legs without socks, God commands to do them for keeping the symbolism of the purification (Fawzy 2020). They also quote from Shah Waliullah (died 1762), a famous Indian scholar, about the significance of *Tayammum*, or symbolic ablution as he said, “*Tayammum* is instituted to ensure that we never forget the importance (i.e. the habit of purification) and that we should go back to regular purification (with water) as soon as our situation changes – i.e. when water is available or can be used once again” (Islamic Institute of Toronto 2020). They added that “we can extrapolate from this, that an action which keeps up the intent and spirit of *Jumu’ah* that we can institute in the extraordinary situation we find ourselves in, such as praying together online, will be an effective temporary measure that will allow us to maintain the practice or the habit of *Jumu’ah* until it is reinstated as normal” (Islamic Institute of Toronto 2020).

Affirmation of the spiritual role of the imagined mosque in shaping the psyche of Muslims seems to be more efficient and productive in the debate of the online prayer. It is worthy of mentioning that physical attendance in prayer is not required in many cases such as health circumstances, natural disasters, and the absence of physical mosques in non-Muslim countries. The point of assertion in the online prayer *fatwa* of the proponent’s team is attracting the Muslim younger generations who may not share the same traditional culture of the physicality of worship as their parents, especially in the Western countries. Having the virtual mosque accessible through their smartphones and being in touch with their religious leaders throughout the day will affect their mentality positively. This virtual presence of a mosque in their consciousness is not subject to emergent absence as in the physical mosque. The point of strength in this perspective is that these scholars who support the virtualization of worship do not suggest that this new form of worship may replace or even compete with the actual religious world. But

it is integrated with the actual physical world and only replaces it in urgent cases. This view is not a full revolutionary step towards the complete virtualization of the religious world. This is a balance between the conservative and the renewal standpoints which will help to preserve the centrality of the physical attendance in the religious places and the virtual attendance as well.

The renewal or the revolutionary view of expecting the turning of the traditional religious experience into a full virtual religious experience has emerged in the late 1990s literature as Heidi Campbell (2012) observed. She says: “early scholarship often suggested that using the Internet for religious purposes might possibly transform religious practice and ideology in revolutionary ways, from challenging the roles of traditional religious authorities to altering religious expectations of community and connection.” She also describes those who expect a full revolutionary step towards the virtualization of religious experience, describing their argument instead as naïve and lacking the necessary nuances of critical reflection. This resonated with a comment from my advisor Ahmad Atif while I was presenting a draft of this study in his nation and *Shari’ah*⁶ class at Spring 2020 that this early scholarship is like the scholarships in the late of 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century which expected the demise of religion. On the contrary, religious practice is flourishing and will keep flourishing.

On the other hand, recent scholarship thinks that the online world is just a mirror of the actual world. Online religious experience does not invent a new experience. Instead, it is an extension of the real religious experience. In her study *Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society*, Campbell (2012) suggests that networked community works like a lens that helps to see that the religious community is not a single static unit, but rather that religious people live in religious social networks that are emergent, varying in depth, fluid, and highly personalized. For her, the online religious world is nothing except a simulation of the actual religious world. Based on this perspective, the virtual religious experience does not represent a threat against the construction of the religious communities in terms of culture, identity, and religious authority.

Conclusion

Offering the virtualization of prayer as an example, I have explored the internal debate among the Muslim legal scholars for the repercussions of perception of the online rituals. In fact, the debate on online prayer reflects the main issues facing Muslims around the world especially in the West. It mirrors the dreams and the prospects of Muslim religious leaders for a better Muslim religious life in the West. At the same time, it demonstrates the difficulties and challenges facing the Western Muslim minorities and Muslim individuals. It makes clear why the Muslim religious leaders are mostly concerned with the identarian, cultural, and social implications of their perspectives. It sustains the idea that “law is a sociocultural construct and local knowledge. Because law and sociocultural phenomena are interlinked and there is no absolute autonomy, any change in law or culture inevitably will influence the other” (Yilmaz 2003).

It may be assumed that the issue of online prayer is recently raised due to COVID-19. Even long before the Internet, Moroccan Muslim scholar Sheikh al-Ghumari (died 1960) wrote a book about the legitimacy of performing Friday prayer with radio, which he supports (Al-Ghumari n.d.). But the issue of the distanced rituals intensified after the emergence of live broadcasting via television and the Internet. One key question raised by this issue is about religious authority: who has the authority to issue a *fatwa*? Juridical institutions are worried more about the individualized *fatwas* issued by “unofficial” scholars who may compete with or even replace those who work in these juridical institutions. The same concern is shared for the identity of the community constituted through this online prayer.

Basically, the opponents of the online prayer validity build their rejection on different caveats, one of which is that supporting the individualized *fatwas* maintaining the permissibility of online prayer is a threat to the religious authorities as represented in the collective juridical associations. Their attitude resonates with the conservative perspective against the virtualization of the religious experience. This conservative view considers that the religious experience through cyberspace causes fragmentation of the religious traditional authorities. On the contrary, the supporters of the religious

experience through cyberspace defends the production of uniformity and unification via the cyberspace religious experience. For them, it helps create the “fellow-feeling” and unifying diasporic Muslims through one religious authority. However, the virtualization can cause both results and does not bring a unique conception to the actual practice. Surprisingly, virtualization combines the discrepancies and can be a two-edged tool. Pluralism in religious authority does not exist because of the virtual experience that has swept the religious space. It is the real impulse for the substantial change and modernity happening in Islamic thought. This is what Peter Mandaville (2007, 302) reminds us of when he says: “there exists in the Muslim world today a highly pluralistic understanding of Islam, linking liberal interpretations of the Qur’an and Sunna with forms of social activism and politics usually associated with progressive causes.”

However, the debate between both teams is very rich and valuable. Both the proponents and the opponents of online prayer share the same point of departure. It is the *Maqasid al-Shariah* (General purposes of Islamic law). Protecting the religion is one of the five necessities or five *Maqasid al-Shariah* which includes protecting soul, offspring, intellect, and wealth as well. This is a general umbrella that any *Mujtahid* or *Mufti* should produce his *Ijtihad* or *fatwa* accordingly. Although both teams of Muslim legal scholars consider the same *Maqsid of Shariah* when considering online prayer fatwa and how to protect religion during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, they differ in their approaches and methods.⁷ The first team of the proponents of the online prayer considers keeping the symbolism of the mosque through the virtual mosque, which broadcasts live prayers to Muslim individuals in their places is the ideal way to help to preserve the religion and the status of the mosque in the hearts of Muslims. The opponents of online prayer consider the protection of religion can only be achieved by preserving the identity of Muslims. They maintain that the identity of Muslims is linked to the actual physical mosque and that protecting the status of the mosque is surely helping the full protection of Muslim’s identity. The virtual simulation of the mosque as a place of rituals is seen by this team as a threat to the identity of Muslims and that is why they strictly go against it.

Finally, this study is an attempt to explain that the physicality in rituals is a complicated issue in Islam. It is for some religious authorities an identity marker, a tool for sustaining the social fiber and the culture of the Muslim community, and for others, it is not.

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Notes

¹ A Muslim legal scholar who is authorized to give juristic rulings on religious issues.

² Sahnun Ibn Sa'id Ibn Habib at-Tanukhi (born 776–7 [160 AH], died 854–5 [240 AH]) was a Maliki jurist, the judge of Qayrawan in the 9th century, and the author of a leading book *Al-Mudawwana* in Fiqh.

³ This saying is attributed to Imam Abu Hanifa, the greatest Imam of *fiqh* and the founder of the Hanafi school.

⁴ This term is basically used to refer to the larger Muslim community tied by the religious ties.

⁵ Khalid Hanafy, professor of Islamic law at al-Azhar and vice-president of the European Council for Fatwa and Research.

⁶ Shari'ah means Islamic law.

⁷ This obviously appears in both discussions of opponent of online prayer team as in Hanafy (2020a) and the proponent of online prayer team as in Fawzy (2020).

Comment:

The Lebanese Uprising in the Digital Age

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Elina Qureshi

Abstract

On October 17, 2019, following the announcement of a tax to be placed on calls made via the mobile communication application WhatsApp, thousands of Lebanese citizens took to the streets to protest against this arbitrary decision. The protest quickly morphed into a country-wide uprising in which citizens from all walks of life participated. Digital technologies were heavily used by both protesters and counter-revolutionary forces. This descriptive commentary piece will seek to shed light on how the former used digital technologies in ingenious ways to further the cause of the uprising while the latter used them to break the uprising's momentum, with the hope that such a piece can pave the way for further research on the intersection of social movements, technology, and counter-revolutionary tactics.

Keywords

Lebanon, cyberactivism, activism, social movements, social media, counter-revolution

Introduction

On October 17, 2019, the Lebanese Minister of Telecommunications announced that a tax would be imposed on voice calls made through WhatsApp, the messaging mobile application used by the vast majority of the population. Within hours, Lebanese citizens took to the streets to protest against this arbitrary decision. The protest in Beirut quickly metamorphosed into a countrywide uprising. Through protests and other forms of civil disobedience, citizens voiced their anger against decades of governmental mismanagement, high-level corruption, socioeconomic deprivation, and environmental degradation (Issam Fares Institute 2019). Protests ebbed and flowed until roughly the beginning of March 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic triggered a strict government-imposed countrywide lockdown, and citizens by and large were reluctant to congregate in crowded spaces. The centrality of

WhatsApp to the outbreak of the uprising led to the inevitable dubbing of the movement as a “WhatsApp Revolution” (Smyth 2019), a misleading label that devalues citizens’ agency and ascribes their determination to confront injustice by describing it solely as a reaction to the threat of a tax on a mobile app (DW 2019).

Based on the literature on how digital tools – namely social media platforms and mobile communication applications such as WhatsApp – have been used to usher in protest movements and bring about political change, and based on our experiences as participants and observers of the uprising, this commentary will look at three ways in which such digital tools have been instrumentalized by Lebanese activists, organizations and concerned citizens to further the goals of the uprising. It will also look at how such tools have been employed for counter-revolutionary purposes by the political establishment and their networks of patronage. While the uprising eventually faltered for numerous reasons – such as the adept usage of counter-revolutionary tactics by entrenched powers, the economic and financial collapse that began to manifest itself in late 2019, or the Covid-19 pandemic which further plunged the country into the abyss – we believe that it is worth looking back and examining how digital tools were used during the uprising so as to better understand the potential that such tools bring forth for effective mobilization, as well as the dangers inherent in their usage.

Digital Tools and Mobilization

Much has been written on the potential that the Internet in general, and social media platforms in particular, have regarding facilitating the mobilization of activists and like-minded citizens towards a common cause. Following the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011, a wide trove of scholarly research emerged on this particular issue. In a review of numerous scholarly publications which followed the Arab uprisings, adopting both qualitative and quantitative methods, Smidi and Shahin (2017) showcase that scholars, in general, agree that social media platforms played, at the very least, an enabling role, facilitating the protests as they were used by individuals to connect with one another and jointly organize demonstrations. However,

scholars also point out that focusing solely on social media is very problematic, as such a focus could potentially shroud other factors that would have contributed to the outbreak of uprisings – namely socioeconomic deprivation and prior social movements that may have paved the way for the mass uprisings.

This was clearly the case during the Lebanese uprising that began on the October 17, 2019. As Lebanese traditional media outlets are by and large owned by the political class and their crony allies in the private sector or subservient to their interests, social media-based alternative media outlets flourished. Established in August 2015 by independent feminist activists during the widespread protests against the Lebanese government's mismanagement of the country's waste crisis, the Facebook page *Akhbar Al Saba* has become a very reliable source of mobilizations occurring all across the country. Relying on a network of anonymous volunteers and reporters who submit raw and unedited videos, *Akhbar Al Saba's* posts have allowed activists to keep up with what is happening on the ground and to know where they should go in order to support the mobilizations (Lteif 2020). *Akhbar Al Saba's* anonymous administrators have told newspaper *L'Orient-Le Jour* that their aim is “to provide a more realistic image of what is happening on the ground,” stressing the necessity of providing accurate information on what is happening on the streets, as they claimed that the Lebanese media “belong to political parties and are at the orders of the government” (Tabbara 2019). These claims are well-warranted. In 2018, the “*Media Ownership Monitor – Lebanon*,” launched by the Samir Kassir Foundation and Reporters Without Borders, revealed that the vast majority of Lebanese media outlets are controlled, directly or indirectly, by the country's political establishment or their allies in the private sector (Samir Kassir Foundation and Reporters Without Borders 2018).

Daleel Thawra, launched on October 20, 2019, is another particularly useful platform. Providing a schedule of the day's main events, including marches, discussions, and protests, it serves as a clear guide for protestors to know where to assemble and what to attend. According to one of the coordinators of the site, the impetus behind establishing the *Daleel* was that “[in] the first

few days, there was some confusion, [and] people needed to be informed” and many wanted to contribute to the uprising but didn’t know how to do so – hence why the *Daleel* was established, allowing anonymous volunteers to list the major events planned so that citizens can access the programming as well as submit demands or post events (Tabbara 2019). The *Daleel* is also active on social media platforms, where its coordinators post daily updates on events happening on the ground, as well as other resources that protestors, activists, and everyday citizens may need. Even as the uprising has died down, the *Daleel* remains active, sharing content and events that active citizens and supporters of the uprising might find relevant, such as webinars tackling major socioeconomic and political issues, charitable initiatives, or general news updates.

As Smidi and Shahin (2017) have highlighted, it would be wrong to focus solely on digital initiatives to explain the growth of protests during the uprising. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that alternative media outlets and social media platforms such as *Akhbar Al Saba* and *Daleel Thawra*, among many others, did play a role in mobilizing citizens during the uprising.

Digitally Sharing Knowledge and Spreading Awareness

A facet of the Lebanese uprising that generated much discussion and admiration is the way in which citizens came together to engage in open discussions dealing with a wide array of topics. Since the beginning of the uprising, numerous public spaces, such as the Samir Kassir Garden and the Lazariéh building parking lot in Beirut’s central district, became open meeting grounds for such discussions. Participants and hosts, including professors and civil society leaders, discussed topics ranging from political change, economic reform, and the future of the uprising (Bajec 2019). These events were often organized by activists who used digital tools to not only spread the word on the discussions or talks but to also film and upload them online so that the videos could be viewed by those unable to attend. One such group of activists was *Bedna Nthour*, *Bedna Na3ref*, which organized numerous lectures by speakers on specific topics, such as Lebanon’s history, the judicial system, privatization of public spaces, and cybersecurity to

name a few (Bedna Nthour, Bedna Na3ref 2020). The lectures would then be followed by a Q and A session whereby audiences would engage in a discussion with the lecturer. The group advertised its events on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Unfortunately, it appears that the group is no longer active. Nonetheless, the discussions organized and the fact that they were filmed and uploaded provides activists and concerned citizens with a treasure trove of easily accessible valuable information.

Prior to the uprising, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) had already made great strides in their online presence, using social media platforms and the Internet in general to expand the reach of their campaigns (Hodali 2019). Such efforts included the production and sharing of short informative videos as well as easy-to-understand infographics. During the uprising, many of these NGOs and CSOs upped the ante by producing timely content that could be easily shared online, be it on social media platforms or on mobile communication applications. One particular example can be highlighted. Legal Agenda is a Beirut-based non-profit organization established in 2009 which conducts and publishes reports, studies, and news bulletins on legal matters in Lebanon and the Arab world to encourage citizens to use the law to strengthen social movements against authorities that often use it to tighten their control on society. Following the outbreak of the uprising, Legal Agenda increased their production of “educational videos and publications offering a detailed analysis of different proposed laws and protesters’ rights” (Lteif 2020). Some of the videos took the form of an interview with an expert in a particular field. One noteworthy video was posted on November 10, 2019. At the time, the Lebanese Parliament was set to convene on November 12, to vote on two controversial laws: a broad amnesty law which would have effectively “pardoned public officials accused of serious misconduct and corruption,” and a law establishing a specialized court for financial crimes, which stated “that the court’s decisions [would not be] subject to appeal, which would violate fair trial guarantees, and [would not] allow ordinary citizens to refer cases to the court” (Majzoub 2019). Given that the disgust and exasperation towards the perceived corruption of the Lebanese political class was one of the main reasons why protestors had been going down in droves

to the streets, the two laws were considered a spectacular slap in the face. Legal Agenda's video, lasting a little over three minutes, clearly explained what was at stake, highlighting the problematic content of both laws (Legal Agenda 2019). On the morning of the planned parliamentary sessions, protestors gathered in significantly large numbers to block parliamentarians' path in Beirut's central district, and the parliamentary session was postponed indefinitely (Awadalla and Knecht 2019). There is no doubt that Legal Agenda's video, widely shared via social media and mobile communication applications, played a role in making citizens aware of the high stakes.

CSOs and NGOs such as Legal Agenda are not the only entities that have sought to make complex and crucial issues that affect our daily lives, such as legal matters, understandable to the broader public. The economic and financial crisis-turned-meltdown that has been plaguing Lebanon for several years now and which worsened significantly prior to the outbreak of the uprising, coupled with a dramatic devaluation of the Lebanese Pound (LBP), triggered many questions regarding the Lebanese economy among everyday citizens, especially given the fact that commercial banks began to impose unregulated informal capital controls and citizens haven't been allowed to access their savings in USD (Al-Attar 2019). With credible knowledge on the state's economic condition difficult to find and reassurances from the government itself deemed untrustworthy, a group of Lebanese experts in finance and economics began to provide simple, clear explanations on the ongoing economic crisis on social media platforms, especially Twitter, with the aim of helping the general public become more knowledgeable and able to engage in informed discussions. In the months since their work began, they have taken on the role of a quasi-watchdog group and consolidated their analyses on a website *Finance 4 Lebanon*.

There is no doubt that the Lebanese uprising has spurred much knowledge sharing – both online and offline. This section has sought to provide a few examples of how everyday citizens and NGOs and CSOs have used digital tools to share knowledge on a wide array of issues which may appear indecipherable and complicated for a lay audience – such as financial and economic matters or legal issues – and stimulate conversations and debates.

The next section will highlight how independent media outlets and NGOs and CSOs have used digital tools to document what is happening on the ground, and often highlight events or issues that may have been deliberately omitted by traditional media outlets – such as human rights abuses.

Documenting and Commenting on the Uprising

As mentioned previously, the majority of traditional media outlets in Lebanon are owned directly or indirectly by the country's political elites or by wealthy individuals in the private sector tied to the former. In other words, the content produced by such outlets tends to reinforce the socioeconomic and political status quo, and their coverage of social movements tends to be biased or shallow – if covered at all. This has prompted several independent media outlets to pop up over the past few years, offering critical content that is drastically different than that provided by traditional media outlets and challenging entrenched notions regarding Lebanon's sociopolitical and economic context. The uprising served as a clear example of how these outlets sought to delegitimize the protest movement, such as by accusing protesters of being foreign-funded agents (Chehayeb 2019).

One such outlet that signifies this break with the traditional media outlets is Megaphone. Established in 2017, Megaphone initially began as a Facebook page launched by independent activists and journalists producing videos on specific topics dealing with Lebanon's political system, economy, and society, putting out critical takes on the entirety of Lebanon's political establishment. Following the outbreak of the uprising, Megaphone – just like many NGOs and CSOs – stepped up their game, putting out short informative videos on a quasi-daily basis highlighting the latest developments on the streets (Megaphone 2020). It is worth noting that many of these videos highlighted facets of the uprising that are not much covered in the traditional media or are simply glossed over, such as the detention of activists, or the emergence of non-politically aligned unions (Megaphone 2019). Cumulatively, these videos “have been watched millions of times” (Azhari 2019). In addition to the videos produced, Megaphone launched a website at the onset of the uprising dedicated to publishing “no-holds-barred opi-

nion pieces, penned by leading Lebanese progressive thinkers” and dealing with numerous social, economic, and political matters (Azhari 2019).

The emergence and rapid growth of alternative media outlets based on social media platforms are some of the highlights of the uprising. Throughout the uprising, these outlets provided much-needed critical coverage on the key political developments taking place in the country and have continued to provide such content after the uprising died down. Although it is difficult to gauge the extent to which these outlets can compete with established traditional media outlets, there is no denying that they are having an impact on the way citizens look at and understand the political, social, and economic contexts in Lebanon.

Digitally-enabled Solidarity

The economic and financial collapse that Lebanon has been witnessing since the value of the Lebanese Pound began to drop in August 2019 has led to a stark deterioration in living conditions all across the country. While widespread poverty is not a new phenomenon in Lebanon and has arguably been a staple of post-civil war life in the country – in 1996, a report by the UN Economic and Social Council of West Asia (ESCWA) had “estimated that 28 percent of Lebanese families were living below the poverty line” (Bauermann 2016, 96) – the current collapse has made these figures look paltry. In August 2020, ESCWA estimated that over 55 percent of the population was living below the poverty line and struggled to access bare necessities (ESCWA 2020). The collapse of the Lebanese Pound has wrought havoc on the Lebanese economy, which has long been heavily reliant on imports. While accurate and reliable statistics are hard to come across, there is no denying that countless businesses have closed and the unemployment rate has soared, while costs of all goods, even essential food staples, have skyrocketed. Explaining the multifaceted reasons as to why such a crisis occurred falls outside the scope of this commentary. What this section will shed light on is how, faced with increased precarity and deprivation, citizens from all walks of life began to come together to establish digital networks of solidarity and mutual assistance.

While solidarity and mutual assistance amongst citizens are certainly not new in Lebanon, the way citizens have made use of digital tools to reach out to and connect with those in need is quite innovative. For instance, after hearing about numerous suicide cases that took place and after seeing a photo of a woman offering to sell one of her kidneys, a Lebanese citizen launched a group on Facebook called *LibanTROC*, which currently has just over 60 thousand members (LibanTROC 2020). Initially conceived as a group whereby people could exchange services and items, the urgent demands made by the members rapidly turned the group into a virtual place whereby citizens with the means to help could connect with those in need (Antonios 2019). Digital tools have greatly facilitated needy citizens' access to assistance and networks of solidarity and charity, with groups on Facebook such as LibanTROC being only one example of such digitally-enabled solidarity.

Nefarious Instrumentalization of Digital Tools

It is clear that the use of digital tools greatly contributed to the uprising's momentum. However, such tools have also brought new and unforeseen dangers. For instance, the political establishment and their supporters were able to instrumentalize social media platforms for their own ends. Participation in online activism – from organizing and spreading the news, sharing opinions, and promoting protest-related events – is necessarily linked to a personal profile. This allows authorities to easily identify dissidents and makes them publicly available as targets for harassment. The ability of pro-government groups and forces to identify, harass, and humiliate protestors has manifested itself in several visible ways. In mid-June, the National News Agency reported that the country's Cybercrimes Bureau had been put on the lookout for social media posts that violated criminal defamation laws, namely “insulting the president” (Amnesty International 2020). However, the Bureau had been questioning prominent pro-uprising journalists, activists, and bloggers for many months prior. In March, it was reported that the Bureau had summoned at least sixty activists for questioning in just three months (Amos 2020). Although the constitution guarantees freedom of speech (“within the limits established by law”), the penal code criminalizes defamation against public officials and makes it possible to imprison a dissident for one to three years, depending on the target of their alleged defamation.

Aside from mainstream, public social media platforms, protestors can also be monitored in their semi-private chats. Although WhatsApp is encrypted, there have been various reports of pro-government “infiltrators” in group chats, which are frequently used to organize and spread information (Mackenzie 2019). Aside from gaining insight into the protestors’ plans and mobilization, this gives authorities yet another way to observe who the active organizers are and who is involved.

Groups supportive of political parties have used social media to harass pro-uprising journalists and public figures. Prominent journalist Dima Sadek is one example. After posting videos of anti-Hezbollah chants and loudly voicing her support for the protest movement, a hashtag, “Dima the lowest,” began to trend on Twitter, and Sadek and her family were inundated with insults and threats through social media, leading her to be sidelined at work and eventually resign in late 2019 (Michaelson and Safi 2019). Another pro-uprising journalist, Layal Saad, had a similar experience, receiving thousands of abusive messages online as well as a constant influx of angry calls (Caramazza 2019). The political establishment and their supporters used such online harassment tactics to discredit the uprising and defame specific figures who had amassed a non-negligible following on social media platforms.

While spreading wild rumors and misinformation is nothing new, such practices have become particularly dangerous in the digital era, whereby one bit of false news can rapidly spread like wildfire and reach thousands before being subjected to any modicum of fact-checking. This particular tactic was widely used during the uprising, and it was quite common for dubious messages and voice notes slandering the uprising or specific activists to spread rapidly through WhatsApp, sowing much doubt and confusion among citizens.

Conclusion

Without falling into the trap of believing that the uprising would not have occurred without digital tools, there is no doubt that these tools and social media platforms have played an instrumental role in the Lebanese uprising.

Designated platforms such as *Daleel Thawra* and constant communication over smartphone applications such as WhatsApp were extremely useful for organizing events, mobilizing protestors, and sustaining the momentum of the uprising. Public discussions, organized, advertised, and streamed on social media served to de-privatize knowledge, bringing expert insight into the public sphere and helping to instill a deeper understanding of the country's political, economic, and social issues among the population. Alternative news sources and the rise of citizen journalism helped to document the uprising, providing a much-needed non-mainstream view of the uprising as well as documented evidence of human rights abuses by the state security apparatus. Online platforms, such as the Facebook group *LibanTROC*, continue to provide protestors and citizens a space to reinforce their solidarity and provide support to one another.

Nonetheless, digitally-enabled activism has increased the visibility of protestors to authorities and made them vulnerable. Lebanon's defamation laws can, and have been, used to victimize and silence protestors and activists. In this way, social media has increased activists' susceptibility to being identified and harassed, be it by the political establishment or by their supporters. Lastly, social media and mobile communication applications can easily become platforms through which misinformation can spread rapidly, a key counter-revolutionary tactic used to delegitimize the uprising and break its momentum.

As the Covid-19 pandemic brought the uprising to a standstill, and as Lebanon further plunged into an economic and financial crisis, it was only expected that the uprising would die down. This commentary sought to examine how digital tools were instrumentalized by protestors and activists to further the protest movement, as well as to highlight what are the dangers inherent in using such tools. We hope that this commentary not only sheds light, however briefly, on this important facet of the Lebanese uprising but also would provide a grounding for future scholarly research on the intersection of social movements, technology, and counter-revolutionary tactics.

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Review:

Cyber Sufis: Virtual Expressions of the American Muslim Experience (Islam in the Twenty-First Century)

Wael Hegazy

Abstract

If you have made up your mind that the embodied rituals are the main dominant phenomenon in modern Sufism and the cyberspace can only contribute to the marginalization of religious experience, this book is out to persuade you otherwise. This is an ethnographic study that investigates the virtualization of Sufi rituals, religious education, spiritual practices, and public outreach adopted by the Inyati Sufi order. It is also an attempt to explore an American Sufi digital paradigm that helps to balance the traditional ways of performing rituals and coping with the new age of shifting to cyber rituals.

Keywords

Disembodied Sufism, Online Sufi Experience, Online Sufi Rituals, Cyber Islam, New Sufism, American Sufism, Inyati Order, and Cyber Sufi Identity.

Robert Rozehnal. 2019. *Cyber Sufis: Virtual Expressions of the American Muslim Experience (Islam in the Twenty-First Century)*. Oneworld Academic, August 13. 242 pages.

The embodied Sufi studies are the most common ones in Sufi literature due to the significance of the body in the Sufi realm. While this is true, this study also comes to be one of the first disembodied Sufi studies that examine the relatively recent cyber Sufism phenomenon. In short, the body is central in the Sufi practices, and that makes the absence of the body unimaginable given the remarkable role of corporeality in classical and modern Sufism. However, the Internet revolution coupled with the increasing social media avenues has created an extremely competitive, and some might even go as far as to say a substitute for traditional ways that dominate the Sufi world

for ages. To achieve this goal, Rozehnal has successfully selected as a case study one of the oldest and largest Sufi orders in the West and the United States, namely the Inyati Sufi order which was founded by Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882–1927). Rozehnal surveyed the most influential Islamic affiliated groups in the US, and he selected a Sufi one to represent disembodied Islam on account of its wide, hybrid, and diverse audience.

The argument of this book is well-stated and easy to grasp. As Rozehnal succinctly put it, “the 21st century Sufi cyberspace now serves as critical sites and alternative spaces for the American Muslim narratives and networking, identity making and community building, experience and expression...” (p. 20). Substantially, due to its significance in constituting the individual personality and communities and even shaping the public and political behaviors, the identity-making process, as a revolutionary, multilayered, and changing narrative expressed in the cyberspace religious experience, seems to act as a focal point in several places in the book. Simply, Rozehnal argues that unlike the fixed and stable sense of identity, cyber identity is fluid and contingent. “It is ‘relational and incomplete’ and always under construction...” (p. 12).

In terms of method, the study is an ethnographic study that investigates the virtualization of Sufi rituals, religious education, spiritual practices, and public outreach adopted by the Inyati Sufi order. The author analyses the contents of tens of webpages, blogs, and social media platforms operated and sponsored by the Inyati Sufi order.

As it stands, this book is structured in a way that not only educates its audience but also engages them and calls for critical thought in order to fully comprehend its content. It consists of an introduction and seven chapters in which the first three chapters are theoretical, while chapters four to six are case studies of Inyati Sufi order in the US, and the last chapter is an attempt to find “shared patterns and resonant themes in the broader landscape of contemporary American Sufi digital media...” (p. 17). The introduction situates the American Sufi cyber experience within a broader digital religious framework analyzing the aspects and repercussions caused by this new form

of digital religion. These repercussions have impacted the shaping of identity, altering the religious authority, and even reformulating of the Muslim communities as a whole.

In chapter one, titled *Mapping digital religion and Cyber-Islam*, the author traces the prominent thinkers' theories and methods on the tremendous shift in the religious experience during the digital age. The author brilliantly evaluates the literature on the digital religion and divides it into three phases. Phase one (the mid-1990s) was distinguished by being of a revolutionary, regenerative, and renewal nature. Phase two began in the early of 2000s which directed an emphasis on the "critical reflection and methodological rigor to the field..."(p. 23) Afterwards, phase three with an expansive growth stage has emerged and it is still growing to the present time. Both chapters two and three, *Misinterpreting Sufism* and *Sufism in American religious landscape*, respectively, deeply delve into defining the *tasawaf* (Sufism) which is misinterpreted by the West as well as Islamists alike. The author explains how the term Sufism is an invention of the late 18th century's Orientalist scholarship. Likewise, it was misinterpreted by the Sunni Islamists who were backed by Saudi Arabia and Arab Gulf countries to demonize the *tasawaf*. In addition, these two chapters situate Sufism in the diverse, hybrid, and multi-identity American religious spectrum.

From chapter four through chapter six, the study offers an extended case study of the oldest and the largest Sufi community in the US and the West, that is the Inayati order that was established by hazrat Inayat Khan in 1910 and had a major institutional engagement under the leadership of his grandson Pir Zia Khan (born 1971). The study narrates the origin and development of this Sufi group drawing the boundaries of its preservation of traditions and the limits of its acceptance of the digital world updates. In further detail, chapter four intensively explains the doctrinal principles of Inayati Sufi group and its systematic institutional transformations manifested in the digital platforms in which they operate. The universality of the spiritual activities offered by Inayati order's websites is affirmed in chapter five that is referred to as "the church for all" based on the diversity and hybridity of the audience interested in these spiritual activities. In chapter

six, the author explains that these Sufi websites are not restricted to spiritual practices, rather they go beyond that to engage in social services that help the civil society in terms of education, nursery, health care, and public outreach. One of the strengths of chapter six is that it makes good use of the previous literature and builds on the recent outcomes of the digital studies done by pioneers of the media and digital religion such as Christopher Helland, Heidi Campbell, and Gary Bunt.

In the concluding chapter, Rozehnal offers new voices and pulls many accounts from other Sufi camps especially those of Siri Lankan and Turkish roots comparatively with Inayati digital experience, which is singled out for its fluidity, hybridity, and adaptability. Lastly, he concludes with his expectation about the future of cyber Sufism in the US to be more engaged in the virtual world which is proven to be an active tool for the Sufi experience and expression. He optimistically hopes that some ethnographic scholars will complete the other half of his journey in this book to identify the overlapping, reciprocity, and complementary online and offline Sufi worlds.

Although the author has successfully chosen the most leading and dominant Sufi order in the US and even in some European countries, the online platforms used by this Sufi order for its rituals or religious education are only a glimpse of the cyber shift in American Sufism, and further research is necessary in order to have a valuable reflection on the cyber shift in the American Sufism. It would be more fruitful if the study covered more than one leading Sufi orders in the US to properly accomplish the purpose of the book: “The Internet’s unique affordance along with its underlying messiness facilitate what Homi Bhabha calls ‘a contradictory and ambivalent space for enunciation’ opening up new avenues for individual agency, social transformation and the inversion of offline real world power dynamics...” (p. 6–7). In addition, Sufi rituals that are crucial in drawing an integrated picture of cyber Sufism have not received enough discussion in terms of their impact on constituting the religious community and shaping the identity within the chapters of the book. Instead, the author predominantly details how Sufi spiritual activities are received and interacted by the targeted audience. Another point of criticism is that when stating his method, the author

acknowledges that he uses an incomplete method that relies exclusively on analyzing the webpages, blogs, and social media as ends in themselves. Instead, this work would have required intensive fieldwork, interviews, and surveys within the actual Sufi community of Inayati, in order to build an integrated picture of the cyber Sufi experience in the US. The urgency for such fieldwork is much-needed especially when a challenging crucial question is left unanswered. The crucial question that the study raised is if the practice of online blessings and ritual performances is achieved successfully with the same value as if they were performed in person. I think this question needs intensive interviews with Sufi religious leaders, disciples, and even the followers of these Sufi online platforms from various religious affiliations.

This criticism aside, this is a fascinating book in exploring an American Sufi digital paradigm that helps to balance the traditional ways of performing rituals and coping with the new age of shifting to cyber rituals. It is a very strong introduction to these traditions, and it should be read by students, academics, and nonspecialists who are interested in digital religion, cyber Sufism, and cyber spirituality, and who would find great benefit by using this book as a starting point for their studies.

Review:

The Media World of ISIS

Orwa Ajjoub

Abstract

The Islamic State group (IS) has grabbed the world's attention as one of the most dangerous and gruesome terrorist organizations in history. The group has been studied from different disciplines such as political science, history, and theology. Michael Krona and Rosemary Pennington's edited volume, The Media World of ISIS, is an attempt by media studies scholars to explore different aspects and dimensions of the IS usage of media.

Keywords

IS, ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State, Syria, Iraq, Middle East, Media, Al-Qaeda

Krona, Michael, and Pennington, Rosemary, eds. 2019. *The Media World of ISIS*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

The Islamic State group (IS) has grabbed the world's attention as one of the most dangerous and gruesome terrorist organizations in history. The group has been studied from different disciplines such as political science, history, and theology. Michael Krona and Rosemary Pennington's edited volume, *The Media World of ISIS*, is an attempt by media studies scholars to explore different aspects and dimensions of the IS usage of media.

The book is divided into three parts, each consisting of four chapters: Media and ISIS's Imaginary Geography, Mediating Terror, and Narratives of the Islamic state. The first part provides a deep dive into IS's rhetoric and the role it played in attracting new recruits, performs a comparative case study with the Mongol Hordes and the Khmer Rouge, and explores the group's search for a sense of both legitimacy and statehood. The first four chapters of the book are useful for contextualizing IS's rhetoric and its impact on the group's followers.

However, in the first chapter, *The Myth of the Caliph: Suffering and Redemption in the Rhetoric of ISIS*, one can find several historical and language errors.

For example, the author does not differentiate between the terms describing the Islamic State group (IS, ISIS, ISIL), which refer to the group's name at different times. He uses ISIS, which was the group name between April 2013 to June 2014, instead of IS, which has been the group's name since June 2014 (p. 13). As for the language error, the author provides an incorrect translation of one of the Arabic names for the group, *Daesh*, which the author translates as "trample or crush" (p. 26). *Daesh* in Arabic has no meaning – it is a pejorative term used by other Muslims to degrade IS.

The second part of the book looks at two main themes: IS's media and branding strategies for disseminating its propaganda, and the impact of the images, icons, and colors used by IS. In chapter eight, *It is more than orange, ISIS's appropriation of orange prison jumpsuit as a rhetorical resistance*, the authors explore IS's use of the "iconic orange jumpsuit when executing its prisoners, as resistance rhetoric to Western intervention in Muslim countries" (p. 167). The chapter is theoretically rich and engaging, mainly drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of bio-power which is "the disciplinary and the fear aspects of society" (p. 172), and Robert Hariman and John Lucaites's work on visual iconography, which looks at the role of image in capturing historical moments and shaping individuals' perceptions on a specific issue. The authors provide a theoretical exploration of Foucault's concept of the docile body which, while enriching the chapter theoretically, does not help to answer its main question. Nevertheless, the authors employ Hariman and John Lucaites's work on visual iconography well to explain how the use of a specific image (photographs of IS's prisoners wearing orange jumpsuits) can activate strong emotional response and deliver ideas that are louder than actions.

The final part of the book provides an interdisciplinary perspective on how the strategic use of media by IS acts as a legitimation tool. Chapter nine analyses interviews conducted with twenty Western millennials to answer one of the most pressing questions in the last five years: why young millennial Muslims who grew up in secular Western countries "leave decent lives, good families ... and so on in order to join a militant movement that was in direct opposition to their home countries" (p. 178)? Following this focus on

the role of media narratives, chapter ten *Monstrous performance, Mohamad Emwazi's transformation* stands out as an important analysis of the role of masculinity in inciting violence and reinforcing the notion of killing the 'other' as a means to prove one's identity.

Chapter eleven explores the notion of legitimacy and how it is maintained by terrorist groups, asking questions about how the co-optation of Western discourse provides a basis of legitimation. In this context, legitimacy is defined by the authors as discursive, mediated through IS ability to disseminate an English-language propaganda magazine. The chapter provides an important exploration of primary data such as IS's magazine *Dabiq*. The final chapter addresses the political debate over defining what constitutes 'genocide,' providing analysis of different media outlets and their role in disseminating terrorist groups' propaganda through sharing their materials. The author grapples with the questions of how to expose the atrocities committed by terrorist groups without being trapped in promoting the groups' agendas.

The book is thematically diverse and lucidly written, which makes it a useful read for those interested in how terrorist groups such as IS use media to promote their ideologies, recruit fighters, and spread fear among their enemies. It is, however, theoretically dense, which might reduce its attraction for non-academic readers.

Review:

Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion

Anders Ackfeldt

Abstract

The edited volume Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion (2017) by Vít Šisler, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, and Xenia Zeiler takes the study of religion and video games seriously and recognizes the widespread usage of religious themes in the world of games. The book can be read as an exposé of the state of research in the field of Game Studies with the specific focus on methods for researching how religion is represented in games and how religious traditions change and serves as inspiration for religious practices and beliefs.

Keywords

method, video games, game studies, computer games

Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion (Routledge Studies in Religion and Digital Culture, 2017), edited by Vít Šisler, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, and Xenia Zeiler. New York: Routledge. 242 p.

The gaming industry has undergone an extensive development since the early 1970s when the first computer games was introduced. The industry is no longer a fringe past time activity for a small young consumer segment. The global gaming market is set to reach US\$256.97 billion by 2025. More than 2.5 billion people worldwide play games. With the arrival of mobile gaming and improvements to hardware as well as video game streaming services gaming has become a viable form of entertainment for players from all backgrounds and ages. With the outbreak of COVID-19 gamers in the United States reported that they spent 45 percent more time playing video games amid the quarantine than before the pandemic (Mordor Intelligence 2020). Most certainly the field of Game Studies will only increase in importance over the coming years. Any gamer (casual as well as a pro) will notice – that in the contemporary post-secular society – many video games *are saturated with religious semiotics, for example, Fall out 3 (Hinduism), BioShock Infinite (Christianity) and the Assassin's Creed franchise (Islam, Christianity and Old Norse religion) just to name a few.*

The edited volume *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* (2017) by Vít Šisler, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, and Xenia Zeiler takes the study of religion and video games seriously and recognizes the widespread usage of religious themes in the world of games. The book can be read as an exposé of the state of research in the field of Game Studies with the specific focus on methods for researching how religion is represented in games and how religious traditions change and serves as inspiration for religious practices and beliefs.

The book is divided into four parts *Textual and Audiovisual Narratives, In-Game Performance, Production and Design, and Interactivity and Rule System*. Each of the book's 12 chapters (excluding the Introduction and the final Critical Reflection) examines a particular method for the study of religion in relation to video games. All chapters follow the same structure and do a good job of giving an overview of the method presented and the exciting research. The case studies presented throughout the chapters of the book are rich and serves as welcomed breaks in between, sometimes, dense theoretical and methodological considerations. The author of this review especially enjoyed Gregory Price Grieve's ethnographic approach to the study of Zen Buddhism among the residents in the virtual world of *Second Life* engaging. It is both thought-provoking and interesting to see how ethnographical research methods has moved into the virtual realms.

However, it must be noted that the ambition of the volume is to go beyond media-centered investigations and examinations of religious themes in games. The editors also want to include "the technical environment of video games and gamers as well as the cultural environments of video games and gaming into consideration" (p. 7).

One such example is the stimulating chapter *Mobile Gaming for Learning Jewish – History, Tikkun Olam, and Civics* by Owen Gottlieb. The contribution investigates how Design-Based Research methods can be used in the study of video games, religious literacy, and learning. The chapter discusses the Augmented Reality Game (ARG) *Jewish Time Jump: New York* and the central question for Owen is "How can mobile history ARGs better provide

a best-case, fair hearing for opposing perspectives?” (p. 83). The outcome of the case study showed that by using a video game learners in civic education better demonstrated the ability to articulate a differing perspective concerning religion.

All in all, *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* is an appreciated contribution to the field of Game Studies. The editors have done an important job putting together this volume and if anyone doubted the seriousness of Games Studies and the field’s methodological awareness and ambitions, they will be proven wrong. The book is sometimes dense when it comes to methodological deliberations but then again, the book is about precisely that. It should also be noted that the uniform structure of the book as well as the love for the subject displayed by the contributors makes it easier to follow the text. I would recommend the book to anyone interested in religion and video games. As well, as people who have a general interest in methodological issues within the humanities and social sciences. This since the field of Game Studies most likely will have a much larger impact on research at large in a near future, both when it comes to empirical, theoretical, and methodological concerns.

References

Mordor Intelligence. 2020. “Gaming market – growth, trends, forecasts (2020–2025).” *Mordor Intelligence* website. Accessed [November 30, 2020], <https://www.mordorintelligence.com/industry-reports/global-games-market>.