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Vít Š i s l e r

The Internet, New Media, and Islam

Production of Islamic Knowledge and Construction of Muslim Identity in the Digital

Age

Internet, nová média a islám

Vytváření islámských norem a konstrukce muslimské identity v digitálním věku

Dizertační práce

vedoucí práce - PhDr. Richard Papík, Ph.D.

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the impact of information and communication technology (ICT) and new media on the production of Islamic knowledge and the construction of Muslim identity in Muslim communities in the Arab world and Western Europe. Today we witness an unprecedented proliferation of ICT and new media in the Arab and Muslim world as well as growing interdependency of various media outlets. This process includes media that morph into each other, messages that migrate across boundaries, and social networks that utilize multiple technologies. The unanticipated assemblages formed by these media contribute simultaneously to preserving traditional cultural norms and religious values while unsettling the existing arrangements and promoting new organizational forms; appealing to a local audience while addressing transnational communities; and asserting conformity with established religious institutions while fueling fragmentation of authority and individualization of faith. Therefore, this dissertation aims to transcend the media-centric logic and to analyze the impact of ICT and new media in the light of the above-mentioned interdependency and hybridization within broader social, cultural and linguistic context. By doing so, it particularly focuses on two separate, yet simultaneously entangled, phenomena. First, it discusses fatwas and other normative content issued and/or disseminated by various Islamic websites for the Muslim minorities living in non-Muslim majority countries, particularly in Western Europe. Second, it analyzes Islamic video games and video clips produced in the Arab world and beyond and discusses the ways in which these new media articulate Muslim identity and communicate Islamic ethical and moral values to the youth. On an overarching level, this dissertation deals with the production of knowledge and construction of identity in the increasingly networked and

interconnected communities; the emerging potential of new digital media for dissemination of moral and religious values; and the ways public authorities operate within the religion-technology interaction.

Abstrakt

Předložená disertační práce analyzuje vliv informačních a komunikačních technologií a nových médií na vytváření islámských norem a konstrukci muslimské identity v muslimských komunitách v arabském světě a zemích Západní Evropy. V současné době dochází k bezprecedentnímu rozšiřování informačních a komunikačních technologií a nových médií v arabském a islámském světě, stejně tak jako k rostoucí provázanosti a vzájemné závislosti jednotlivých platforem digitálních médií. Tento proces zahrnuje média, která metamorfují jedno v druhé, sdělení, která se šíří bez ohledu na státní hranice, a sociální sítě, využívající celou škálu odlišných technologií. Nepředvídatelné kombinace těchto médií a technologií pak přispívají na jedné straně k posilování tradičních kulturních norem a náboženských hodnot a na druhé straně k rozrušování existujících struktur a vzniku nových modelů organizace; na jedné straně oslovují lokální publikum, zatímco na druhé straně posilují globální komunity; vynucují konformitu s etablovanými náboženskými institucemi, a zároveň usnadňují fragmentaci náboženské autority a individualizaci víry. Předložená disertační práce si klade za cíl překročit logiku sevřenou úzkými mediálními kategoriemi a analyzovat vliv informačních a komunikačních technologií a nových médií ve světle výše zmíněné vzájemné provázanosti a hybridizace v rámci širšího sociálního, kulturního a lingvistického kontextu arabského a islámského světa. Za tím účelem se práce zaměřuje na dva odlišné, přesto však vzájemně provázané fenomény. Za prvé pojednává o fatwách a dalších normativních materiálech vydávaných nebo rozšiřovaných na internetu pro potřeby muslimských menšin žijících mimo hranice islámského světa, zejména v zemích Západní Evropy. Za druhé analyzuje videoklipy a počítačové hry vytvořené převážně v arabském světě a zkoumá způsoby, jakými tato nová média

artikulují muslimskou identitu a předávají islámské etické a morální hodnoty mladé generaci. V obecné rovině pak předložená disertační práce pojednává o vytváření normativního diskurzu a formování identity ve stále více propojených komunitách; vzrůstajícím potenciálu nových médií pro rozšiřování morálních a náboženských hodnot; a způsobech, jakými veřejné autority reagují na vzrůstající interakcí náboženství a nových technologií.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Note on Transliteration

Within the main text of this thesis, I decided not to burden readers with a complex system of transliteration of Arabic terminology into English. Such a system would be unnecessary and damaging to the flow of the text, especially for readers outside the fields of Arabic and Islamic studies. Therefore, all Arabic words found in an unabridged dictionary (e.g. Sunni, fatwa, hadith, hajj) are treated as English words in this thesis. Correspondingly, contemporary names and places are spelled as they are found in standard publications (e.g. Muhammad, Mecca). For other terms, I have opted for a simplified transliteration based on the system used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*. Nevertheless, quotations from the Internet and textual sources retain their original transliteration.

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1 Introduction

This dissertation analyzes the impact of information and communication technology (ICT) and new digital media on the production of Islamic knowledge and the construction of Muslim identity in Muslim communities in the Arab world and Western Europe. Today we witness an unprecedented proliferation of ICT and new media in the Arab and Muslim world as well as growing interdependency of various media outlets. This process includes media that morph into each other, messages that migrate across boundaries, and social networks that utilize multiple technologies. The unanticipated assemblages formed by these media contribute simultaneously to preserving traditional cultural norms and religious values while unsettling the existing arrangements and promoting new organizational forms; appealing to a local audience while addressing transnational communities; and asserting conformity with established religious institutions while fueling fragmentation of authority and individualization of faith.

Therefore, this dissertation aims to transcend the media-centric logic and to analyze the impact of ICT and new media in the light of the above-mentioned interdependency and hybridization within broader social, cultural and linguistic context. By doing so, it particularly focuses on two separate, yet simultaneously entangled, phenomena. First, it discusses fatwas and other normative content issued and/or disseminated by various Islamic websites for the Muslim minorities living in non-Muslim majority setting, particularly within the European legal systems. Second, it analyzes Islamic video games and video clips produced in the Arab world and beyond and discusses the ways

in which these new media forms articulate Muslim identity and communicate Islamic ethical and moral values to the youth. On an overarching level, this dissertation deals with the production of knowledge and construction of identity in the increasingly networked and interconnected communities; the emerging potential of new digital media for dissemination of moral and religious values; and the ways public authorities operate within the religion-technology interaction.

The discursive development and inner struggle over authority between competing interpretations of Islam and Islamic law, encompassing broader issues of identity among members of Muslim minorities, constitutes a key issue in social, economical, and political reality of contemporary Middle East, Europe, and United States. Today we are in crucial need of a critical understanding of the production of Islamic knowledge and construction of interpretive authority within transnational Muslim social networks. Despite a commonly shared concern that the Internet and ICT play a significant role in decision-making processes within Muslim communities and heavily influence the shaping of Muslim identities, the number of complex, well researched, and case-based studies on how this is done remains relatively low and their results seem to be to a large extent ambiguous.

The methodological approach used in this dissertation is an agglomeration of various research ventures coming from a variety of disciplines including information science, communication studies, cultural studies, Islamic studies, legal studies, new media studies, and computer science. Given the multifaceted nature of the hybridized media outlets analyzed in this thesis, the particular methodological and theoretical frameworks are discussed in detail in individual sections where they belong. Nevertheless, the

overarching theoretical and methodological background of this thesis lies in the domain of information science and communication studies. According to Cejpek (2005, p. 178)

> The subject of information science in the narrower sense is the mediation of knowledge, experience, and stories (potential information) recorded through systems of signs and systematically ordered in collections of documents and globally dispersed electronic resources. The information science also deals with the consequences such mediation of potential information has for human beings and society.

In the last few years, there is a growing interest of researchers, coming from information science and communication studies background, in the Arab and Muslim world, particularly regarding the patterns of use of the Internet among the youth and the democratization potential of information and communication technologies. For example, Rasha A. Abdulla from the American University in Cairo has published a pioneering book in 2007 called *The Internet in the Arab World: Egypt and beyond*, which provides essential information and knowledge about the development of the Internet in the Arab world as well as a comprehensive presentation of the uses and effects of this new medium on the region (Abdulla 2007). Regarding the Muslim world, Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis from the departments of communication at the Queens University of Charlotte, and the University of Maryland respectively, have published a book in 2009 called *Islam dot com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace*, which provides an insight into the expanding Islamic discourse and changing notions of Islamic identity as it appears on three of the most popular Islamic websites (El-Nawawy & Khamis 2009). Finally, Phillip N. Howard from the

Department of Communication at the University of Washington, has published a comprehensive study in 2010 called *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam*, which presents a challenging and original analysis of the cultural and political dynamics of the Muslim world through the lens of the interaction between communication technology and politics (Howard 2010). These recent books clearly indicate an emerging field of study within the inherent domain of information science and communication studies, i.e. the interactions between information and communication technology and individual users, authorities, and institutions in the Arab and Muslim world and broader political and social aspects of such interactions.

At the same time, there is also a growing interest of researches from information science and communication studies in the possible interactions between systems of organized religion and information and communication technology. For example, the *Information, Communication & Society Journal* is currently (i.e. November 2010) preparing for print a special issue called *Religion and the Internet: The Online-Offline Connection* focusing among other on the interactions between online communities and offline religious institutions and responses of offline religious authorities to religious manifestations and practices online from their community or tradition. Recently, the Center for the Study of Information and Religion (CSIR) has been established in Kent State's School of Library and Information Science. At CSIR, an interdisciplinary approach is being used to facilitate research that is focused on the various institutions and agents of religion and their effect on social knowledge through the use, dissemination, and diffusion of information. The goals of the CSIR are: first, to investigate the importance of information in the religious world; second, to understand the relationship between the

information-seeking behavior of clergy and the body of knowledge that exists to serve their information needs; and third, to advance our understanding of the role of information in religious practice. CSIR currently accepts abstracts for consideration for the first annual Conference on Information and Religion, scheduled for May 2011 at Kent State University.

Nevertheless, despite the recent grow of interest of information science and communication studies in the topics of religion, Islam, and the Arab world, it has to be emphasized that similar research, albeit from different methodological positions, has been going on for at least a decade and its results have to be taken into account. The most salient and groundbreaking research came unsurprisingly from the field of Middle Eastern and/or Islamic studies, oftentimes incorporating research originating in the domains of anthropology and cultural studies. As early as in 1999, Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson have edited a pioneering anthology called *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, which provides a fascinating account on the role new media play in Muslim society and diaspora, particularly dealing with the potential of new media for the redefinition of public sphere and the emergence of new Islam's interpreters (Eickelman & Anderson 1999). Similarly important is the work of Gary R. Bunt from the University of Lampeter, who published several key books on Islam, the Internet, and new media, namely *Virtually Islamic* in 2000, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* in 2003, and *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam* in 2009 (Bunt 2000, 2003, 2009).

There are literally hundreds of other researches who provide valuable insights into the particular aspects of the emergence and growth of the Internet and new media in the

Muslim and Arab world, and their research is properly discussed below in the particular chapters. The aim of this introductory literature review is twofold. First, to reaffirm the clear link between the study of the Internet and new media in the Muslim and Arab world and the contemporary information science and communication studies; and, second, to emphasize the inherently multidisciplinary character of this thesis and the correspondingly varied selection of research ventures and methodologies, stemming from the multifaceted character of the topic itself.

Before discussing the development of the Internet and new media in the Muslim and Arab world, I must first shed light on four important conceptual notions. The first is obviously the term "Islam." Essentially, in this thesis I strive to avoid presenting Islam as a single monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to new realities. Instead, I aim to perceive Islam as diverse and multifaceted phenomenon, with international differences, debates, and development. As many authors (Said 1978, 1997; Shaheen 2000; Poole 2006; Wingfield & Karaman 2001; Pintak 2006; Karim 2006) have demonstrated, the representations of Islam appearing in European and American news media oftentimes exploit stereotypes and clichés, constructing schematized and flattened notion of "Islam." At the same time, this notion of Islam is often framed as threatening, supportive of terrorism (Larsson 2007), or engaged in "a clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1996). In this respect, Said (1997, p. l) even argues that

> In no really significant way is there a direct correspondence between the
> "Islam" in common Western usage and the enormously varied life that

goes on within the world of Islam, with its more than 800,000,000 people,[1] its millions of square miles of territory principally in Africa and Asia, its dozens of societies, states, histories, geographies, cultures. […] During the past few years, especially since events in Iran caught European and American attention so strongly,[2] the media have therefore covered Islam: they have portrayed it, characterized it, analyzed it, given instant courses on it, and consequently they have made it "known." But, as I have implied, this coverage – and with it the work of academic experts on Islam, geopolitical strategists who speak of "the crescent of crisis," cultural thinkers who deplore "the decline of the West" – is misleadingly full. It has given consumers of news the sense that they have understood Islam without at the same time intimating to them that a great deal in this energetic coverage is based on far from objective material. […] Aside from the fact, that neither Christianity or Judaism, both of them going through quite remarkable revivals (or "returns"), is treated in so emotional way, there is an unquestioned assumption that Islam can be characterized limitlessly by means of handful of recklessly general and repeatedly deployed clichés.

By the same token, Küng (2007, p. 19) argues that the common failing of representation of Islam is the attachment to a monolithic and unhistorical image and presupposition

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[1] Said wrote the first version of his text in 1981; the current estimations of Muslim population reach 1.57 billion (PewResearchCenter 2009).

[2] Said is referring to the Islamic Revolution which took place in Iran in 1979. Nevertheless, most of his observations remain valid today, given the recent development of the "War on Terror" and the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

that Islam has always been, and is, everywhere the same. In other words, "However different Wahhabi Saudis, Iranian Shiite mullahs, Egyptian Islamic Brethren, Palestinian Hamas fighters, Pakistani Sufis, or American Black Muslims may be, it is thought that there is an eternal unchanging essence of Islam, radically different from everything Western" (ibid.).

Nevertheless, Küng (2007, p. 20) simultaneously asserts that for all the historic currents and counter-currents, in the various constantly shifting historical images and lived-out realizations of Islam there is an abiding element; its basic components and basic perspectives stem from an origin that is by no means random but is given with a quite specific historical personality, a holy scripture. Yet, against all rigid "essentialism," he immediately adds that this abiding essence shows itself only in what is changing; that there is an identity, but only in variables; a continuum, but only in the event; a constancy, but only in changing manifestations. By the same way, I treat Islam in my thesis as a dynamic, rather than rigid and static system; and the production of Islamic knowledge and the construction of Muslim identity as open ended process involving variety of actors. By doing so, I analyze the various manifestations of Islam mentioned in this thesis in the broader context where they transpire; clearly linking them to the respective institutions, authorities, and individuals who articulate or promote them.

Correspondingly, the second notion which needs clarification is the umbrella term "Muslim world." As Howard (2010, p. 20) notes, today there are 75 countries with significant Muslim communities; 48 countries where Muslims are in the majority and at least 50 percent of the population is Muslim; 27 countries where Muslims are an important minority and at least 10 percent of the population is Muslim. While Muslims

are found on all five inhabited continents, more than 60% of the global Muslim population is in Asia and about 20% is in the Middle East and North Africa. However, the Middle East-North Africa region has the highest percentage of Muslim-majority countries. Indeed, more than half of the 20 countries and territories in that region have populations that are approximately 95% Muslim or greater (PewResearchCenter 2009). As has been mentioned above, the diversity of experience in Islamic countries is as striking as the similarities. There is enormous diversity in the economic, political, and cultural institutions of Muslim countries; not to mention the various interpretations of Islam. In this respect, Howard (2010, p. 23) even argues that there is not much evidence that the "Muslim world" is a meaningful political category. In fact, it is a term of generalization, about as useful as the "Western world" or "the West." These terms are similarly subjective in nature, depending on whether cultural, economic, religious or political criteria are employed. In his influential, yet not generally accepted thesis, Huntington (1996) argues that the definition of "the West" is primarily based on religion, as the countries of Western and Central Europe, and subsequently United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and Latin America, were historically influenced by the two forms of Western Christianity, namely Catholicism and Protestantism. Conversely, other uses of the term "Western world" refer to the societies of Europe and their genealogical, colonial, and philosophical descendants, typically also including those countries whose ethnic identity and dominant culture derive from European culture; not necessarily connecting the term with Christianity. Finally, depending on context, the term "Western world" may be restricted solely to the Americas and Western Europe.

Therefore, in this thesis I use the terms "Muslim world" and "Western world" only as operational terms, not as political categories; acknowledging their porous and multifaceted nature. Moreover, particularly the term "the West" (*al-gharb*) oftentimes appears in the analyzed fatwas and interviews; usually without the petitioner, mufti, or interviewee providing his or her definition of the term.

Finally, the last term which has to be clarified is the "Arab world." Essentially, for the purpose of this thesis, I define Arab world as an umbrella term for countries that belong to the Arab League of Nations and whose official language is Arabic (see also Abdulla 2007).[3] As is the case with the above mentioned umbrella terms, by no means this indicates that the Arab world constitutes a monolithic bloc. Despite the fact that most Arab countries share the same language, culture, religion, and history, there are core differences among Arab audiences regarding political and cultural ideologies (Amin 2007, p. x). It's also important to emphasize that although the majority of Arabs are Muslims, the population in the Arab world encompasses also a variety of other religions, including Christians, Druze, Baha'is, and others.

Yet, at the same time, as Zayani (2008) argues, there is an overlap between the notions of Arab and Muslim public spheres. The research on the role of new media and the Internet in the Arab world oftentimes entangles with broader research concerning the Muslim world in general. In many cases research conducted within the framework of Islamic studies deals directly with issues related to the Arab media landscape. Conversely, many new Arab media play an important role in the production of global

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[3] These countries are: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

Islamic knowledge, transcending national, regional, and language boundaries. This is particularly relevant to the situation of Muslim minorities living in non-Muslim countries, where the Internet and new media have become an important adjunct to traditional means of communicating about Islam and facilitate "a new form of Islamic discourse" (Bunt 2006, p. 13). Many prominent Islamic websites are maintained and/or operate from Arab countries (e.g. IslamOnline, Fatwa-Online, etc.), so besides being part of the "emerging Muslim public sphere" (Eickelman & Anderson 2003, p. 1), they also form an inseparable part of the Arab media landscape (Khamis & Šisler 2010).

This dissertation stems from fundamental research conducted at Charles University in Prague in 2005 – 2010, the American University in Cairo in 2007 – 2008, and at the Northwestern University in Chicago in 2008 – 2009. Its findings are the result of both qualitative and content analysis of research materials including websites, blogs, video clips and video games, as well as interviews with major media producers. Most of the research materials and interviews have been collected through my fieldwork in Damascus, Syria (2005), Beirut, Lebanon (2005) and Cairo, Egypt (2006, 2007-2008). Therefore, the focus of this thesis is primarily on the Muslim communities in the Arab world and on Muslim minorities in Western Europe (in most cases connected with the Arab world). Similarly, the Islamic materials and media used in this thesis originated primarily in the Arab world, mainly in the three above mentioned countries. Nevertheless, most of these media have a broader, in some cases even global audience; and some of the materials analyzed in this thesis originated outside of the boundaries of the Arab world. This reflects the above-mentioned hybridization of the Islamic discourse and the migration of messages across geographical boundaries; as well as the simultaneous overlaps of local and global notions of Muslim identity. The information

about the authors, including countries of origin and residence, of all examples and research materials used in this thesis are clearly indicated whenever possible. By no means this dissertation aspires to cover all the possible interactions between multifaceted Muslim communities, new media, and the Internet; rather, it focuses on two separated, yet interlinked phenomena that are becoming increasingly relevant – the production of Islamic jurisprudence on the Internet for Muslim minorities in Western Europe and the construction of Muslim identity in new media in the Arab world. These two phenomena and corresponding Muslim communities have been chosen for various reasons. First, the issue of dispensing religious and legal opinions defining how to behave in compliance with Islamic laws while living as a minority within European legal frameworks is of growing importance in the fabric of key social, political and economic issues of the contemporary unified Europe. As this thesis argues, the Internet and new media play an increasingly important role in the construction of Muslim identity and production of Islamic knowledge in contemporary European Muslim minorities, particularly among the youth. Therefore, today we are in a crucial need of understanding the differentiated and oftentimes contrasting notions of Islam and Muslim identity as promoted by various Internet muftis and preachers. Second, particularly in the Arab world, these contrasting notions of Islam and Muslim identity are not necessarily produced and disseminated on the Internet; they increasingly find their way to what I describe as "neglected media," capitalizing on the notion of Reichmuth and Werning (2006), i.e. various small media outlets traditionally neglected by the academia yet having massive popularity among the youth, such as video clips, video games, video blogs, etc. In this thesis I argue, that particularly video games present a new radical information transferal for the Islamic message in the Arab world

and as such constitute a new research agenda both in the field of information science and communication studies as well as in Islamic and Arab studies.

Before outlining the general structure and organization of this thesis, I must briefly describe the "new media revolution" which erupted in the Arab world after 1990 (Khamis & Šisler 2010). This revolution was inspired by a number of factors and their accompanying shifts in the media landscape. First, the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf war that followed it in 1991 were accompanied by the availability of CNN's news coverage of the war throughout the Arab region for free for the first time. This phenomenon had multiple implications on the media scene in the region, since it inspired many Arab countries to revolutionize their own television coverage through allowing privatized satellite television channels as well as by professionalizing their own patterns of television coverage along the lines of western television journalism (El-Nawawy & Iskander 2002).

Second, in the 1990s Internet penetration started to spread throughout the Arab world. Although the region generally suffered from "being on the low end of the digital divide" (Abdulla 2007, p. 35), facing many challenges, including a lack of human and economic IT resources, funds for IT research and development, and solid telecommunications infrastructure, this situation is rapidly changing, since many Arab countries are currently striving hard to increase Internet penetration rates (Khamis & Šisler 2010). The penetration rates vary greatly in different Arab states, yet the region as a whole has witnessed an unprecedented rise in Internet penetration levels over the last few years (Abdulla 2007, p. 45; Warf & Vincent 2007).

According to recent estimations in June 2010 (Internet World Stats 2010), the world average Internet penetration is 28.7 %. Several Arab countries substantially exceed this figure, for example: Bahrain (88.0 %), the United Arab Emirates (75.9 %), Qatar (51.8 %), Saudi Arabia (38.1 %), Kuwait (39.4 %), Tunisia (34.0 %), and Morocco (33.0 %), whereas the rest of the Arab world falls slightly below it, like Jordan (27.2 %), Lebanon (24.2 %), Egypt (21.2 %), and Syria (17.7 %). Only in a few Arab countries the Internet penetration remains far below the international average, such as Libya (5.5 %), Yemen (1.8 %) and Iraq (1.1 %).[4]

Internet use is increasingly more prevalent among younger age groups within the Arab world, especially the 20 to 30 year old age group (Abdulla 2007, p. 50). There is a shortage in reliable data on the income levels and educational backgrounds of Internet users in the Arab world, but it is safe to say that Internet use is highest among urban, middle and upper class groups, as suggested in studies covering Morocco (Baune 2005), Kuwait (Wheeler 2005), Egypt (Abdulla 2007), United Arab Emirates (Sokol & Sisler 2010), and Saudi Arabia (Sait et al. 2007). Similar to western societies, the Internet usage is a way of life for young, educated Arabs (Khalid 2007). In the Arab world, the Internet is used for many reasons besides having access to news and gaining information. Instrumental sites such as search engines, social contacts through e-mail, blogs, and Facebook, as well as the discussion of taboo topics are just some of the uses; along with entertainment, sports, and search for moral guidance and religious advice

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[4] InternetWorld Stats use demographic numbers based on data from the US Census Bureau and Internet usage numbers based on data published by Nielsen Online, ITU, and other sources. For more information see: *InternetWorld Stats*. 2010. [online]. Nov 17, 2010, [cit. 2010-11-24]. Available online: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/>.

through religious websites (El-Nawawy & Khamis 2009; Bunt 2009; Hofheinz 2007; Abdulla 2007; Sokol & Sisler 2010; Khamis & Šisler 2010).

The emergence and rapid proliferation of the Internet in the Arab world raised various expectations about its impact on traditional Arab society. On the one hand, several authors argue that the Internet can possibly contribute to the empowerment of traditionally marginalized actors, especially in the social, political and religious domain. For example, Bunt (2000) and Poole (2002, p. 54) suggest that the openness of the Internet allows disenfranchised and marginalized groups to circumvent mainstream media and to subvert hegemonic discourses along the lines of gender, sexuality, and age (see also Khamis & Šisler 2010). On the other hand, some authors, like Castells (1996, p. 363), argue that the effect of the spread of Internet technologies is likely to be "the reinforcement of the culturally dominant social networks, as well as the increase of their cosmopolitanism and globalization." By the same token, Anderson (2008) discusses how the excitement over the revolutionary potential of new media and information technologies in the Middle East focused on them as alternatives. As such, he continues, new technologies and alternative channels suggested a transformation of the public sphere, by empowering new voices and new people. Yet, as Anderson demonstrates, time and experience have outrun this paradigm and many new actors turned out to have roots in old establishments. Therefore, he argues that alternative models are insufficient "because they isolate actors as individuals from the larger story of how micro-processes of networked communication are working through today's macro-processes of globalization" (p. 1). Instead he suggests thinking of new information and communication technologies in the Arab world as a complex of "informational and technological mobility, of shifting reflexivities that intensify and remix cultural and

other practices, and of highly unstable assemblages and contingent effects" (ibid.; see also Sokol & Sisler 2010). It is precisely the complex interplay between technology, society, and culture that remixes and reinforces existing practices of social interaction in virtual environments; an issue I analyze in this thesis, particularly regarding the construction of religious interpretive authority and Muslim identity.

The Chapter 2 of this thesis discusses the production of Islamic knowledge on the Internet, using case studies of websites providing normative content for Muslim minorities in Europe. With an increasing number of Muslims approaching religious scholars and their legal advices on the Internet, a new paradigm has arguably emerged in the construction of Islamic knowledge. The religious scholars issue their advice mostly in the form of a fatwa, i.e. an answer to a real or hypothetical inquiry reflecting a legal conviction of an individual scholar, based mainly on older rulings and/or his own interpretation of the religious texts. As such a fatwa is not legally binding, but the individual petitioner is advised to follow it. The persuasive power of the respective fatwa is thus based mainly on the authority of the scholar (mufti) who issued it. There are thousands of Internet sites on which committees of major Islamic scholars – or even just enthusiastic individuals – issue legal opinions that range from questions of personal behavior to theoretical political dilemmas. The Internet has emerged as a transnational sphere of blogs and chat rooms in which these opinions and their respective interpretive methods are broadly discussed.

Therefore, in this chapter, I attempt to transcend this media-centric logic by situating the dispensation of religious opinions in cyberspace into the particular social framework; i.e. that of Muslim minorities living in Europe. From preliminary case studies of

Middle Eastern and Western European web spheres it seems that some processes often ascribed to the Internet – like the individualization and privatization of religious practices and the participation in decision-making – have their roots mainly in other factors. In such cases the Internet represents more of a catalyst or vehicle of transmission. On the other hand some processes are seemingly entrenched in the features of the medium itself. The anonymity of cyber environments allows for a greater willingness among petitioners to raise intimate questions, while the transnational character of the Internet contributes to the notion of global Islamic identity. The Internet also seems to promote, at least in some specific social settings, the greater participation of women in public sphere. The Chapter 2 of this thesis focuses particularly on Sunni websites catering for Muslims in Europe and explores their fatwas and other forms of counseling addressing the specific issues arising from living as a minority in a non-Muslim majority setting. It stems from a compound research, during which more than 500 fatwas, among other materials, have been downloaded, archived and analyzed between 2005 and 2010. Essentially, in the Chapter 2 I argue that the underlying logic behind the Islamic cyber counseling emphasizes the role of the Self, the privatization of faith, and the increasing insistence on religion as a system of values and ethics. I also demonstrate that the popularity of Internet preachers and muftis converges with the broader transformation of contemporary religiosity, which similarly emphasizes the role of the individual. Such transformation promotes a ready-made and easily-accessible set of norms and values that might order daily lives and define a practical and visible identity. Nevertheless, I also suggest that the Internet has in the long term reinforced culturally dominant social networks and that while fueling individualization and privatization of faith, it simultaneously asserts conformity and compliance with established religious authorities.

Most academic research of ICT, the Internet, and Islam is based upon written source materials, whereas non-written media remain profoundly under studied, in spite of their social and political impact. These media can include, but are not limited to, video clips, video games, audio sermons, and others. In the Arab world these forms of media are arguably more consumed and more pervasive than other traditional media, given the importance of oral traditions, and literacy rates (Amin & Gher 2000). In recent years a new cottage industry concerned with the production of Arab and Islamic video games has emerged, where game designers are attempting to address alleged misrepresentations of Arabs and Muslims in European and American games. Their attempts to transcend these misrepresentations actively contribute to the shaping of Muslim identities among Arab youth, and should be critically studied.

Therefore, the Chapter 3 of this thesis analyses the construction of Muslim identity in such neglected digital media, particularly in video games and video clips produced in the Arab and Muslim world. By doing so, this chapter presents both the ways in which Muslims and Arabs are represented, and represent themselves, in the above-mentioned media. It utilizes the theoretical framework of so-called "neglected media," and explores this media type's potential in shaping of Muslim identities. First, I define neglected media and set their production and consumption into broader political, cultural, and linguistical context of the Arab and Muslim world. Based on content analysis of more than fifty games and interviews with major game producers, I argue that the developing Arab and Muslim video game industry plays a significant role in the reproduction of Islamic culture and could therefore be perceived as one of the most cutting-edge conveyors of contemporary Islam. At the same time, I analyze how various genres of

European and American video games have constructed the representation of Arabs and Muslims. Within these games, I argue, the diverse ethnic and religious identities of the Muslim world have been flattened out and reconstructed into a series of social typologies operating within a broader framework of terrorism and hostility. Moreover, in this chapter I will also consider the significance of Western attempts to transcend simplified patterns of representation that have dominated the video game industry by offering what is known as "serious" games. Finally, I analyze video games and video clips with an Islamic emphasis and the various levels at which they convey ethical and moral values. Given their pervasiveness, especially among Middle Eastern youth, we are in crucial need today of critical understanding of the different ways these media articulate Islam and communicate it to consumers. Therefore, I discuss the appropriation of games by various private Islamic companies, operating in the broader religious and cultural context of the Islamic revival and piety movement, for educational purposes. On a more general level, this chapter aims to lay down a theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing video games from the perspective of information science and communication studies.

Overall, my research objectives aim to present a complex analysis of the role the Internet and information and communication technologies play in the production of transnational Islamic knowledge and in shaping Muslim identities in a variety of social settings. This thesis is based on fieldwork, conducted in Muslim communities in the Arab world and Western Europe, and fundamental research of the relationship between Internet and ICT usage and the attempts of various Muslim authorities to establish themselves as interpretive authorities in global Islamic discourse. This thesis also studies various forms of non-traditional media, heretofore neglected by the academy,

with a profound importance and cultural impact in contemporary society, especially among the youth, mainly Islamic video clips and video games. It aims to enhance our understanding of how these forms of media present and subsequently construct Muslim identity. On a more general level, this dissertation deals with the production of knowledge and construction of identity in the increasingly networked and interconnected communities; the emerging potential of new digital media for dissemination of moral and religious values; and the ways public authorities operate within the religion-technology interaction.

2 The Internet and the Production of Islamic Knowledge

An increasing number of Muslims living in Islamic countries and abroad are at the present time approaching scholars and counselors via the Internet. Oftentimes they are seeking answers to pressing topical social questions; namely how to behave in compliance with the religious laws in the modern world. Today we witness an unprecedented proliferation of the Internet websites and satellite television channels with an Islamic emphasis in the Arab and Muslim world. The Internet and information and communication technology create new public sphere(s) where different, and oftentimes conflicting, concepts of Muslim identity are negotiated. By doing so, the Internet and satellite TV have introduced substantial innovation in both production and consumption of Islamic knowledge (Mariani 2006, p. 131). The development of new infrastructures, skills and communication patterns has resulted in the emergence of "new media ecology," where established traditional Muslim authorities compete for audiences with charismatic satellite preachers and Internet-based muftis (Anderson 2003, p. 45).

The development of this new media ecology is particularly relevant to European Muslim communities, where experiences of cultural displacement and negotiations on hybridity and authenticity are at the heart of contemporary life (Metcalf 1996, p. 22). There are hundreds of thousands of sites providing specific "Islamic" content for Muslim minorities, ranging from traditional outlets, i.e. fatwas, sermons, and religious treaties; through audio lectures, podcasting, and videos on You Tube; to social

networking sites, educational video games, and the vibrant blogosphere. These all exemplify what Bunt (2003) calls "cyber Islamic environments" and constitute a space where contemporary Islam is articulated.

This chapter aims to transcend the media-centric logic and to analyze the impact of new media in the light of the above-mentioned interdependency and hybridization within broader social, cultural and political context of Muslim minorities, namely those living in Western Europe.[5] It aims to analyze one particular segment of such cyber Islamic environments, i.e. websites issuing fatwas and providing other forms of counseling addressing the specific issues arising from living as a minority in a non-Muslim majority setting. More specifically, this chapter focuses on Sunni[6] websites catering to European Muslim minorities and explores their fatwas addressing the conflicting areas between Islamic law and European legal systems. Fatwa is a traditional institution in Islamic law and presents an answer to a real or hypothetical inquiry, oftentimes related to the interpretation of religious texts in the light of contemporary conditions. It is addressed from a petitioner (*mustaftī*) to a religious and legal authority (*muftī*). Essentially, fatwa is not legally binding, unless sanctioned by the State, and its

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[5] Some of the material presented in this chapter appeared in ŠISLER, Vít. 2009. European courts authority contested? The Case of Marriage and Divorce Fatwas On-line. *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology*. 2009, vol.3, no.1, s. 51-78. Available online: <http://www.digitalislam.eu/article.do?articleId=2350>. ISSN 1802-5951; and ŠISLER, Vít. 2007. The Internet and the construction of Islamic knowledge in Europe. *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology*. 2007, vol.1, no.2, s. 205-218. Available online: <http://www.digitalislam.eu/article.do?articleId=1422>. ISSN 1802-5951.

[6] This chapter discusses exclusively the opinions and fatwas of authorities broadly associated with Sunni Islam. These opinions can vary significantly from the theoretical approaches taken by Shi'a and other Muslim groups.

persuasive power is therefore based primarily on the authority of the *muftī* who issued it. Due to the general non-existence of official Islamic authorities in the Western Europe, fatwas became the primary mechanism in dealing with normative issues (Caeiro 2003b, p. 3).

After providing a brief introduction into the broader context of Muslim minorities in Europe and the fundamentals of Islamic law, this chapter presents different ways, in which Sunni fatwa-issuing websites deal with the authority of the State. These range from complete denial of man-made law to its pragmatic acceptance in accordance with various interpretations of the Qurʿān and the *hadīth*. This chapter argues that the Internet and information and communication technologies constitute an increasingly important public sphere, in which the various models of coexistence between Islamic law and European legal systems are negotiated and Muslim identities are shaped. Moreover, it demonstrates how these emerging concepts could subsequently be incorporated into existing European legal framework through the institutions of contractual freedom and arbitration tribunals. By doing so, the Muslim authorities associated with the counseling websites and the *sharīʿa* councils force European societies to reflect publicly upon their normative structures while simultaneously reinforcing their own authority within local Muslim communities.

Furthermore, this chapter explores the underlying rationale behind the phenomenon of the fatwa-issuing websites, which emphasize the role of the individual and promote voluntarily adherence to Islamic law. Essentially, I argue that the Islamic cyber counseling, which is driven by individual petitions and inquiries, emphasizes the privatization of faith and the increasing insistence on religion as a system of values and

ethics. This chapter also demonstrates that the popularity of Internet preachers and muftis converges with the broader transformation of contemporary religiosity, which similarly emphasizes the role of the individual. Such transformation promotes a ready-made and easily-accessible set of norms and values that might order daily lives and define a practical and visible identity (Roy 2004, p. 31). The easily-accessible and searchable databases of fatwas provide exactly such pre-set knowledge and codes of behavior, which the individual can choose from. I thereafter link this rationale behind the fatwa-issuing websites to the shifting paradigm within contemporary Islamic movements, capitalizing on Roy's (2004) concepts of "post-Islamism" and "neo-fundamentalism". Finally, on a more general level, this chapter aims to provide case studies enhancing our understanding of how the Internet shapes existing public spheres and how public authorities operate within the religion-technology interaction.

2.1 Muslim Minorities in Europe

In the second half of the 20th century the traditional constituencies of Islam have been profoundly reshaped by immigration to the Western Europe. For the first time, a vast number of Muslims have deliberately left states which apply, at least in theory, Islamic principles in their legislation and moved to non-Islamic countries. Since classical Islamic jurisprudence does not provide a theoretical framework for such conditions (Lewis 1994, p. 16) – and it is questionable what relevance this would have for contemporary European Muslims – the key issues of relationship between Islam and the State are being defined and negotiated on an everyday basis by the agency of particular social actors. Today, these negotiations are increasingly shaped by media and new information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet.

The term "Muslim minorities" does not refer to a homogeneous entity in the European context, nor can it be easily outlined and utilized in a discourse regarding religious and legal practices. Muslims in Europe vary greatly in their nationality, ethnicity, and beliefs; and may consist of converts, immigrants, as well as genuine minorities settled on the continent for centuries. In Western Europe, the Muslim presence is mostly related to immigration that began after the Second World War. As Fetzer and Soper (2005, p. 2) describe it, Muslims were part of a broader wave that brought workers from the former colonies and elsewhere to the industrialized states of the West that were trying to rebuild in the war's aftermath. Private employers and governments across Western Europe actively recruited foreign workers to provide the labor necessary to continue economic expansion. In the face of the economic recession of the early 1970s European states gradually closed their borders to low-skilled workers but allowed for the possibility of family reunification and political asylum (ibid.). Thus, immigrants, who were supposed to stay in Europe temporarily and return to their home countries afterwards, opted instead to bring their families to the continent and accepted Europe as their new homeland. This was partly due to their fear that they would be prevented from re-entering Europe, were they to have left at that time. They were also afraid of the worsening economic situation in their home countries.

The transition from the status of *gastarbeiters* to residents brought about a fundamental shift in the self-perception of the Muslim minorities and the expectations they have associated with the State. The religious beliefs and practices of the immigrant workers, who were mostly men, were confined to the private sphere outlined by sub-urban dormitories and provisionary prayer rooms. After the reunion of families and setting up of normal life, the question of accommodation of broader religious needs appeared. This

included various issues ranging from Islamic education in public schools, through the permissibility of ritual slaughter, on to the role of Islamic law in family matters. The fundamental matter negotiated in practice by these issues was the relationship between Islam and the State, in many cases re-formulating the Church-State relationship in general (Ferrari 2000, p. 8). Albeit to a various degree in particular states and regions, Islam became an inseparable part of the Western European landscape.

In Eastern Europe, however, it never ceased to be such; although this fact has been largely obscured by the persistent reality of the Cold War. It was not until the collapse of the communist empire that Europe, in the words of Roy (2004, p. 18), "re-discovered" that there are European Muslim countries (Albania, Bosnia and, tomorrow, Kosovo) as well as genuine European Muslim minorities (Pomaks in Bulgaria, Tatars in Poland and Belarus). Most of the Balkan Muslims have been settled in the region for centuries, ethnically being mainly of Slavic, Turkish, Alban and Roma origin, and became minorities in *stricto sensu* after the withdrawal and later dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, i.e. during the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Yet, in many regions, particularly under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Islam never ceased to play its public role and Islamic law (of the *hanafī* rite) has been applied by the State (Evstatiev 2006, p. 18). Although the communist regimes suppressed most religious manifestations in the public sphere, after their fall the issues of religious identity and relationship between Islam and the State have resurfaced with renewed intensity (Nielsen 1992, p. 4).

Similarly, in many Western European countries, particularly in the UK, the Muslim presence dates centuries back. As Ali *et al.* (2009, p. 8) note, Muslims have established

a long standing relation with the United Kingdom which is traceable to the 17th century, mainly in diplomatic, commercial and scholarly missions. As a result of the colonial encounter with British Muslim colonies, in 1842 about 3000 Muslim seamen known as "lascars" were said to be the early Muslim settlers in the United Kingdom. They were most probably staffers of the East India Company from Yemen, Gujarat, Assam and Bengal who use to visit the United Kingdom occasionally but gradually settled and even married in port towns and cities like Cardiff, Liverpool, Glasgow and London. Similarly, from 1920s to 1970 there was another influx of Muslims from mostly Asia migrated to the UK to complement to labor shortage in many industrial cities like the Midlands, London, Lancashire, and Yorkshire. Therefore, Ali *et al.* (2009, p. 9) argue, that hundreds of years back Muslims have been living in the UK and as observed from their practices in their early contact, "they exhibited some resistance to the culture of their host community in maintaining their religious rituals like funerals, naming ceremonies, marriages, form of worship, food, etc." This, in turn, showed "their preparedness to preserve their identity which was threatened as a result of disconnectedness from their homelands and the fear of cultural assimilation" (ibid.). Similarly, the question of cultural identity constitutes the key and underlying issue of the Islamic websites and councils for Muslim minorities in Europe.

Existing research on the production of Islamic knowledge in Europe (Nielsen 1992; Metcalf 1996; Bruinessen 2003; Caeiro 2004; Roy 2004; Peter 2006) indicates a few key factors that have to be taken into account when analyzing the fatwa-issuing websites. First, the very existence of a Muslim minority in a non-Muslim society implies that there are no Muslim authorities appointed by the State (although this fact is

about to change)[7] and that *sharī'a* is not officially recognized as a source of law. The former strengthens the fragmentation of religious authority, individualization and privatization of Islam (Peter 2006), whereas the latter transforms the observance of Islamic rules into a matter of individual choice. Without the enforceable legal and social framework of the majority Muslim society, the role of personal and voluntarily adherence becomes more important in following Islamic law. Correspondingly – particularly in Western Europe – where Muslim minorities come from diverse backgrounds and lack common cultural or linguistical heritage, the Muslim identity has to be reinvented and recast in terms of codes of comportment, values and beliefs. As Roy (2004, p. 23) argues, this identity, self-evident so long as it belonged to an inherited cultural legacy, has to express itself explicitly in a non-Muslim or Western context.

In this respect, Ali *et al.* (2009, p. 7) argue that among Muslim minorities in Europe religious identity appears to create formidable networks of multiple identities with members willing to abandon their ethnicity for religious solidarity. This is particularly observed in relation to the second generation of Muslims in the United Kingdom who prefer to be addressed as British Muslims as opposed to say Arabs, Pakistanis, etc. (Leweling 2005).

Essentially, the underlying logic behind the development of European Muslim minorities emphasizes the role of the Self, the privatization of faith, and the increasing

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[7] Several member states of the European Union, for example France and the United Kingdom, have recently started instructonal and educational programs aimed at training local Muslim imams, versed in traditional Islamic religious disciplines and familiar with local laws and regulations. See for example: *Muslim College, London.* [online]. [cit. 2010-11-24]. Available online: <http://www.muslimcollege.ac.uk >.

insistence on religion as a system of values and ethics. This by no means implies that the emerging "European Islam" may be perceived in the light of the 16th century Protestant Reformation, but – more likely – that its multi-faceted representations are adapting to contemporary Western forms of religiosity (Roy 2004, p. 5). As such these representations could no longer be analyzed within the discursive of foreign or immigrant cultures but, more precisely, in the contexts of globalization, deterritorialization and transnationalism. It is precisely the imaginary space of transnational *umma* (Muslim community), enhanced by the Internet and communication technologies, where the traditional Islamic law regains its significance and relevance to the daily life through constant discussions, inquiries and admonitions.

2.2 Islamic Law and European Legal Systems

The Egyptian-born yet globally influential Muslim scholar Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī (2005, p. 7) stated that it is the adherence to Islamic law through which Muslim minorities living in non-Muslim societies reaffirm their identity. This observation relates closely to the nature of Islam and Islamic law. As Schacht (1964) argues, Islam is to a large extent a religion of *orthopraxy* and as such provides believers with a set of relatively concrete norms governing all aspects of human existence. Religious law (*sharīʿa*) has a central position in Islam and covers issues of legal, ritual and ethical nature, which are not necessarily regulated by law in the European sense of the word. *Sharīʿa* in theory expresses the Law of God as directly revealed in the Qurʾān and manifested by the deeds and sayings of the prophet Muhammad and his companions, as recorded in the *hadīth*. As such *sharīʿa* is in principle eternal and unchangeable. Yet we have to distinguish between *sharīʿa* as a concept and as the concrete rules of law, determined by

particular methodologies and interpretations of the sacred texts. Thus the normative content of *sharī'a* necessarily evolves and undergoes changes in order to comply with new social and economic realities. This is done through constant re-interpretation and social re-integration of the Quranic verses and the *hadīth* by jurisprudence (Khalidi 1992, p. 28). Islamic law represents an extreme case of a "jurists' law," as it was created and further developed by private specialists (Schacht 1964, p. 209). Yet, instead of disengaging the legally relevant elements of each case and subsuming it under general rules, Muslim jurists concentrated on establishing graded series of cases (Schacht 1964, p. 205). This casuistical method in particular is one of the most striking features of traditional Islamic law and reinforces the position of fatwas and *muftīs*.

At the same time, Islamic law remains to a large degree a religious ideal which has never been applied in its full extent (Schacht 1964; Mozaffari 1987; Roy 2004). Existing legislation in Muslim countries is typically based on a combination of *sharī'a*, applied mostly in family matters, and foreign legal systems; although the former is often referred to as the main source of legislation in the constitution. As such, *sharī'a* constitutes more a set of values and a normative framework than a positive law framework in the European sense (Roy 2004, p. 197).

Yet, as El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009, p. 91) put it, although the *sharī'a* had been largely abandoned in most practical applications, following the colonial epoch at the conception of the modern nation state, this did not eradicate its cultural relevance and ethical significance for the umma, since "The shari'ah had always meant more than the legal foundations of the community or a normative code instituted by jurists. It had always constituted the ethico-legal matrix that pervaded the life of the community and

imbued it with its sense for what constituted legitimacy and what did not" (Abul-Fadl 1990, p. 36; quoted in El-Nawawy & Khamis 2009, p. 91).

This asymmetry has to be kept in mind when exploring the conflicting areas between Islamic law and European legal systems. We have, on the one hand, a multi-faceted corpus of constantly negotiated and re-interpreted norms and positive, codified rules of law sanctioned by the State on the other. It is particularly due to this asymmetrical nature of both systems that the existing research on the relationship between Islam and European law is mostly concerned with the Islamic norms and their recognition and application by European courts (Potz & Wieshaider 2004; Fetzer & Soper 2005; Rohe 2007). The opposite, i.e. the acceptance of particular European provisions by Islamic law, has been far less discussed; and if so, then mainly by Muslim scholars (Ibn Baz & Uthaymeen 1998; Qaradāwī 2005).

Another fundamental feature of Islamic law, which has to be taken into account, is its adherence to *the principle of the personality of law*. Essentially, according to this principle, the legal status of an individual is governed by his or her religious affiliation: particularly in issues pertaining to matrimonial law and inheritance law. This principle derives from the *dhimmī* law, i.e. the traditional institution of Islamic law regulating the position of non-Muslims living in Islamic territory; and from the concept of *millets*, which were the ethno-religious communities recognized by the Ottoman Empire (Evstatiev 2006). These communities have been granted substantial autonomy in governing their internal affairs as well as in matrimonial and family law issues; a state which actually remains in existence in many Ottoman Empire successor countries in the Middle East still today (An-Na'im 2002). Given the persistence of *sharī'a* principles in

family matters, most conflicts between Islamic law and European legal systems revolve around these issues (Rohe 2007, p. 23).

As Ali *et al.* (2009, p. 12) argue, unlike public law, Islamic personal law does not necessarily require the state to function. The practices covered by it have all along been practices among the Muslim diasporic communities. European legal systems may provide for these practices at a general level but this does not exclude the application of Islamic injunctions on them. Thus while the Muslims apply the religio-legal dictates on one hand, they also comply with European secular laws on the other hand. This has made the Muslim diaspora subject to dual laws, a situation described in the UK as *Angrezi Shariat* (Yilmaz 2004).

Nevertheless, and contrary to the popular notion, *sharī'a* is already officially applied in Europe today. It is explicitly recognized in several member states of the European Union, namely in Greece and Spain, as a formal way of contracting a marriage.[8] It is applicable in family matters in most other European states within the framework of private international law, when the chosen *lex causae* is that of a foreign state applying *sharī'a* (Rohe 2007). Finally, in matters pertaining to personal law and law of contract, it is incorporated into European legal systems through the institutions of mediation and arbitration. Essentially, in this case the disputing parties present their dispute to a Muslim arbiter and stipulate in a civil law contract that they will follow his decision. The arbiter thereafter judges the case according to *sharī'a*; yet, his decision is

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[8] Spain recognized the Islamic formal way of contracting a marriage as an option in its Personal Status Law in 1992. In order to ensure necessary legal protections there are compulsory provisions for the registration of these marriages (Rohe 2007, p. 20).

enforceable through civil law and courts. In the United Kingdom for example the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal discussed below operates as an institution of this kind. Therefore, beyond exploring the fatwa-issuing websites based on a voluntarily adherence to Islamic law, this chapter discusses also the arbitration tribunals and *sharī'a* councils and the various ways in which they utilize the Internet in order to connect with their local communities and establish themselves as a source of authority.

2.3   Marriage and Divorce in Islamic Law

Marriage in Islam (*nikāh*) is a civil law contract concluded between the bridegroom and the legal guardian (*walī*) of the bride.[9] The bridegroom undertakes to pay the nuptial gift (*sadāq*, *mahr*) to the wife herself. The contract must be concluded in the presence of free witnesses, two men or one man and two women; this has the double aim of providing proof of marriage and disproving unchastity. This contract is the only legally relevant act in concluding marriage (Schacht 1964, p. 161). The principle differences between Islamic law and most of European legal systems are that (1) in Islam marriage presents a civil contract and as such does not need to be approved by the State nor by any religious authority in order to be valid (although most Muslim states require its registration); (2) that the impediments to marriage, i.e. the taxative enumeration of the "non-marriageable persons" vary in both systems; and (3) although a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman, the opposite is forbidden in Islam.

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[9] The *walī* is the nearest male relative, in the order of succession, followed by the manumitter and his succession, and failing those, the judge (*qādī*).

Divorce in Islamic law can take many forms, the most common cases being (1) the repudiation (*talāq*) of the wife by the husband; (2) the dissolution of the marriage by agreement (*mubāra'a*) with mutual waiving of any financial obligations; (3) the *tafrīk*, which is the dissolution of marriage pronounced by a judge (*qādī*) of his own initiative or at the instance of one of the spouses; and finally (4) the *khul'*, by which the wife redeems herself from a marriage for a consideration (Schacht 1964, pp. 164 – 165).[10] With regard to European legal systems, it should be noted that the marriage becomes invalid through apostasy from Islam of one of the spouses (Schacht 1964, p. 165). The legal position of the wife is, in theory, obviously less favorable than that of the husband, since the repudiation of the wife does not need to be approved by any authority and takes immediate legal effect; while any dissolution of marriage initiated by the wife requires such approval.[11] Especially when considered within the European context, the permissibility of repudiation (*talāq*) and its legal effects are potentially the most contested issues. These topics also constitute a substantial portion of the inquiries addressed to the Internet muftis.

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[10] The permissibility of *khul'*, or its particular features, has been disputed by some Islamic schools of law (for details see An-Na'im 2002).

[11] In fact, the wife's situation could be, and often is, considerably improved by specific stipulations made in the marriage contract. These include, for example, conditional repudiation which is pronounced by the husband immediately after the conclusion of the marriage and can be accepted by the wife anytime later on.

2.4 Muftis and their Fatwas

As I have mentioned above, *fatwa* (pl. *fatāwā*)[12] is an answer to a real or hypothetical inquiry and reflects a legal conviction of an individual scholar, based mainly on older rulings and/or his own interpretation of the religious texts. As such it is not legally binding, but the individual petitioner is advised to follow it. The persuasive power of the respective fatwa is thus based mainly on the authority of the scholar (*muftī*) who issued it.

In the past, traditional constituencies of Islamic authorities competent for such inquiries were delimited by geographical and social factors that were much harder to contravene than they are today. Not only can every Muslim with access to the Internet send his or her inquiries to even the most geographically remote mufti, but with the aid of online legal sources even individuals who lack a long-lasting and demanding official education can establish counseling sites for their peers if their answers are valid and convincing enough.

In Western Europe, in the absence of institutionalized Islamic authorities, the muftis and their fatwas play a key role in the construction of Islamic knowledge. As Caeiro (2003b, p. 2) has noted, "in Europe the fatwa is the only useful mechanism in dealing with normative issues." It would be naïve to presume that all fatwas issued by various authorities play a determining role in social behavior. Nevertheless, they constitute an Islamic discourse which Muslims living in Diaspora use to legitimize behaviors that

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[12] For the purposes of this thesis I will use the common English plural, i.e. "fatwas."

have already been developed in new social contexts (Caeiro 2003b, p. 2; Mandaville 2003b, p. 130).

A variety of Islamic websites disseminate or issue fatwas, usually offering a question form or petition, in which the petitioner can fill in his or her inquiry, and the mufti or body of muftis associated with the particular site can answer it, posting the final fatwa on-line. Some sites even offer a live fatwa session with well-known scholars (e.g. IslamOnline.net). Thus the process of dispensing the fatwa and the communication with the *mustaftī* takes place solely in the cyberspace. The inquiries range from everyday issues to topical questions of Muslims living in non-Muslim society. The following fatwa dealing with the status of videogames and their productions in Islamic law was taken from Cairo based website IslamOnline.net

> Question: Dear scholars, As-Salaam 'Alaykum. I have a question on Computer Games. Is it *Halal* or *Haram* to play computer games? Is it *Halal* or *Haram* to make and sell them? If it can fall into both, can you please clarify? Any help is very much appreciated. Jazakum Allah khayran.

> Answer (excerpt): It is not *Haram* to play computer games as long as none of the material contains indecency, pornography or anything against Islamic teachings and playing them does not keep one from doing an obligation. The same conditions apply to making and selling such games. However, Muslim parents should be on alert regarding the content of these games and

pay much attention to the choice of the beneficial games that do not go against the Islamic teachings before they bring them to their children.[13]

The next fatwa tackles a situation of a Muslim fighting for his non-Muslim country and has been retrieved from American based website IslamiCity.com

Question: If a Muslim serves in the army of his non-Muslim country, and a war breaks out between his country and a Muslim state, will he be considered a martyr if he fights and dies for his country?

Answer (excerpt): A Muslim only believes in Islam and owes all his allegiance to the community which implements Islam as a faith and a code of living. This does not mean that a Muslim who belongs to a minority in a country where the majority are non-Muslims may act in a way which is detrimental to his country. If his minority Muslim community enjoys the freedom to practice its faith and the protection of the law against persecution, then he has no reason to act against the authority in his country. […] A Muslim may not fight another Muslim except in one case. If two Muslim groups or communities fight against each other, we are required to try to establish peace between them. If one of them launches aggression against the other, we all must try to help the victim of aggression against the aggressors until the aggression stops when all Muslims are required to re-

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[13] *IslamOnline*. [online]. [cit. 2006-12-1]. Available online:

<http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503545740>.

establish peace between them. If a war breaks out, like many of the wars we have seen in this century, both combatants may be in the wrong. In such a war, it is more appropriate for Muslim soldiers to refrain from fighting. [14]

Today, there are thousands of Islamic websites operating in various European languages. Of these, only a few offer on-line *iftā* – or the dispensing of legal opinions. Some are maintained by semi-official bodies of muftis like IslamOnline.net, closely connected with the European Council for Fatwa and Research, some of them are operated by individual muftis seeking a global audience, like AskIman.com, a website of a South-African mufti Ibrahim Desai, and some are maintained by official fatwa issuing committees of Islamic countries, like Fatwa-online.com, which is connected with the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatawa of Saudi Arabia (Bunt 2003; Ameri & Abdulati 2000).

These sites regularly answer the questions of Muslims from non-Muslim countries, mainly Europe and the United States. As we have described above a new paradigm has therefore emerged in the construction of Islamic knowledge. With an ever-growing number of Muslims connecting to the Internet and submitting questions to even the most geographically remote mufti, today we are in a critical need of considering the role and impact, if any, of these Internet-based muftis and on-line fatwas on the production of the Islamic knowledge.

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[14] *IslamiCity*. [online]. [cit. 2006-12-1]. Available online: <http://www.islamicity.com/>.

2.5 The Role of the Internet

Roy (2004, p. x) argued that in the contemporary production of Islamic knowledge the Internet plays an overwhelmingly important role, "as exemplified in the texts, ideas and speeches that are circulating worldwide in an accessible form." This is particularly relevant to Muslim minorities in the West, where the Internet has become an important adjunct to traditional means of communication about Islam and is facilitating a new form of Islamic discourse (Bunt 2006, p. 13). Along the same lines, El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009, p. 117) argue that another important aspect to highlight in discussing the notion of the virtual umma is the strong impact of the Internet on Muslims living in non-Muslim societies, as well as the role played by these young Muslims to bring Islam to the Internet.

> Those Muslims can reestablish connections with their religion through the various services provided to them through Islamic websites. These services have made available to those migrant Muslims, who are living in transnational, non-Muslim communities, what previously circulated in narrow, face-to-face settings and, therefore, helped them to have a sense of religious communalism and collectivism that would allow them to reconstruct their identities as members of the Islamic faith (ibid).

The issue of identity construction closely relates to what Eickelman and Piscatori (2004) call "objectification of Islam," i.e. "the process by which basic questions come to the fore in the consciousness of large numbers of believers: 'What is my religion?' 'Why is it important in my life?' and 'How do my beliefs guide my conduct?'" (p. 38).

In Europe, this process also appears connected to larger processes of social change and intergenerational shift (Caeiro 2010). This shift from the first generation of Muslim immigrants to subsequent generations of European Muslim citizens can be broadly described as a shift from a "lived Islam" to a "constructed Islam" (Babès 2004) and it inevitably encompasses search for religious authority and "true" Islamic identity. Therefore, the various websites providing normative content for Muslim minorities discussed below should be approached as venues for "virtual rituals" of "identity making" through which immigrant or diasporic Muslims preserve or reconstruct their religious identities. These online platforms range from global Islamic websites, based in Muslim majority countries yet addressing Muslim communities from all over the world, to local authorities and councils focusing on geographically defined constituencies yet linking through the Internet to the transnational Muslim *umma*.

Several studies have been published concerning the role of the Internet on the production of Islamic knowledge, yet their results remain ambiguous and conflicting. Bunt (2000, 2003, 2010) has provided an extensive analysis of "cyber Islamic environments" in his three monographs. Anderson and Eickelman (2003) have discussed more broadly different forms of new media in the Muslim world. Allievi (2003) has analyzed the very specific role of information and communication technologies in the construction of Muslim identity and communities. Finally, Schmidt (2004) has explored how charismatic role traditionally granted by Sufi sheikh is negotiated in the social space that the Internet creates.

The construction of religious authority in Western Europe, with some regard paid to the Internet, was studied by Bruinessen (2003) and Caeiro (2003a, 2003b, 2004).

Nevertheless, these studies, originating mainly from Western academic circles, lack an Arab or Muslim perspective, like the examination of the potential of the Internet for *da'wa* (spreading the Islamic message) by Mostafa (2000) or the analysis of the Islamic discourse on three Muslim Internet discussion forums by El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009) .

For a long time the Internet was seen as an influential and subversive medium which inherently promotes democracy, direct participation and generally contests established and traditional authorities, especially in non-democratic environments. A major change in the organization of society was predicted to occur by some thinkers of the techno avant-garde scene (Leary 1994; Huitema 1995; Levy 2001). Especially after the fall of the communist authoritarian regimes in the Eastern Europe, the connection between this process and information and communication technologies has taken on a powerful, implicit veracity (Kalathil & Boas 2003, p. 1). As Mathews (quoted in Kalathil & Boas 2003, p. ix) has noted: "In the absence of thorough analysis unexamined assumptions about the Internet´s likely impact have become conventional wisdom."

These very same expectations are clearly evident in works critically analyzing the role of ICT in the Arab and Muslim world. "The Internet and globalization are acting like nutcrackers to open societies and empower Arab democrats with new tools" noted Friedman (2000).   Directly addressing the issue of on-line fatwas, an American Muslim intellectual Muqtedar Khan (quoted in Wax 1999) even stated that "the Internet has made everyone a mufti." According to other authors, the proliferation of the Internet has resulted in the emergence of minority opinions and contributed to the dissolution of traditional authorities (e.g. Anderson 2003; Bunt 2006; Mandaville

2003a, 2003b). While the first argument is undoubtedly true, the latter overstates the subversive influence of the Internet. As many suggested, the mere presence of dissent discourse online doesn't give evidence of undermining established political and religious structures, as we can clearly see in the case studies of Syria or Saudi Arabia (Fandy 1999; Teitelbaum 2002). Similarly, although Islamic websites have firmly entrenched themselves in the media ecology, there is no proof that the Internet itself is an antidote to authoritarianism and could radically reshape the foundations of the decision making process. The construction of Islamic knowledge in Europe is a complex matter with a lot of social, political and economic factors in play and can not be understood solely within a media-centric logic (Allievi 2003, p. 12). The following paragraphs describe three ways in which the Internet and mainly the fatwa-issuing sites have contributed to the development of Islamic knowledge within European Muslim communities. These processes, or interventions, will be analyzed within the broader context Islamic discursive development in the global sphere, the networking of Muslim communities in Europe, and the construction of interpretative authority in relation to Islamic law.

2.5.1 Reconstruction of Public Sphere

The Internet arguably constitutes a transnational public sphere in which all issued fatwas are searchable and can be – in fact they often are – discussed publicly in blogs and chatrooms. This can be perceived as a substantive difference to previous constituencies in which the fatwas of the scholars – although disseminated by mass media – were never publicly contested. Moreover, in the networked sphere of the Internet the various fatwa-issuing sites are borrowing, reprinting and commenting on

foreign fatwas in an approving or disapproving manner. For example, Caeiro (2004) has described a case concerning the permissibility of using a loan in order to solve one's housing situation which was issued in 1999 by the European Council for Fatwa and Research. This particular fatwa has radically reshaped the prohibition of *ribā'* (usury) – imposed by traditional interpretation of Islamic law – by the mean of *hāja* (need) in which the European Muslims potentially find themselves when trying to find housing. The fatwa was disseminated by IslamOnline.net and Ukim.org, and was quickly adopted or refused by other sites. Indeed it has triggered a global debate that has mostly taken place in cyberspace, and has clearly influenced subsequent fatwas, for example one issued later by Al-Azhar (Caeiro 2004, p. 374). Similar debates and fatwa-borrowings can be found in many other cases. The public nature of the process opens a larger space for criticism and allows laymen to construct the Islamic public sphere (Caeiro 2004, p. 370; see also Eickelman & Anderson 2003, p. ii).

The Internet highlights the myriad concepts, movements and sects of Islam, but it also highlights the differences between them. In particular, the younger Muslims living in Europe pay close attention to these differences. They search for an original or "true" Islam, which they can distinguish from the Islam of their parents. They often see the latter as being influenced by local customs of their parents' country of origin. In the global context, this has contributed to the "essentialism" and "homogenization" of the religion (Vertovec 2003, p. 318).

The last process connected to the trans-nationalism of the Internet is manifested by an increasing number of fatwas addressing the global problems of the imaginary Muslim community – e.g. Palestine, Iraq, Chechnya or Kashmir. The growing interest of the

petitioners in such issues indicates the emerging notion of a global Islamic identity (Nielsen 2003, p. 39; Mandaville 2003b, p. 128). The fatwa issuing sites have reiterated and reinforced patterns already observed in mass media – mainly in the pan-Arabic satellite televisions – but they have shifted the discourse from a journalistic to a legalistic and religious trope. Thus a virtual Muslim community (*umma*) is being re-created on the Internet.

2.5.2 Redefinition of Authority

The Internet has highlighted the marginalized groups and minority opinions in contemporary Islam, especially in the beginning, when established traditional authorities were not present. Some scholars have argued that there are a disproportionately high number of Internet sites which can be described as Salafi, i.e. having clear inclinations to the *salafīya* movement (Bunt 2006, p. 157). Moreover, until recently the Internet was providing an effective space for dissenting opinions that had limited or no access to other forms of mass media, like in the cases of Iranian scholar Hussein Ali Montazeri or Egyptian and Saudi Arabian opposition movements (Šisler 2006b, p. 2). In most cases the messages of the marginalized or dissenting groups have been presented as purely Islamic, with no reference to orthodox or majority opinion.

As we have shown above, a typical discursive covering the Internet, Islam and the Middle East has, from the beginning, been dominated by a conventional link between information technology and democratization (Kalathil & Boas 2003). As Anderson (2008) has noted, excitement over the revolutionary potential of new media in the Middle East focused on them as alternatives: suggesting transformation of a public

sphere and the dissolution of traditional authorities. However, as he argues, time and experience have outrun this paradigm

> Many new actors turned out to have roots in old establishments. Often it was the cadet generations of elites who brought the new technologies. Governments proved adept at deploying the underlying technologies to their own ends. […] Early experiments were absorbed into media conglomerates; by the millennium established religious figures had their sermons, lessons, and outreach on the Internet for the populations it drew and aggregated (Anderson 2008, p. 1).

Over time, the so-called traditional authorities have invaded cyberspace and struggled to regain the authority they have allegedly lost. For example, the Al-Azhar library is now online with a huge database of fatwas and other religious texts. Even in Iran clerics have been encouraged by the state to set up their own weblogs, and the religious militia is operating their own Islamic cybercafés with protected, i.e. filtered, content (Bunt 2006, p. 155).

Instead of undermining the traditional and established religious authorities, the Internet and ICT created new space in which traditionally educated muftis compete with new popular preachers over audiences. This phenomenon is poignantly demonstrated in Mariani's (2006) case study of the Internet presentations of two foremost Muslim media figures – Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, an Al-Azhar graduate and a traditionally defined *'ālim* (scholar), and Amr Khāled, holder of an accountancy degree and a newly established *dā'iya* (preacher). The Internet and ICT also provide for new usages and practices,

which could significantly reshape the production and consumption of knowledge. For example, Riexinger's (2008) case study of Turkish popular preacher, Harun Yahya, demonstrates how the combination of a neglected subject with the innovative use of new media can establish opinion leadership, particularly in a Muslim minority context. It is also the conditions of European Muslim minorities where, as Caeiro (2003a) and Vertovec (2003) have argued, ICT and the Internet tend to displace the interpretive authority from scholars towards selective personal interpretation, contributing to the so called processes of "individualization" and "privatization" of Islam.

These processes are again particularly evident among the younger generation of European Muslims, who search the Internet for different views and opinions, discuss them in both in online and off-line environments, and then select those most fitting to their own views. The same selective approach is often applied towards the sacred texts – the holy Qur'ān and Sunna. The reasons for this phenomenon are variegated, most frequently cited are the impact of secular education in Western societies and the disintegration of traditional social enforcement frameworks. Be this as it may, the vehicle and catalyst of this phenomenon is to a continuously increasing extent the Internet and the various media outlets it enables.

The last impact of the Internet on the construction of interpretative authority is manifested by the fact that more and more Muslims from Islamic countries are seeking answers via the Internet from the European-based muftis. The case of IslamOnline is again significant – in its database of fatwas we can find thousands of inquiries allegedly submitted from African or Middle Eastern countries, yet answered by European-based muftis. This constitutes a unique and in our modern history quite new situation – the

European muftis are, at least in some cases, becoming interpretative authority for the Muslim world (Caeiro 2004, p. 371).

2.5.3 Hybridization of Discourse

The third topic for analysis in this chapter is the particular discourse and rhetoric of issued fatwas. Above all, we can clearly recognize a shift to popular, sometimes even secular and scientific discourse in the reasoning (*obiter dictum*) of particular fatwas. Because the muftis are addressing a broad audience that has most often been raised in secular societies, they attempt to use a common language that refers to scientific and sociological arguments – sometimes even to European legal systems. This could be also perceived within the concept of *da'wa* – while the sites are often visited by non-Muslims searching information about Islam, the muftis are encouraged to present them the Islamic opinion not only as the law of God but also in a rational way (Mostafa 2000, p. 159).

Another characteristic of these fatwas is that the majority are using English. Although, for example, the European Council for Fatwa and Research dispenses its opinions in Arabic, they are disseminated mainly in English and French (Caeiro 2010). This is necessary for addressing a global audience but it has also some legal connotations. When a mufti works with an interpretation of the sacred texts, which are of course in Arabic, and replaces the original terms with English equivalents, his translations could result in semantic overlapping and blurring.

The third characteristic particular to the rhetoric of online fatwas can be found in the

anonymity of cyber Islamic environments, which manifests itself in vast number of inquiries concerning intimate and sexual issues

> Question (excerpt): Dear scholars, As-Salamu 'alaykum. I am a married woman. If my husband does not satisfy me in bed, is it permissible in Islam for me to masturbate and satisfy myself?

> Answer (excerpt): In Islam marriage is a partnership based on mutual rights and obligations. It is, therefore, important that both spouses try their best to be considerate and sensitive towards the needs and feelings of one another and do their best to satisfy each other within the bounds of Islam. Sexual fulfillment is an important part of the mutual obligations of husband and wife. […] If he cannot satisfy you through sexual intercourse, he is perfectly justified in satisfying you through other avenues; he could very well masturbate you; if he were to do this, he is working within the perfect limits of Islam; his doing it on you is different from you doing it on yourself. A person masturbating on himself/herself is not allowed in Islam except in dire necessity where one fears falling into adultery; marriage is intended in Islam to be a shield against that. […] If in spite of your best efforts to convince your husband, he still remains insensitive to your needs in this respect, you are justified in taking

whatever steps are necessary in terminating your marriage, if you are unable to tolerate it.[15]

The above-mentioned fatwa is an example of a question which would not be raised comfortably in a traditional constituency. It also creates a public space for women petitioners, allowing them to address even their most intimate topics within the framework of Islam and Islamic law. The active participation of women in the construction of Islamic knowledge is not common but the few exceptions have gained significant attention in the media (e.g. the Egyptian sexologist Heba Gamal Kotb).[16]

We have briefly described the three main groups of processes and changes in the construction of Islamic knowledge in Europe in which the Internet plays a significant role or at least contributes to them. These processes are related to trans-nationalism, discourse and to authority. In all of them there are other important factors in play, mainly the role of other mass media (especially the satellite televisions), education and diverse social networks.

As Anderson and Eickelman (2003, p. xi) have noted, a mere plurality of discourses doesn't inevitably lead to civic pluralism. Thus it is important to stress that the Internet "has the potential to promote greater openness in the Islamic decision-making process as well as to reinforce entrenched views." The most visible impact of the Internet is manifested in changes cleaving both across "modern" and "traditional" concepts of

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[15] *IslamOnline*. [online]. [cit. 2006-12-1]. Available online:

<http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503546454>.

[16] *Heba Kotb*. [online]. [cit. 2006-12-1]. Available online: <http://www.hebakotb.net/>.

Islam – in the emerging notion of global Islamic identity and the construction of transnational Muslim public sphere.

The particular role of the Internet in the production of Islamic knowledge will be further investigated in the following case studies, focusing on one, yet increasingly important segment of the cyber Islamic environment, i.e. on the fatwas issued or disseminated online and related to the matrimonial issues of Muslims living in non-Muslim societies.

2.6 Case Studies

The case studies presented in this chapter are the result of qualitative and quantitative analysis of six major websites providing fatwas and other normative content to European Muslim minorities. They stem from a larger research on the production of contemporary Islamic knowledge in Europe on the Internet, during which more than 500 fatwas, among other material, have been downloaded, archived and analyzed between 2006 and 2009. In particular, these case studies discuss in detail fatwas related to family issues, namely marriage and divorce, and examines the different ways in which they deal with possible conflicts with European legal systems. All the fatwas were analyzed in English and/or Arabic respectively, together with a detailed examination of the off-line context and background of each of the sites and authorities in question.

As Larsson (2007, p. 56) argues, the majority of academic studies of Islam and the Internet have so far been descriptive and focused on providing an overall impression of Islamic or Muslim homepages: few studies have addressed the relationship between

online and offline activities (e.g. Bunt 2000, 2003; Brückner 2001). Therefore, in order to enhance the content analysis of the respective sites and their fatwas, the following case studies furthermore explore the connections between such websites and global and local Islamic institutions, the interactions between online and offline Muslim communities, and the ways in which the normative content online shapes offline religious manifestations and practices. By doing so, the case studies analyze how European Muslim minorities utilize the Internet and the various media outlets it enables to connect with their faith tradition.

The following case studies do not explore on-line fatwas as part of a discreet and coherent theological corpus, but rather as a result of concrete actions of the Muslim individuals, who initiated their deliverance. The extent to which these on-line fatwas reflect existing discourses and practices can not easily be determined, yet they all constitute differentiated responses to the fundamental questions of modernity; namely how to live in accordance with Islamic law in a Western, globalized society.

2.6.1 Islam4Uk.com

Islam4UK.com is an English-language website launched in 2008 and registered in Preston, UK. According to its mission statement, it has been established "as a platform to propagate the supreme Islamic ideology within the United Kingdom as a divine alternative to man-made law".[17] Similarly, its objectives consist of "changing public opinion in favour of Islam in order to […] implement the Sharee'ah in Britain".[18] The

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[17] *Islam4UK* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.islam4uk.com/about-us>.

[18] Ibid.

website is closely connected with Anjem Choudhary and his teacher Omar Bakri Muhammad, a radical Islamist preacher, who played a significant role in the development of the Hizb al-Tahrir movement in the United Kingdom between 1986 and 1996. Later on, he led another Islamist organization, Al-Muhajiroun, until its disbandment in 2004. Bakri, who is Syrian with Lebanese citizenship, was granted political asylum in the UK on the grounds of his involvement with Islamist opposition to the authoritarian Syrian regime in the 1980s. He is currently residing in Lebanon and banned from entering the United Kingdom.[19] Nevertheless, he continues to play a role in European Muslim affairs through lectures, texts and videos, disseminated via the Internet with the help of his followers and students.[20] He also utilizes ICT for maintaining direct contact with his audience, as was recently the case with his preaching over the telephone to a Muslim rally in north London in March 2009 (Edwards 2009).

Bakri has appointed himself a "Judge of the Shari'ah Court of the UK,"[21] and from this largely self-proclaimed position he has issued several fatwas discussing the co-existence of *sharī'a* and European legal systems. Generally speaking, central to his theoretical framework is the notion of complete and radical refusal of all non-Islamic and man-made laws. According to Bakri, the only solution capable of bringing justice to mankind is the installment of the Islamic state (Edwards 2009). Since, in his view, the last "lawful" Islamic state ceased to exist in 1924 with the abolishment of the Ottoman

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[19] Banned cleric barred from rescue ship. *Guardian.co.uk* [online]. 21 July 2006, [cit. 2010-11-14].

Available online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/jul/21/syria.immigrationpolicy>.

[20] Covert preaching of banned cleric. *BBC News* [online]. 14 November 2006, [cit. 2010-11-10].

Available online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6143632.stm>.

[21] *Moon Research Centre* [online]. [cit. 2010-11-20]. Available online:

<http://mrc.org.uk/marriage_2.html>.

Caliphate, he claims that a believer living today in a non-Muslim society has to strive to follow the laws of God only and should not resort to secular law. The following emblematic fatwa was issued in 2000

Question: What is the Islamic verdict on Civil/Registered Marriages? Are Muslims allowed to marry in registry offices?

Answer [excerpt]: Marriage in Islam is a divine bond between two legitimate parties. […] It is one of the most sacred divine contracts because the subject matter is a human being i.e. the would-be wife. [...] A civil marriage is a contract registered in the local council in order for a man and a woman to have a relationship governed by the marriage laws of the state. Any man can marry any woman, whether they are boyfriend or girlfriend, fornicator or "fornicatress", pregnant or having had previous sexual relations. [...] The fact of the matter is that the Civil Marriage is a complete non-Islamic social system and man-made way of life which contradicts the Islamic marriage and way of life in all its details. [...] We therefore call upon all Muslims to refrain from marrying in accordance to the civil law, any marriage based upon this law is considered to be invalid in Islam. Any children from such a marriage would also be considered illegitimate in Islam.[22]

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[22] *Islam4UK* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.islam4uk.com/current-affairs/latest-news/44-latest/195-the-islamic-verdict-on-civilregistered-marriages>.

First, it should be noted that not only does Omar Bakri's fatwa forbid Muslims to resort to civil law, but it implicitly invalidates any marriage concluded in accordance with such law and proclaims offspring resulting from those marriages to be illegitimate. Such an approach directly challenges the authority of the State and echoes the Islamists' notion of the divine law as the only legitimate source of authority. Moreover, such law is perceived as unchangeable and eternal – i.e. valid and directly applicable in all times and places. Any regime that claims a legislative sovereignty which goes beyond enforcement of the law laid down by God – in the words of Qurʾān beyond merely "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong"[23] – is considered oppressive and unlawful.[24] These and other statements of Omar Bakri, including support of international *jihād* (Bunt 2000, p. 101), eventually led to his ban from entering the United Kingdom.[25]

Yet, when we closely examine the *ratio decidendi* of the above-mentioned fatwa, we discover that the main concern of Omar Bakri lies not only in the fact that the State contests the authority of God, but, more precisely, that its law allows indecency and contradicts the Islamic way of life. In other words, the underlying rationale for the decision is primarily moral and not political. This is reflected as well in Bakri's above-mentioned call for the installment of the Islamic state, which he perceives as "a necessity for the people in order to keep [them] away from personal desire and greed" (Edwards 2009).

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[23] Qurʾān, sūra al-ʿImrān, verse 104.

[24] Covert preaching of banned cleric. *BBC News* [online]. 14 November 2006, [cit. 2010-11-10]. Available online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6143632.stm>.

[25] Banned cleric barred from rescue ship. *Guardian.co.uk* [online]. 21 July 2006, [cit. 2010-11-14]. Available online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/jul/21/syria.immigrationpolicy>.

From a broader perspective, this emphasis on moral principles follows an emerging shift within contemporary Islamist movements, a phenomenon which Roy (2004) calls "neofundamentalism" or "post-Islamism." Essentially, neofundamentalism shifts the focus from the creation of an Islamic state to the promotion of Islamic piety and implementation of *sharī'a* on a daily basis of personal adherence. As Roy (1994) points out, the conceptual framework of Islamist parties was unable to provide an effective blueprint for an Islamic state. Conversely, the contemporary religious revival in Islam is targeting society more than the State and calling to the individual's spiritual needs (Roy 2004, p. 3). Neofundamentalism appeals to Muslims living as a minority and has gained some ground among rootless Muslim youth, particularly among second- and third-generation migrants in the West, who have experienced the deterritorialisation of Islam (Roy 2004, p. 2). Yet, the emphasis on individual piety and the endeavor to adhere strictly to Islamic laws can take many different forms, as we will see below. In fact, the number of actual followers of Bakri's radical concept is estimated to be relatively low (Wiktorowicz 2005), despite his prominent media coverage (Poole 2002).

2.6.2 Fatwa-Online.com

Fatwa-online.com is an English-language website launched in 1999 and registered in Medina, Saudi Arabia. The site is addressing English speaking audience, particularly Muslims living in the non-Muslim countries, as expressed in its mission statement

> Whilst English-speaking Muslims have been starved of access to officially-
> published fataawa which originate in the Arabic language, inshaa.-Allaah,

our aim is to make available online, these and many other fataawa in the English language for the first time! On a regular basis therefore, we endeavour to publish new questions along with their answers, inshaa.-Allaah.[26]

The term "officially published fatwas" refers mainly to fatwas issued by the "Permanent Committee for Islaamic Research and Fataawa" of Saudi Arabia, as established by a Royal Decree in 1971,[27] as well to fatwas issued by other prominent Saudi Arabian scholars. The site claims that all these scholars are versed in classical jurisprudence. It also features these scholars' biographies emphasizing the chain of the teachers, who passed their knowledge to each respective scholar.[28] Nevertheless, the site is not the official website of the Permanent Committee, but rather it is an integral part of informal web-ring of eight interlinked, explicitly *salafī* websites, i.e. hijra.net, madeenah.com, markazquba.com, smatch.net, subulassalaam.com and ummahservices.com, all registered by the same registrant.

The term s*alafīyya* originally designated the followers of the ideas and practices of the so-called "righteous ancestors" (*al-salaf al-sālih*). The approach of *salafīyya* generally rejects later traditions and schools of thought, calling for a return to the Qur'ān and the

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[26] *Fatwa-Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.fatwa-online.com/ouraim.html>.

[27] *Fatwa-Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.fatwa-online.com/scholarsbiographies/15thcentury/permanentcommittee.htm>.

[28] *Fatwa-Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-9-12]. Available online: <http://fatwa-online.com/scholarsbiographies/15thcentury/rabeealmadkhalee.htm>.

sunna as the authentic basis for Muslim life. By the end of the twentieth century, however, the term *salafi* came to be applied to different variants of Islamic revivalism.[29]

The web-page includes a special section labeled "Muslim minorities", where fatwas directly addressed to Muslims living in the West are published. These consist mainly of the fatwas of two respected Saudi scholars, i.e. Shaykh 'Abdul-'Azeez Ibn Baaz, former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, and his student Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Saalih Ibn 'Uthaymeen, a former member of the Council of Senior Scholars of the Kingdom. In fact, the fatwas published in this section stem, to a large extent, from a previously printed collection (Ibn Baz & Uthaymeen 1998).

The site strictly follows a conservative form of Sunni Islam associated with the teachings of an 18th century scholar, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb, which later became the official interpretation of Islam in Saudi Arabia. On the theoretical level, the fatwas published by Fatwa-Online claim the validity of Islamic law for all Muslims, regardless their place of residence, and its superiority over man-made laws, particularly in cases regarding marriage and divorce

> Question [excerpt]: If a man living within a Muslim minority community
> in a non-Muslim country wants to divorce his wife, should he follow the
> divorce procedures of that country, which controls and enforces its own
> law […], or should he follow divorce proceedings laid down in Islaamic
> law?

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[29] See the entry *salafi* in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*. Editor in chief, Richard C. Martin. New York : Macmillan Reference USA, 2004. 2 volumes, p. 608-610. ISBN 0028656032.

Response [excerpt]: It is not permissible for a Muslim to follow, either in his worship or in his dealings with others, other than what is laid down in Islaamic law. Divorce is one of those issues which is dealt with by Islaamic law in the most complete manner. It is, therefore not permitted for anyone to go beyond or transgress the limits set by Allaah (Subhaanahu wa Ta'aala) concerning divorce. [...] It is, therefore not permitted for a Muslim to transgress those limits set by Allaah and he should divorce according to the stipulations of Islaamic law.[30]

Moreover, in another fatwa Shaykh Ibn 'Uthaymeen urges Muslims living in a non-Muslim society to appoint an arbitrator who will judge among them according to *sharī'a*. This in fact promotes establishment of a parallel legal framework, based on a voluntarily adherence, informal authority of the judge and compulsory social mechanisms of the community

It is obligatory for the Muslims to appoint a judge to pass judgment between them according to Islamic law. It is not permissible for them to take as arbitrators those who do not judge according to Islamic law. If a group or society agree[s] upon him being appointed as arbitrator between

[30] *Fatwa-Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.fatwa-online.com/fataawa/muslimminorities/0000920_2.htm>.

them, then his judgment should be enforced in all matters in which they have asked him to arbitrate.[31]

Another fatwa declares void any marriage in which the wife converts to Islam while the husband does not.[32] This follows the strict interpretation of Islamic law, according to which such marriage is considered void after passing a specified "waiting period" (*'idda*). Addressing this fatwa to Muslim minorities living in a non-Muslim society in fact directly challenges the family laws of the particular states. Yet, the authority of the State is recognized and Muslims can resort to its laws when these do not contradict *sharī'a* and their acceptance eases bureaucratic and formal obligations

> Question: If it is necessary by law to register a divorce or to follow registration procedures with the official authorities in the country where he is living, then, after he has divorced according to Islaamic law, should he go and formally register it with those authorities?
>
> Response: There is no objection to him registering it but it should be done according to Islaamic law. He should say that he has divorced his wife so and so, the daughter of so and so, according to Islaamic law and then it can be entered in the register of those people.[33]

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[31] *Fatwa-Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.fatwa-online.com/fataawa/muslimminorities/0000903_4.htm>.

[32] *Fatwa-Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.fatwa-online.com/fataawa/muslimminorities/0000324_2.htm>.

[33] *Fatwa-Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.fatwa-online.com/fataawa/muslimminorities/0000920_3.htm>.

In another fatwa dealing with a permissibility of studying and working in mixed-sex-environments, Shaykh Ibn 'Uthaymeen obliges Muslims living in West to "abandon their livelihood and seek another from another direction or from another country" if it is not possible for them "to gain a livelihood except by what Allaah has forbidden, namely through the mixing of men and women."[34]   Along the same lines, Shaykh Ibn Baaz advices Muslims living in Europe not to marry non-Muslim women, although this is permissible in traditional Islamic law in the case of the People of the Book, i.e. Christians and Jews

> Question: What is your advice concerning some Muslim minorities marrying disbelieving women who do not believe in the existence of a Creator and what is the effect of that upon the children?

> Response [excerpt]: My advice to all Muslims is that they should not marry anyone who is not a Muslim. A Muslim man should do his utmost to marry a Muslim woman because that will be good for him, both in the life of this world and in the Hereafter and good for his children as well. With regards to marrying kuffaar, if they are not from the People of the Book, the Jews and Christians, then, according to clear text and consensus of the scholars, it is forbidden. [...]

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[34] *Fatwa-Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.fatwa-online.com/fataawa/muslimminorities/0000324_3.htm>.

There is no harm, therefore, in marrying women from the People of the Book, if the need arises. However, to refrain from doing so and to marry Muslim women is preferable and advisable, especially nowadays.

The risk involved in marrying them these days is greater because they have control and power over husbands and might, therefore, lead their husbands or their children to kufr in Allaah. My advice to all my brothers everywhere is, that they should not marry non-Muslim women and that they should be aware of the risks and end result of doing so. Rather, they should do their utmost to marry Muslim women and to educate and guide them to what is good. This is safer, especially at this time when evil and wickedness has increased. The kuffaar have today gained the upper hand over the Muslims, and women in the countries of the kuffaar have power and authority and dominate their Muslim husbands and try to attract them and their children to their false religion.[35]

Finally, another fatwa forbids Muslims living in non-Islamic countries to call the non-Muslims "brothers" or "sisters" because brotherhood, if not established by descent, is only in faith.[36]

The underlying logic behind the fatwas disseminated through Fatwa-Online resonates with the notion of oneness and the unchangeability of *sharī'a*, that is valid for Muslims

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[35] *Fatwa-Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.fatwa-online.com/fataawa/muslimminorities/0000822_5.htm>.

[36] *Fatwa-Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.fatwa-online.com/fataawa/muslimminorities/0000920_4.htm>.

at all times and in all places. They also urge believers to adhere to the strict interpretation of Islamic Law, particularly in matters related to practices defining visible and audible Muslim identity. Such approach directly contradicts the concept of jurisprudence of minorities (*fiqh al-aqalliyyāt*) promoted by Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī and other, mainly European and North American, Muslim scholars (see below). Thus, the translation of originally Saudi Arabian fatwas into English and their agile dissemination through various media outlets reflect a broader struggle over interpretive authority in Sunni Islam. In the context of European Muslim minorities, however, this struggle also inevitably involves foreign policy issues.

Generally speaking, many Muslim states provide their former citizens and their descendants with religious and cultural support, including educating and sending imams to European mosques, establishing cultural centers, and funding satellite TV broadcasting. The Turkish, Algerian and Moroccan governments in particular are very actively involved in Europe in retaining control over their emigrants (Roy 2004, p. 137). However, as Roy argues, "Saudi Arabia claims to represent all Muslims in the West and has created an array of institutions to spread Salafism and foster non-assimilation" (ibid.). The above mentioned fatwas of prominent Saudi Arabian scholars in fact emphasize religiously-based neo-ethnicity and promote *communitarisation*, i.e. the trend of identifying people primarily as an ethno-cultural or religious group and only secondarily as individual citizens (Roy 2004, p. 20). Although the direct impact of Fatwa-Online on individual behavior is questionable, the fatwas of Ibn Baz and Uthaymeen circulate broadly in cyber-Islamic environments.

While discussing the interactions between online platforms and offline religious communities, we should note that direct communication between petitioners and muftis is not enabled by Fatwa-Online, although the authors add new fatwas on a regular basis (Bunt 2003, p. 143). Instead of utilizing the interactive potential of the medium, the authors of Fatwa-Online perceive the Internet as an emerging sphere where the *salafi* message should be disseminated. As such, the site doesn't provide space for dialogue or critical deliberations but rather it translates the already existing religious knowledge into a new digital domain.

Beyond textual material the site also offers audio files of Qur'anic recitations and sermons of respected Saudi Arabian scholars for download. This in particular meets the above mentioned Amin and Gher's (2000) claim of the oral cultural heritage pertaining to digital communication in the Arab Muslim world. By same token, El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009, p. 77) argue that "In today's virtual Islamic community, many Islamic websites, in an attempt to gain the trust of their visitors, are trying to reflect the oral tradition by allowing these visitors to download Quranic recitations, with a high sound quality, for free." This notion echoes what White (2003) calls the "orality of trust," i.e. the local bonds created through word of mouth and simultaneous face-to-face interactions which form the backbone of social cohesion in Islamic countries. Yet, as White argues, "the depersonalized language of modern media has limited credibility in niche ecologies characterized by a culture of orality and personal interactions" (p. 176). Therefore, the strive of Fatwa-Online to provide its readers with authentic audio sermons of respected scholars, together with the above-mentioned detailed biographies of these scholars emphasizing the chain of the teachers who passed their knowledge to them, should be, in the light of Islamic tradition, perceived not only as a way to

establish authority of the *salafī* message itself but also as a way to maintain credibility of the site *per se*. This credibility is of paramount importance given the fact that the site seems not to be directly maintained or even supervised by any of the above-mentioned scholars.

The issue of trust is even more important when we examine other, more interactive, sites linked in the Fatwa-Online web-ring. These include the smatch.net, which is an "online matrimonial resource designed for Salafi adults to find their suitable Salafi marriage partner"[37] and UmmahServices.com, which offers various "certified third party services", such as paying a *fidya*, the redemption in the monetary value of one sheep from the omission of certain religious duties during the hajj, or *sadāqa*, the almsgiving at the end of Ramadan.[38] All these services are paid through PayPal and the owners of the site guarantee that they will be performed "according to the noble Qur'ān and the authentic Sunna."[39]

Not only do online platforms such as UmmahServices.com effectively establish a new kind of Islamic e-commerce but, more importantly, they substantially transform the performance of traditional Muslim rituals. By a single click believers from all over the world can feed the fasting inside *Al-Masjid al-Nabawī* during the month of Ramadan or pay the *badal hajj*, i.e. the performance of the obligatory hajj on behalf of those who

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[37] *smatch.net* [online]. [cit. 2010-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.smatch.net/>.

[38] *UmmahServices.com* [online]. [cit. 2010-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.ummahservices.com/fidyah.htm>.

[39] *UmmahServices.com* [online]. [cit. 2010-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.ummahservices.com/badalhajj.htm>.

have died whilst not having done so.[40] Upon online payment the *badal hajj* will be performed by a student from the Islamic University of Medina or Umm al-Qura University in Mecca who will complete all the hajj rites and, at the same time, "benefit from the fee he receives by allowing him to maintain himself or his family whilst studying."[41]

Therefore, through the cyber Islamic environment of UmmahServices.com the conception of "religion online" (Helland 2000) directly connects to offline practices and local communities. In this context, Wellman and Gulia (2003, p. 187) argue that, while operating via the Internet, virtual communities are glocalized

> They are simultaneously more global and local, as worldwide connectivity and domestic matters intersect. Global connectivity de-emphasizes the importance of locality for community; online relationships may be more stimulating than suburban neighborhoods.

The Fatwa-Online web-ring provides precisely such global connectivity to the *salafī* Muslim community. It links Muslims living in the West with students in Mecca and Medina through participation in collective rituals, enables them finding a spouse within their local *salafī* community, and provides them with collection of fatwas offering ready-made set of norms and values. The online community formed around Fatwa-Online, which further expands to real-world social networks, meets in particular the Roy's claim (2004, p. 30) that, in the conditions of globalization, westernization and the

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[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

impact of living as a minority, Muslim communities are no longer "the product of a given culture or civilization, but of the will of individuals who experience a process of individualization through deculturation and who, explicitly and voluntarily, decide to join a new community based solely on the explicit tenets of religion."

2.6.3 AskImam.org

AskImam.org is an English-language website launched in 2004 and registered in Alexandria, Virginia, USA. It seems to be a technically-updated mirror of the site Ask-Imam.com which has been in operation since 2000 and is hosted and maintained in San Jose, California, USA. Both sites contain fatwas issued by the *muftī* Ebrahim Desai, a former head of the Dar ul Ifta department at Jamiatul Ulama (Council of Muslim Theologians) in Camperdown, South Africa.[42] The aim of both sites is to "provide easy access to common Islamic questions and answers to anyone using the World Wide Web."[43]

Essentially, Desai holds the position that Muslims living in a non-Muslim country are bound to follow the laws of that country as long as they are not contrary to *sharī'a*.[44] The methodology of how to determine such contradiction is not explained on Desai's webpage, but can to some extent be discerned from the fatwas he has issued in particular cases. His approach follows casuistic and legalistic interpretations of *sharī'a*

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[42] *Jamiatul Ulama Kwa Zulu Natal* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.jamiat.org.za/index.html>.

[43] *Ask Imam* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.askimam.org/about.php>.

[44] *Ask Imam* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.askimam.org/fatwa/fatwa.php?askid=4db27ac0a921fcd91f643fbdcf5c26bb>.

focusing more on individual deeds and their requirements than on rules of law and their validity as such. In other words, if a particular deed or act satisfies both procedural and substantial conditions laid down by Islamic law, it is valid according to Desai, regardless of the law under which it has formally been carried out. Thus, a marriage contracted in accordance to civil law at a municipal registry office constitutes a valid Islamic *nikāh* if two Muslim witnesses have been present and the Islamic impediments to marriage have not been breached.[45]

In a similar manner, Desai considers any divorce approved by a civil court valid on the condition that it has been initiated by the husband.[46] This reflects the above-mentioned concept of *talāq* (repudiation) granted by *sharī'a* to the husband only. In one of the many fatwas issued on that matter, Desai actually extends the Islamic concept of revocability of *talāq* to civil court decisions. Moreover, he explicitly invalidates any civil divorce initiated by the wife, unless the marriage was annulated by a Muslim judge in advance

> Answer [excerpt]: If the husband instituted divorce through court and it was granted, it will be regarded as only one Talaaq-e-Raj'ee (revocable divorce). The husband can revoke the divorce within the Iddat period. If he did not revoke it, the Talaaq will be changed to Talaaq-e-Baain

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[45] *Ask Imam* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.askimam.org/fatwa/fatwa.php?askid=3a1f6208c913a3fe44905186b6f12c20>.

[46] *Ask Imam* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.askimam.org/fatwa/fatwa.php?askid=f69061373bbbaf9c606057b53493dc21>.

(irrevocable divorce). […] If the wife instituted the divorce through Court,

it will not constitute Talaaq.[47]

Desai's strict legalistic approach is most evident in contested cases, where he often

refuses to issue a *fatwa* unless he knows the exact wording of a civil court's decision so

he can determine its validity from an Islamic point of view.[48] Finally, in a manner

somehow similar to the Uthaymeen's concept of arbitrary courts, Desai suggests to

Muslim women that they contact local Muslim authorities in order to get *tafrīk*

(dissolution of marriage) granted, before (or even instead of) seeking divorce through

civil courts

> Question [excerpt]: Can a woman file for divorce with the secular courts to
>
> release her from a marriage of zulm where the man has been guilty of
>
> adultery?

> Answer [excerpt]: The decree of divorce granted in a secular court does
>
> not constitute an Islamic divorce (Talaaq) if the wife is an applicant. […]
>
> If a woman is oppressed and she requests her husband to issue her a Talaaq
>
> and he refuses, then the woman should contact her local Ulama body, for
>
> example, the Jamiat and present her case there. The Ulama will advise her

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[47] *Ask Imam* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.askimam.org/fatwa/fatwa.php?askid=7c700f9e8e81880d7a52f8a236793de5>.

[48] *Ask Imam* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.askimam.org/fatwa/fatwa.php?askid=543dd28ef94d141d12d1c18ed3c6584d >.

accordingly. That may include an application for an annulment of her marriage.[49]

The case of AskImam meets, in particular, the above-mentioned Riexinger's (2008) claim of establishing an authority through the innovative use of new media combined with filling a gap on the religious market. The number of questions related to family issues and initiated by Muslims living in Western Europe clearly indicates that this is fertile ground for counseling and establishing opinion leadership. As Bruinessen (2003) has stated, religious authority is expressed most clearly and explicitly in the relationship between *mustaftī* and *muftī*. The very act of asking someone for a fatwa is the most explicit recognition of that person's religious authority. Ebrahim Desai exemplifies a scholar who, although being trained in non-Azhari institution outside of the Arab world, gained global recognition mainly through mass support accumulated via information and communication technology.

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[49] *Ask Imam* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.askimam.org/fatwa/fatwa.php?askid=e90e87e526e4c18a78197dbb7012c408>.

2.6.4   IslamOnline.net[50]

The Arabic and English website IslamOnline.net was launched on 24 June 1997. It is owned and controlled by the Al-Balagh Cultural Society, a non-profit company registered in Doha, Qatar (Mariani 2006, p. 136). Although the website is registered in Qatar as well, it operates mainly from Cairo, Egypt. According to its mission statement, IslamOnline "aims to present the unified and lively nature of Islam that is keeping up with modern times in all areas."[51] With regard to Islamic law, the website's objective is

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[50] The fieldwork research for this thesis, including downloading, archiving, and analyzing fatwas from the IslamOnline website, has been conducted in 2008 – 2009. Therefore, this chapter reflects the state of matters within this particular timeframe. In March 2010, during finalizing this thesis, the Al-Balagh Society, a Qatari association that owns Islamonline.net, decided to reorganize the website and to transfer supervision of its content and technology, as well as its administration, from its Cairo-based editors to the association's main headquarters in Doha (MEMRI 2010). In response, some 300 of the website's Cairo employees who faced layoffs as a result of this decision launched a strike. After interceding on their behalf, Sheikh Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī was dismissed by the Qatari government from his position as chairman of Al-Balagh's board of directors. The employees, in collaboration with Al-Qaradāwī, responded by launching a new website that would, according to their statement, continue the Islamic legacy already established by IslamOnline (MEMRI 2010). This new website, OnIslam.net, preserves to a large degree the structure and range of content of the original IslamOnline website. The Arabic version of the original IslamOnline website has been substantially changed, reflecting the owners aim to limit its content to religious issues only. The English version of the original IslamOnline website is still available online, yet it is not linked from its Arabic counterpart and seems to be not updated since April 2010. The following text analyzes the content of the original website unless stated otherwise.

[51] *Islam Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.islamonline.net/English/AboutUs.shtml>.

> To expand the circle of introducing Islam; present its comprehensiveness and the way its system and laws complement each other; to affirm its balance, fairness and applicability in all places and times; and present the tolerance and the humanity of its laws.[52]

IslamOnline constitutes one of the most influential fatwa-issuing websites (Bunt 2003; Mariani 2006; Gräf 2007). It offers a vast, searchable fatwa database, forms to electronically submit an inquiry for a new fatwa, and live "fatwa-sessions" with various muftis immediately answering users' questions. The body of muftis and counselors associated with IslamOnline is large and consists of many different authorities, ranging from al-Azhar graduates to European and North American imams. Yet, the site is particularly connected with the European Council for Fatwa and Research and the above-mentioned scholar, Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī. The latter was born in a small Egyptian village in 1926 and received traditional religious training at al-Azhar, one of the most important Islamic educational institutions in the world. Later on, he worked for the Egyptian Ministry of Religious Endowments (*awqāf*) and founded and presided over the Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Qatar. Qaradāwī owes his international "fame" mainly to his program *al-Sharī'a wa-l-Hayāt* (Sharī'a and Life) aired for the first time in September 1997 by the Qatari satellite television station, Al-Jazeera (Mariani 2006, p. 134). Since 1997 he has also run his own website, which is in Arabic only. [53]

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[52] Ibid.

[53] *Qaradawi.net* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.qaradawi.net>.

As a well-known and regarded scholar, Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī is highly influential in the production of global Islamic knowledge. He is particularly active in the affairs of European Muslim communities. In 1997, together with Faysal Mawlawi, he initiated the creation of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, a private body of muftis issuing fatwas specifically dealing with the conditions of Muslim minorities in Europe (Caeiro 2003b). Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī coined the concept of *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt* (jurisprudence of minorities) and dedicated a whole legal treaty to this topic (Qaradāwī 2005). Essentially, he argues that Islamic law is valid for all Muslims regardless of their country of residence; nevertheless, the jurisprudence of minorities should take into account such minorities' respective place, time, and conditions. The main aim of *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt* is to help Muslim minorities lead wholesome Islamic lives according to *sharī'a* while maintaining positive interactions with the non-Muslim majority (Qaradāwī 2005, p. 23).

Generally speaking, the site IslamOnline adheres to the main principles of *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt*. Yet, due to the diverse range of muftis associated with the site, the concrete fatwas vary substantially in their decisions and reasoning. This is particularly evident in fatwas related to family issues

> Question: I would like to know the point of view of Islam if a Muslim living in a Western country, where polygamy is regarded unlawful, has to have a second wife due to some reasons.

> First Response [excerpt]: The Muslim man who has a second wife [...] has to follow the channels of law in order to legalize his second marriage in the

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country he lives in. [...] If the attempts to legalize the second marriage fail, the person could document his (second) marriage in one of the Islamic centers. [...] The problem he might face in the future is regarding getting birth certificates for the children from his second wife. But I think there are some flexible European laws concerning registering names of the children born even from illegitimate relationships.

Second Response [excerpt]: A Muslim living in a non-Muslim society is obligated to follow the laws. We cannot say that their laws are contrary to the Shari`ah, so we have to follow the Shari`ah. Taking a second wife is not a necessary requirement; there is no mandatory duty on the Muslim to have a second wife.[54]

The fact that two different decisions were actually given is specific to IslamOnline. It resembles the institution of *dissenting opinion* known from European jurisprudence and demonstrates the dynamic behind the decision-making processes within the body operating the site. Both fatwas have been issued by muftis living in Western countries and knowing the local laws and customs. Both recognize the authority of civil law; albeit in very different ways. The first fatwa by Sheikh Ahmad Hulail, imam of Tariq ibn Ziad Mosque in Frankfurt, Germany, recommends that believers *de facto* avoid the law; whereas the latter by Jamal Badawi, member of the Fiqh Council of North America, strictly obliges them to abide by it. Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī has stated that in the

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[54] *Islam Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-

Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503547860>.

case of contradicting fatwas a Muslim must follow the one that "his true conscience believes is closer to the truth" (Caeiro 2003b, p. 32). This statement in fact echoes the emphasis on the role of the individual and the privatization of faith, as we will discuss below.

It seems that over the course of time fatwas issued by IslamOnline more or less converge to the second, Badawi's point of view. For example, the following fatwa delivered by Faysal Mawlawi, Deputy Chairman of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, validates civil marriages as long as they are not contracted between the "unmarriageable" persons as defined in Islamic law

> Question: Is the civil marriage conducted in Western and European countries valid from a Shari'ah point of view?
>
> Answer [excerpt]: The legal marriage which is done in European countries is regarded as a valid marriage in Shari`ah as long as there is no legal reason in Shari`ah against the marriage. [...] For instance, a Muslim is not allowed to marry his foster-sister, though this is permissible in European laws. Likewise, a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim and a Muslim man is not allowed to marry any non-Muslim other than a Christian or Jewish woman, though all types of inter-faith marriage are permitted in Western laws.[55]

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[55] *Islam Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:
<http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?cid=1119503546430&pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar%2FFatwaE%2FFatwaEAskTheScholar>.

Mawlawi's approach seemingly corresponds with the above-mentioned one of Ebrahim Desai. Yet, when we closely examine his reasoning, we discover that Mawlawi scrutinizes the marriage's validity only from the substantial law's point of view and not from the procedural one. In fact, this indicates *de facto* recognition of the civil law and its procedures and leaves the responsibility for choosing the spouse in accordance with Islamic law to the individual believer.

Similarly, the European Council for Fatwa and Research, although in theory acknowledging the imperative for Muslims to resort to Islamic law only, in fact recognizes the authority of secular civil law and its courts based on principles of choosing lesser harm and preventing chaos

> Question: What is the Islamic ruling regarding the divorce issued by a non-Muslim judge?

> Answer [excerpt]: The principle is that a Muslim only resorts to a Muslim Judge or any suitable deputy in the event of a conflict. However, and due to the absence of an Islamic judicial system in non-Muslim countries, it is imperative that a Muslim who conducted his Marriage by virtue of those countries' respective laws, to comply with the rulings of a non-Muslim judge in the event of a divorce. Since, the laws were accepted as governing the marriage contract, then it is as though one has implicitly accepted all consequences, including that the marriage may not be terminated without the consent of a judge. […] The jurisprudence (Fiqh) principle applicable

in this case is that whatever is normal practice is similar to a contractual agreement. Also, implementing the rulings of a non-Muslim judiciary is an acceptable matter, as it falls under the bringing about of what is considered to be of interest and to deter what is considered to be of harm and may cause chaos.[56]

Finally, Ahmad Kutty, a scholar of Islamic studies at the Islamic Institute of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, recognizes civil law to its full extent in the following fatwa also published by IslamOnline

Question [excerpt]: Do you think that it is important to wait until civil divorce is completed if Islamic divorce has been issued long ago?

Answer [excerpt]: Islam teaches us to abide by the laws of the land; Islam never favors anarchy and lawlessness. Since we don't have Shari`ah courts in Western countries, we should govern ourselves by the existing laws as best as we can. After all, marriage and family life are not personal issues; rather they have direct bearing on communities and societies. It is highly important for you to finalize your legal divorce before getting married

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[56] *Islam Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?cid=1119503544364&pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar%2FFatwaE%2FFatwaEAskTheScholar>.

again. In this way, you can avoid any unforeseen harm that may arise due to lack of legal support.[57]

Similarly, another key fatwa dealing with the coexistence of *sharī'a* and European legal systems states that "since those Muslims are not living in Islamic countries and they have to respect the laws and rules of the countries where they live, some of the teachings of Islam, especially recommended deeds, are not fully applied on them."[58] However, it emphasizes that "they have to strive their best to apply as much as they can of the teachings of Islam." [59] Taking a different tack, another fatwa states that Muslims minorities "are supposed to hold fast to the marked features of their own Islamic identity and never try to compromise their faith in order to fit in their societies." [60] Nevertheless, in certain situations, "the law of necessity may apply to certain individuals under specific circumstances."[61] As an example it mentions wearing a *niqāb* which, while acceptable in certain countries, could be considered extremely bizarre and out of the ordinary in others. In the latter case, Muslims living in the West

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[57] *Islam Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?cid=1146992942251&pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar%2FFatwaE%2FFatwaEAskTheScholar>.

[58] *Islam Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?cid=1119503549292&pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar%2FFatwaE%2FFatwaEAskTheScholar>.

[59] Ibid.

[60] *Islam Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?cid=1171274627715&pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar%2FFatwaE%2FFatwaEAskTheScholar>.

[61] Ibid.

"should always look at the pros and cons and try [their] best to apply the rules of Islam to the best of our ability."[62]

Most of the above mentioned fatwas on IslamOnline generally adhere to the concept of *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt*, although the different interpretations result in significantly different decisions. Nevertheless, namely in comparison with the previously-described, fatwa-issuing websites, IslamOnline as a whole presents a more moderate approach towards Islamic law. The site seems to follow the concept of "balance and moderation" (*al-wasatiyya wa-l-i'tidāl*) as coined by Qaradāwī and adopted by other Muslim scholars. It refers to the maintenance of balance between old and new as well as between the different Islamic legal schools and doctrines. Moderation then means opposition to extremism, which, according to Qaradāwī, can include both secular and radical trends (Gräf 2007, p. 3). Essentially, IslamOnline could be labeled as a post-Islamist project, using Roy's terminology, in the sense that it strives to promote *sharī'a* on a basis of daily adherence and behavior. Yet, in contrast with Fatwa-Online and its legalistic interpretation of *sharī'a*, IslamOnline tries to reconcile Islamic law with contemporary conditions. As such, it could be perceived as part of what Baker (2003, p. 111) calls "an Islamist project of peaceful resistance, intellectual reform, and gradual, social transformation in the unprecedented conditions of a globalized world".

Both websites emphasize the role of the individual and his/her voluntarily adherence to Islamic law; albeit in a very different manner. The muftis associated with Fatwa-Online urge believers to distance themselves from the State and to establish private councils, judging their affairs according to rigid interpretations of Islamic law with an

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[62] Ibid.

indisputable and predefined set of norms. On the other hand, IslamOnline invites individuals to discuss these interpretations and the following set of norms and engages the believers in the rebuilding of the imaginary global Muslim *umma* by deliberate observance of these rules.

Correspondingly, IslamOnline is distinguished by its technological standards and the extent of interactivity and engagement available to the user. In comparison with the sites Fatwa-Online or Islam4UK, which mainly re-publish fatwas issued elsewhere, IslamOnline enables direct deliverance of fatwas in a live, computer-mediated session. Not only does this feature utilize the potential of ICT to its full extent, but it also enhances the attractiveness and topicalness of the site. As al-Qaradāwī has stated, exploiting the Internet in the service of Islam is necessary and a religious obligation (*fard*) (Kouřilová 2008). This imperative is reflected as well in the site's mission statement

> The Internet has created a realm of opportunities for communication. We pledge to take advantage of these opportunities to achieve the highest levels of integrity, precision in content and creative professionalism in design. We work hard so that IslamOnline.net's content, information, and ideas are presented professionally to gain the distinction that will make it credible and attractive.[63]

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[63] *Islam Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.islamonline.net/English/AboutUs.shtml>.

The discursive of this statement in fact echoes Haenni's (2008) notion of "private religious entrepreneurship". He uses this term to describe the assemblage of Islamic piety, usage of communication technologies, and marketing strategies. Up to the present day, IslamOnline, which exemplifies precisely such a private religious initiative, remains one of the most successful Islamic websites worldwide in terms of visitors per day.[64] The muftis on the site may lack the official recognition by the State, but they can be sure that their fatwas are read and discussed from Morocco to Malaysia.

While exploring the online offline interaction we should shed light on the recent expansion of IslamOnline into a new digital domain of *Second Life*, an online multi-user virtual world. *Second Life* is a privately-owned, subscription-based 3D application created by the company Linden Lab and launched in 2003. *Second Life* presents an entirely user-created environment in which members use official design tools to shape the in-world (Radde-Antweiler 2007, p. 187). IslamOnline sponsored a virtual re-creation of the city of Mecca and the simulation of the hajj pilgrimage, which was released in December 2007, just prior to the 2007–2008 hajj season. The purpose of the simulation was to educate Muslims about how to participate in the hajj and non-Muslims about this important ritual and the various steps that pilgrims take. The hajj simulation in *Second Life* reconstructs a realistic environment and allows users to freely explore it, move from one stage of the simulation to another, and interact with its objects. Yet, and more importantly, it allows users to share their experience with others through both visual representation of their avatars and a textual in-world chat and

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[64] According to Alexa, IslamOnline has the 2nd highest rank in the category "Top/Society/Religion and Spirituality/Islam" and 3714th highest rank in general. It is preceded by IslamWay (islamway.com, ranked 1616th overall) and followed by the website of Amr Khaled (amrkhaled.net, ranked 6238th overall). See *Alexa* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.alexa.com/>.

messaging system. Therefore, through creating the perception of mutual "presence" among its individual visitors, the hajj simulation can be experienced collectively and even facilitate "ritual experience" for some of its users, as reported by Heidbrink (2007) and Derrickson (2008). At the same time, IslamOnline regularly utilizes *Second Life* for online lectures and interviews, creating a platform where individual Muslims from all over the world can directly engage in dialogue with respected scholars in high-tech virtual environment.

2.6.5 Islamic-Sharia.org

The Islamic Shari'a Council is a quasi-Islamic Court founded in 1982 in Birmingham, UK. It strives to represent an "authoritative body" consisting of a panel of scholars from many established institutions in the UK, including London Central Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre in London, Jamia Mosque and Islamic Centre n Birmingham, and Islamic Centre in Glasgow. According to its mission statement

> The Council considers itself to be a stabilising influence within the UK Muslim community. Outside of Muslim countries, Islamic institutions are essential for the survival of Muslim communities. Other establishments such as mosques, schools, universities and banks preserve the Muslim identity of a community and create a protective environment for young and old alike.[65]

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[65] *Islamic Sharia* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.islamic-sharia.org/about-us/about-us-10.html>.

The Council issues fatwas, provides mediation, and judges cases presented to it by individual petitioners. It primarily deals with issues pertaining to family and matrimonial law, namely with divorces granted by civil courts in the UK which are not necessarily considered valid in the eyes of the Islamic law. As I have discussed above, divorce in Islamic law can take many forms, the most common cases being the repudiation (*talāq*) of the wife by the husband, the dissolution of marriage (*tafrīk*) pronounced by a judge, and the *khul'*, by which the wife redeems herself from a marriage for a consideration. Also, as I have demonstrated in the previous case studies, according to some Muslim scholars, namely the Shaykh Ibn 'Uthaymeen, a divorce granted by a non-Islamic court is not valid at all in the eyes of Islamic law.[66] According to many others it is not valid if the wife was the petitioner.[67] In all these case the Islamic Shari'a Council enables the parties to obtain an Islamic divorce. According to its statistics, by August 2010, the Council had dealt with more than seven thousands cases.[68]

The Council is not legally recognized in the UK. Rather it represents an informal parallel court which supplements the State's legal system and its institutions in cases where these, according to the Council's members, fail to meet the necessary requirements laid down by the Law of God. At the same time, as its website states

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[66] *Fatwa-Online* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.fatwa-online.com/fataawa/muslimminorities/0000920_2.htm>.

[67] *Ask Imam* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.askimam.org/fatwa/fatwa.php?askid=e90e87e526e4c18a78197dbb7012c408>.

[68] *Islamic Sharia* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.islamic-sharia.org/about-us/about-us-9.html>.

The fact that it is already established, and is gradually gaining ground among the Muslim community, and the satisfaction attained by those who seek its ruling, are all preparatory steps towards the final goal of gaining the confidence of the host community in the soundness of the Islamic legal system and the help and insight they could gain from it. The experience gained by the scholars taking part in its procedures make them more prepared for the eventuality of recognition for Islamic law.[69]

As such, the Islamic Shari'a Council exemplifies the "arbitration tribunals" as envisioned in the fatwa by Shaykh Ibn 'Uthaymeen which urges Muslims living in a non-Muslim society to appoint an arbitrator who will judge among them according to *sharī'a*.[70] This, in turn, promotes establishment of a parallel legal framework, based on a voluntarily adherence, informal authority of the judges and compulsory social mechanisms of the community. Simultaneously, the broader mission of the Council to gain recognition of *sharī'a* in the UK enters another, political sphere where the very concepts of coexistence between Islam and the State are negotiated.

The Council has launched its English website Islamic-Sharia.org as late as in 2007. As such, it at first seems to meet the El-Nawawy and Khamis' (2009, p. 74) claim that traditional *'ulama* have failed to adapt to the new media ecology and "change their message to cope with the new social and cultural developments". Therefore, El-Nawawy and Khamis argue, they have particularly failed to understand the mentality of

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[69] *Islamic Sharia* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.islamic-sharia.org/about-us/about-us-7.html>.

[70] *Ask Imam* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.fatwa-online.com/fataawa/muslimminorities/0000903_4.htm>.

young Muslims and to gain their trust and confidence. Yet, soon after it went online, the website Islamic-Sharia.org gained substantial traffic and the Council's fatwas are sought by many young people of various and multifaceted background. Therefore, the case of the Islamic Shari'a Council rather exemplifies what Anderson (2008) describes as migration online of established religious networks and institutions, which, at first being slow to adapt and thus preceded by "new Islam's interpreters," eventually proved adept at deploying the underlying technologies to their own ends and re-established their presence and authority online.

When compared with the above-mentioned global Islamic websites, such as Fatwa-Online and IslamOnline, it should be noted how the website of the Council is firmly linked to its local UK Muslim community and the services the Council provides for it. As is the case in the above-mentioned sites, Islamic-Sharia.org contains large and searchable database of fatwas. Yet, it also offers an online form for requesting an offline appointment, where the petitioner can specify his or her problem, so an appropriate member of the Council can prepare for the meeting. Recently, the site introduced downloadable forms for petitioners seeking Islamic divorce, i.e. *talāq* for men and *khul'* for women. In the case of *talāq*, the husband has to provide his and his wife details, reasons for asking divorce, details about children and financial obligations, and pay the required fee. Upon receiving the application the Council will issue a *talāq* form to the husband which he has to sign in front of two witnesses and return back to the Council. The Council will then inform the wife by sending her a letter giving her thirty days to submit her claims. If she has no objections (or no response is received), and providing all other requirements are met, the Islamic divorce certificate will be

issued by the Council. At the same time, the petitioners are advised to consult a solicitor for obtaining a civil divorce.[71]

Therefore, the primary difference between other Islamic websites providing legal and religious consultations and Islamic-Sharia.org lies in the online offline connections, where the muftis of the Council directly communicate with the petitioners, seek to be informed about particular details of each respective case, and offer a possibility of face-to-face meeting. In this context, Thomson (1995) noted that new methods of religious interaction and communication on the Internet have depersonalized the content and structure of the traditional religious message

> To the extent that the transmission of tradition becomes dependent on mediated forms of communication, it also becomes detached from the individuals with whom one interacts in day in day-to-day life.

The activities of the Council to a large extend transcend this depersonalization and seek to create a bond of trust between the petitioners and the muftis, which, in turn, reaffirms the Council's authority as a religious and quasi-legal body. Echoing Thompson's thought, El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009) have argued that the Internet, in and by itself, is not capable of solely taking on the responsibility of helping today's young Muslims develop a clearly defined self-identity in a complex post modern environment. Instead, they suggest that "the offline community, represented in the home, school, and mosque, should bear part of the responsibility in guiding young Muslims and arming them with

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[71] *Islamic Sharia* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.islamic-sharia.org/docman/divorce-froms/divorce-form-men/download-2.html>.

the necessary tools that would help them differentiate between authenticated and nonauthenticated religious message in the virtual community" (p. 76). The Islamic Shari'a Council, although not legally recognized in the UK, and the website it maintains constitute a successful example of establishing arbitration and reconciliation council for local community while linking this offline institution to global online *umma* simultaneously.

2.6.6 MATribunal.com

The Muslim Arbitration Tribunal (MAT) was established in 2007 in Birmingham in order to "provide a viable alternative for the Muslim community seeking to resolve disputes in accordance with Islamic Sacred Law and without having to resort to costly and time consuming litigation."[72] As the webpage states, the establishment of MAT is an "important and significant step towards providing the Muslim community with a real opportunity to self determine disputes in accordance with Islamic Sacred Law."[73]

Unlike the Islamic Shari'a Council mentioned above, the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal operates within the legal framework of England and Wales thereby ensuring that any determination reached by it can be enforced through existing means of enforcement open to normal litigants. Yet, as the website states

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[72] *Muslim Arbitration Tribunal* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.matribunal.com/>.

[73] Ibid.

Although MAT must operate within the legal framework of England and Wales, this does not prevent or impede MAT from ensuring that all determinations reached by it are in accordance with one of the recognised Schools of Islamic Sacred Law. MAT will therefore, for the first time, offer the Muslim community a real and true opportunity to settle disputes in accordance with Islamic Sacred Law with the knowledge that the outcome as determined by MAT will be binding and enforceable.[74]

MAT operates under the Arbitration Act 1996.[75] Therefore, its procedural rules require that each tribunal must consist of at least two members, one a scholar of *sharī'a* and the other a solicitor or barrister registered to practice in England or Wales. Although the official website of MAT Matribunal.com doesn't contain any fatwas for Muslim minorities living in Europe, the following statement summarizes the MAT opinion regarding the coexistence of *sharī'a* and non-Islamic legal systems

> We believe in the co-existence of both English law and personal religious laws. We believe that the law of the land in which we live is binding upon each citizen, and we are not attempting to impose Shariah upon anyone. Shariah does however have its place in this society where it is our personal and religious law. What a great achievement it will be if we can produce a result to the satisfaction of both English and Islamic law![76]

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[74] Ibid.

[75] *Arbitration Act 1996* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:
<http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1996/ukpga_19960023_en_1>.

[76] *Muslim Arbitration Tribunal* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:
<http://www.matribunal.com/values.html>.

As Ali *et al.* (2009, p. 16) have argued, female Muslims in the UK oftentimes express dissatisfaction with the manner in which the *khul'* divorce is treated and the lack of impartiality in typical Shari'a Councils which are presided by men. This, among other factors, could probably have led MAT to stress on its webpage that it has "young qualified people, male and female, sitting as members of the Arbitration Tribunal" and that "there will be no race or sex discrimination in this organisation."[77] This statement can in fact resonate with feelings of many young Muslim women who feel that although "English courts do not have the competency to discuss issues of Islamic law," (Ali *et al.* 2009, p. 17) they, particularly in issues regarding divorce and matrimony related problems, provide Muslim women with more protection than traditional Islamic *sharī'a* councils (ibid.). Perhaps as a mean of differentiation of the MAT towards the global Islamic websites, which are often supervised by scholars from Arab Muslim countries such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia, the website Matribunal.com emphasizes that the MAT scholars or lawyers are not from abroad but from within the UK.[78]

Finally, when regarding the online offline interaction we should note that the website Matribunal.com features an application online form which can be used for submitting a request for dispute resolution. By electronically submitting this form, the petitioner submits himself or herself to the jurisdiction of the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal to arbitrate on all matters relating to the particular case.[79] Therefore, the Tribunal does not only transcend the limitations of most of the *sharī'a* councils by successfully integrating

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[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

[79] *Muslim Arbitration Tribunal* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online:

<http://www.matribunal.com/application.html>.

its rulings into the enforceable framework of the English legal system; moreover, it also fully utilizes the possibilities of the Internet to create not only a "bond of trust" between the petitioner and the mufti but an online, legally binding agreement between the two parties in a way known previously rather from the domain of e-commerce and e-government.

In this respect, Bunt (2010) argues that new media and ICT based services have the potential to be a significant channel of influence and authority in Muslim communities. According to him, the modes and communications dynamics of scholars, opinion providers and petitioners (or consumers) are shifting in response to technological developments, while maintaining the essence of long-held traditions of religious authority and interpretation. Again, this is particularly true in the case of Muslim minorities in Europe, where the online counseling, issuing of fatwas, and online and offline arbitration intersect with issues of multiple identities, citizenship, the relationship between the host and migrant communities, legal pluralism, and cultural continuities.

2.7 Concluding Remarks

The case studies provided in this chapter have briefly explored six distinct websites providing normative content in English and Arabic for European Muslim minorities. By no means should this list be considered as an exhaustive one, since there are many similar sites with significant influence[80], and others aimed at Turkish, French, or

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[80] For example, the above-mentioned IslamWay.com; AmrKhaled.net; Bouti.com, Dar-alIfta.org, IslamiCity.com, IslamOnline.net, Islam-qa.com; and others.

German speaking audience. There are also plenty of popular Islamic websites, whose authors deny the concept of fatwa as such and strive for different, non-legalistic interpretations of Islam.[81] As has been stated above, the examples quoted in the case studies stem from a broader corpus of more than 500 analyzed fatwas. Most of these fatwas could actually be subsumed under one of the patterns explored in this chapter, ranging from radical denial of State law to its pragmatic acceptance.

What again has to be emphasized here is the predominantly declarative and symbolic value of a fatwa (Mozaffari 1987, p. 44). Especially in the European context and without any legally-enforceable framework, following a fatwa remains completely deliberate and the latter constitutes more of a legitimization of existing social practice than a normative act *per se* (Caeiro 2004). Moreover, a substantial amount of believers do not perceive Islam primarily as a legal framework, nor do they resort to an Internet *muftī*. As Roy (2004, p. 20) puts it: "Although there is a long tradition of exegesis and fatwa on what a Muslim should or should not do when confronted with a non-Muslim environment and practices, most Muslims find a way to deal with that without contacting Fatwa-Online.com." Furthermore, a considerable number of Muslims are not particularly interested in performing religious practices, while not denying their Muslim identity as such (Rohe 2007, p. 16).

Yet, the popularity of normative-content oriented sites, e.g. the IslamOnline or Amr Khaled,[82] and the successful establishment of some predominantly Internet-based

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[81] For example the North American Muslim intellectual, Muqtedar Khan, and his website *Ijtihād* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.ijtihad.org>.

[82] *Amr Khaled* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-20]. Available online: <http://www.amrkhaled.net>.

muftis, e.g. Ebrahim Desai, indicates the appeal this form of religious guidance has to many believers. As we have already argued, to a large extent the popularity of Internet preachers and muftis converges with the broader transformation of contemporary religiosity, which emphasizes the role of the individual and privatization of faith. Correspondingly, the easily-accessible and searchable databases of fatwas provide pre-set knowledge and codes of behavior, which the individual can choose from. This is even exemplified in the phenomenon of so-called "fatwa shopping", when a person approaches different authorities in order to obtain a fatwa that suits his or her needs (Hosen 2008).

Beyond the emphasis on the individual, another underlying logic of the fatwa-issuing websites is the question of identity. We have already mentioned the Qaradāwī's (2005, p. 7) claim that it is the adherence to *sharī'a* through which Muslim minorities living in non-Muslim societies reaffirm their identity. Yet, as we have demonstrated, *sharī'a* as a legal norm does not survive as such in a non-Muslim environment. Therefore, in the words of Roy (2004, p. 191), it has to be recast either in spiritualist and modern terms, or as a normative code of behavior that draws a clear boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims. From this point of view, the fatwa-issuing websites aimed at Muslim minorities living in Europe play a more effective role in shaping the latter's identities than in the construction of a coherent and sustainable legal framework.

Information and communication technologies cannot have any social or political impact apart from their use by human beings (Kalathil & Boas 2003, p. 2). Indeed, some of the fatwa-issuing websites, e.g. Islam4UK, call for radical rejection of man-made laws and therefore directly challenge the authority of the State and its courts. Yet, the majority of

sites *de facto* recognizes the sovereignty of the State and provides believers with guidelines how to live in accordance with *sharī'a* within a non-Muslim legal system. Inherently, the principles promoted by these sites are based on voluntarily adherence and individual responsibility, since the muftis lack any legal means to enforce their decisions.

In his prescient work, Dasetto (2000) laid down five possible models of settlement of active Islam in Europe. According to him, these are (1) assimilation to the Western model of religion as a private and spiritual sphere; (2) cosmopolitan integration preserving institutionalized cultural references and laws; (3) dissent and rejection of the West and its models; (4) diasporas of networked and self-concerned communities; and (5) geopolitization of minorities as an appendix to the foreign policy of their states of origin. By no means are these models mutually exclusive. The Internet fatwas in fact exemplify the existing as well as the possible future assemblages of Dasetto's model.

In reality, the theoretical frameworks manifested by the various fatwa-issuing websites are mostly already embodied in the practices of European Muslims; albeit to varying degrees. As we have stated above, contrary to the popular notion, *sharī'a* is already applied in Europe today. We have also demonstrated that, beyond the realm of private international law and marriage contracts, *sharī'a* is also incorporated into European legal systems through the institutions of mediation and arbitration, as exemplified in the existence of Muslim Arbitration Tribunal. Moreover, several autonomous tribunals have been established that echo the Uthaymeen's idea of *sharī'a* judges, e.g. the Islamic Shari'a Council in UK which provides Islamic divorce independently of and separately from the United Kingdom's legal system.

It is not only the Muslim authorities who formulate ideas challenging the legal status quo. In his highly-publicized speech for Radio 4's *World at One* programme in February 2008, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, said that the adoption of certain aspects of *sharī'a* law in the United Kingdom seems unavoidable; specifically referring to family law and marital issues. He argues that this step would help maintain social cohesion and points out that similar Orthodox Jewish courts (Beth Din) are already in operation in the UK.[83] Similarly, Lord Chief Justice Phillips stated in his speech at the East London Muslim Centre in July 2008 that the UK already goes a long way towards embracing *sharī'a* in the context of family disputes. He did however lay down clear limitations for such a process

> There is no reason why principles of Sharia Law, or any other religious code should not be the basis for mediation or other forms of alternative dispute resolution. It must be recognised, however, that any sanctions for a failure to comply with the agreed terms of the mediation would be drawn from the laws of England and Wales. So far as aspects of matrimonial law are concerned, there is a limited precedent for English law to recognise aspects of religious laws, although when it comes to divorce this can only be effected in accordance with the civil law of this country.[84]

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[83] Sharia law in UK is (unavoidable). *BBC News* [online]. 7 February 2008, [cit. 2010-11-16]. Available online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7232661.stm>.

[84] *Muslim Arbitration Tribunal* [online]. [cit. 2009-4-25]. Available online:
<http://www.matribunal.com/downloads/LCJ_speech.pdf>.

The public statements of various religious and State authorities take us back to the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, as a sphere between the civil society and the state, where critical public issues of general interest are discussed. As Casanova (1994, p. 228) has poignantly stated, "By entering the public sphere and forcing the public discussion or contestation of certain issues, religions force modern societies to reflect publicly and collectively upon their normative structures." As we have demonstrated, the authority of European legal systems is not contested by the virtual fatwa-issuing websites, but reconfigured by the very real behavior of concrete social actors. Nevertheless, it is increasingly on the Internet and in the multiple public spheres it creates where these new configurations are constantly negotiated and new models of European Muslim identity are shaped. Therefore, the fatwa-issuing websites constitute a prominent example of how technology reconfigures the politics of religious authority in the contexts of globalization, deterritorialization, and transnationalism.

Beyond analyzing the content of the above-mentioned websites, this chapter also aimed to explore the connections between the respective websites and global and local Islamic institutions, the interactions between online and offline Muslim communities, and the ways in which the online counseling shapes offline religious manifestations and practices.

Despite the different religious and ideological background of the respective sites, they all manifest high level of media hybridization and interdependency. This can be particularly observed in the assemblage of textual and audiovisual normative content offered by Fatwa-Online; in the virtual "live fatwa sessions" or the hajj simulation recreated in the immersive environment of *Second Life* sponsored by IslamOnline; and

in the "legally binding" electronic submissions provided by Muslim Arbitrational Tribunal. The underlying logic behind these technological innovations could be perceived as an attempt to transcend the depersonalization associated with electronic media and create a "bond of trust" between the petitioners and the muftis, thus asserting the latter's authority. Mandaville (2003b, p. 136) notes that how Islam becomes represented in new forms and via new media has special significance in the context of "the fragmentation of traditional sources of religious authority." This means that "the traditional 'ulama are increasingly finding themselves bypassed in favor of, for instance, Muslim youth workers, in the search for religious knowledge" (p. 137).

As this chapter has demonstrated, the traditional and established religious authorities are apparently aware that their message in order to be heard has be recast in accordance with new cultural and media ecology. Moreover, they proved very successful in utilizing the new media technologies. Yet, at the same time, the technology enabling the communications between individual petitioners and religious scholars favors bottom-up approach since the fatwas issued depend on the petitions the website has aggregated. In this respect, El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009, p. 217) argue that the Internet constitutes a new manifestation of a Muslim *umma* that is not based on authority, but on public participation. In other words, there is an independence from traditional religious authority and institutional hegemony, where the discourse is driven by the concerns of publicly oriented individuals rather than by institutional powers. This is supported by the fact that it is the petitioners, not the muftis, who set the agenda for the issues to be discussed on most of the websites that we analyzed. By the same token, Ali *et al.* (2009, p. 50) suggest, that fatwa represents a bottom-up approach "to informing and influencing the formal legal system and is representative of the ordinary

Muslim's concern regarding 'Islamicness' of actions and issues around her/him."
Nevertheless, despite the agenda being set by the individual petitioners, it is the
traditional established authority, oftentimes closely linked to existing religious
institutions, who issues the fatwa or give the advice. Therefore, I argue that the Internet
is in the long term capable of reinforcing culturally dominant social networks and that
while fueling individualization and privatization of faith, it could simultaneously assert
conformity and compliance with established religious structures. At the same time, the
success of the global Islamic websites operated from Arab Muslim countries among
European Muslim minorities indicates that "the search for religious authority shows that
Muslims in the West aspire to a transnational community united in belief and practice"
(Walker 2007).

Moreover, the case studies show that the growing interdependency of various media
outlets featured by the Islamic websites is coupled by similar hybridization to the
discourse. Arguably, one important factor that has contributed to the increasing
accessibility of the Internet technology in the virtual Islamic public sphere beyond the
circle of the religious elite or *'ulama* is its vernacular nature. This feature has led to the
"reintellectualization of Islamic discourse." Eickelman and Anderson (1999, p. 12;
quoted in El-Nawawy & Khamis 2009, p. 70), who coined the term described it as
follows

> By reintellectualization, we mean presenting Islamic doctrine and discourse
> in accessible, vernacular terms, even if this contributes to basic
> reconfiguration of doctrine and practice. Reintellectualization has
> sometimes been thought of as the province of folk or local Islam, a category

that has been criticized for deflecting attention from the presence of the global in the local throughout the Muslim world. But more is involved with new media and new people: Islamic discourse has not only moved to the vernacular and become accessible to significantly wider publics, it has also become framed in styles of reasoning and forms of argument that draw on wider, less exclusive or erudite bodies of knowledge, including those of applied science and engineering.

As El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009, p. 71) put it, the vernacular nature of Islamic websites providing normative content is not the only factor that has contributed to the popularity and wider audience; another important factor is the wide variety of controversial issues that have not often been discussed in the conventional Islamic circles.

Finally, all the concepts of Muslim identity provided by the various online platforms explored in the case studies essentially constitute differentiated responses to the question how to live in accordance with Islamic law in a modern, globalized society. Particularly given the media attention the fundamentalist or *salafi* concepts of Islam and Islamic law, as expressed e.g. by the website Fatwa-Online, gain in the global news media, we are today in crucial need of critically understanding the other dimensions of the modern Islamic revival movements, which, according to Khan (2006, p. xiii) advocate a "moderate discourse that seeks to find a place for Islam as well as democracy (and to) explore the contentious domain where freedom and faith, democracy and theology negotiate a mutually compatible future." Such discourse, as demonstrated in the establishment of Muslim Arbitration Tribunal or in fatwas

disseminated by the former IslamOnline,[85] reinterprets the traditional Islamic law in the

light of contemporary conditions and provides for a modern, global Muslim identity.

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[85] See footnote 50.

3. New Media and the Construction of Muslim Identity

As I have shown in the previous chapter, information and communication technology (ICT), particularly the Internet, and its possible role in the construction of contemporary Islamic knowledge has been the subject of intensive academic interest in the last decade. The primary interest of many of these studies was on the possibilities of ICT in the process of democratization of Muslim societies. Therefore, a number of pioneering studies focus on the question of authority and lay interpretations of Islam and fatwa-issuing websites (Anderson 1997, 2003; Bunt 2000, 2003; Brückner 2001). Later on several authors suggested that ICT and the Internet tend to displace the interpretive authority from scholars towards selective personal interpretation, contributing to the so-called processes of "individualization" and "privatization" of Islam (Caeiro 2003b; Vertovec 2003).

Indeed, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, the above-mentioned processes apply to Muslim minority settings where, given the absence of institutionalized and traditional authorities, fatwas play a key role in the construction of Islamic knowledge. On the other hand, when we transcend the media-centric logic and analyze the influence of ICT and new media in the broader context of diverse social settings, the results in Muslim majority societies appear to be more ambiguous. Of course we can find many examples of challenges to the traditional and established authorities via the Internet in the Middle East, like the cases of Iranian scholar Hossein Ali Montazeri (Abdo 2000), Saudi Arabian Shaykh Muhammad al-Mohaisany (Bunt 2005) or the Egyptian on-line

newspaper *Al-Sha'b* associated with *Hizb al-amal* party (Abdel-Latif 2004). Yet these examples appear to be isolated and anecdotal in the broader context. Indeed, does this "cyber-resistance" pose a challenge to established authorities within Muslim societies? As we have seen this does not necessarily mean undermining those authorities in the long term. Apart from increasing possibilities of state control over the content of digital media, in the last few years various institutions and formal authorities have started to reclaim the public sphere created by ICT and the Internet by setting their own web pages and producing their own digital media content. In the same time the increasing penetration of the Internet in the Arab and Muslim world can bolster the economic development, as well as increase general public satisfaction and thus favor institutions and authorities in an indirect manner (Kalathil & Boas 2003, p. 8). For example, in her research concerning the role of the Internet in Kuwait, Wheeler (2005, p. 187) concluded that the local cultural values and politics are aided by global technologies used to enhance the place of Islamic conservatism in everyday life.

As I have already noted, the information and communication technology can not have any social or political impact apart from its use by human beings (Kalathil & Boas 2003, p. 2). Latest research suggests that the dominant modes of use of the Internet in the Arab and Muslim world do not differ significantly from its uses elsewhere (Bunt 2006; Wheeler 2005; Abdulla 2007; Hofheinz 2007). Bunt (2006, p. 154) even argues that the patterns of Internet use constitute mainly of general surfing habits like retrieving information about popular culture, reading news, chatting and gaming, whereas the access to specific Islamic content represents only a small part of it. Similar examples are to be found in the work of Hofheinz (2007, p. 75), although he suggests that religion has a greater weight on the Arab Internet than elsewhere. The results of

comprehensive fieldwork conducted by Abdulla (2007, p. 143) among the students of American University in Cairo also concur with past research of different Internet user population, indicating five primary motives for using the Internet as information seeking, surveillance, entertainment, personal utility, and social interaction.

Several authors have already expressed concern that written content of digital media, including the Internet, is not necessarily representative in the relation to Islam and new media. For example, Allievi (2003, p. 15) claims that non-written media are more pervasive and more consumed than others by Muslim audience. He argues that current Islamic discourse belongs far more to "oral culture" than to written production. This claim pertains particularly to the production of knowledge in the Arab region. As Amin and Gher (2000, p. 136) put it

> Arabic cultural heritage must be considered when trying to evaluate the impact of digital communication in the Arab world. Primary among many cultural issues is the fact that the oral tradition is the preferred mode of communication among Arabic peoples.[86]

Moreover, non-written media play an important role in the production of Islamic knowledge in the Arab and Muslim world also due to the generally lower literacy rates (Boyd 2003, p. 241; UNESCO 2010). Another important factor which must be taken into consideration is the penetration of the Internet and other ICT in the region. Although the first has grown considerably in the last few years, as we have shown in the Chapter 1, it still remains relatively low in comparison to the Western world, whereas

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[86] See also Boyd (2003, p. 241).

television, video, CD and DVD players pervade much of the society (Amin & Gher 2000, p. 114; Boyd 2003, p. 252; Internet World Stats 2010). Alterman (2001) presumed that the Middle East's "mid-tech" revolution – the widespread diffusion of 1970's technologies, like videocassettes, photocopiers and satellite television – would be more socially and politically consequential than the Internet in the short to medium term. Although today this list should more correspondingly encompass audio cassettes, CDs and DVDs, video games, MP3 players and others, the fundamental factors determining the importance of these "small media" devices remain the same, i.e. the dominant oral culture, low literacy rates, and wide, inexpensive availability. The latter is to a great extent the result of loose or missing copyright enforcement in most Arab and Muslim countries (BSA 2007). Throughout most of the Arab and Muslim world, consumers can buy unofficial copies of audio sermons, music, latest movies or video games for very low prices in semi-official stores or from a plentiful supply of street vendors (like the well known *sūq al-sarūja* in Damascus or *shāri'a al-shawarbī* in Cairo).

Most academic research of ICT and the Internet in the Arab and Muslim world is based on written materials (mainly websites and blogs) with an emphasis on normative Islamic content, e.g. fatwas and lectures. Other non-written digital media remain profoundly understudied, in spite of their arguable social and political impact. This paradigm prevails not only in our preferences and evaluations of primary sources – where something that is "written" can be quoted and put into a bibliography, i.e., included in the academic rituals – but also in the very way we understand cultural transmission and its methods. As Allievi (2003, p. 15) says, "We often read Islam through the literature it produces, and from this we deduce Muslims, using a procedure that appears 'natural' to

us or which is at any rate habitual for us, whilst it is only 'cultural'." These habitual mechanisms have to be taken into account, particularly when it comes to research on information and communication technology (ICT) and the new patterns of media production and consumption.

In this respect, Ong (1982) coined the term "secondary orality" to describe the tendency of electronic media to echo the communication patterns of oral cultures. His work seems especially prescient in light of recent ICT developments, which have enabled new forms of audiovisual communication, social networking, and non-written individual expression (e.g., video blogging, posting on YouTube, etc.). In the linguistic and cultural context of the Arab world, the notion of oral tradition reveals two important facts. First, given generally lower literacy rates, it has to be taken into account that Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is not the primary communication mode for most of the Arab public. Nevertheless, at the same time, the written sources studied by Western academia are almost exclusively in MSA. On the contrary, non-written popular media are produced in various linguistic modes, usually combining MSA with a local variation of colloquial Arabic. Second, spoken Arabic offers greater space for structural and semantic repetition, which ensures both linguistic cohesion and rhetorical force. In the Arabic language and the Arab-Islamic cultural tradition, repetition is often used for creating rhetorical presence, which enhances the persuasive potential of the discourse (Johnstone 1991). As I will demonstrate below, the concept of orality is significant both to Islamic video clips and video games, and particularly to their instructive and educational content.

Therefore, in this chapter I aim to transcend this written-media centric logic and consider how consumer identity and identification are constructed in non-written digital media, particularly video games, video clips and other "neglected" digital media produced in the contemporary Muslim communities.[87] In particular, this chapter analyzes contemporary Arab video game production, utilizing the theoretical framework of so-called "neglected media", and explore this media type's potential in shaping of Muslim identities. First, it defines neglected media and set their production and consumption into broader political, cultural, and linguistical context of the Arab world. Based on content analysis of more than fifty games and interviews with major game producers, I argue that the developing Arab video game industry plays a significant role in the reproduction of Islamic culture and could therefore be perceived as one of the most cutting-edge conveyors of contemporary Islam. On a more general level, this chapter aims to lay down a theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing video games from the perspective of information science, communication studies, and cultural studies.

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[87] Some of the material presented in this chapter appeared as ŠISLER, Vít. 2009. Video Games, Video Clips, and Islam: New Media and the Communication of Values. *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, p. 231–258. ISBN 1443814059; and ŠISLER, Vít. 2008. Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2008, vol. 2, no. 11, p. 203-220. ISSN 1367-5494.

3.1 Neglected Media, Youth Culture, and Identity

Reichmuth and Werning (2006, p. 47) introduced an umbrella term "neglected media," which encompasses a broad variety of popular and pervasive media systematically omitted by academia. According to their definition

> Neglected media exhibit strong popular appeal and economic relevance, contrasted by lack of cultural prestige and scientific coverage. Often, they have a profound impact on the collective imagination, although this so-called passive knowledge is seldom accepted as culturally relevant.

Neglected media could include audio clips, video clips, video games, comic strips and others. By no means should this list be considered a closed one, for new forms of digital media are emerging almost overnight and quickly gaining a broad audience (like videos shared on YouTube, podcasting, *machinimas*, etc.). In other words, neglected media are not defined by any specific form, but rather by their pervasiveness, social relevance, and academic marginalization. For the purpose of Arab and Islamic studies neglected media should encompass also audio *khutāb* (sermons) and lectures, disseminated both offline (on audio cassettes, CDs and DVDs) and online (MP3 and video downloads, podcasting). Such lectures are a popular genre in the Arab world and constitute an important part of *al-islām al-sawtī* (voice Islam).

The production and consumption of neglected media have to be analyzed in the broader context of youth popular culture. By the term "youth popular culture," I mean those cultural texts, artifacts, and practices which are attractive to large numbers of people

from more recent generations, which are often mass-produced on a global scale (Marsh 2005). Popular music, video clips and video games are usually designed with their youth consumer base in mind and tend to incorporate and reflect its tastes, imaginations, and expectations (Reichmuth & Werning 2006, p. 47). At the same time, youth culture and youth as a social group is of growing importance in the contemporary Arab world. According to estimations the region as a whole is very young, with a median age slightly below 22 years; over a third of its population is under 15; and only 6% is aged 60 and over (Tabutin & Schoumaker 2005, p. 564). The issue of identity construction among variant youth subcultures is thus of key importance in understanding the dynamics of present and future of the region's development.

Brown *et al.* (1994, p. 813) have reflected the role of media in the construction of youth identity

> Individuals actively and creatively sample available cultural symbols, myths, and rituals as they produce their identities. For teens, mass media are central to this process because they are a convenient source of cultural options.

Other authors correspondingly suggest that new media plays a central role in the construction of children's social identities (Marsh 2005). Nevertheless, "identity" in digital media culture is often understood through acts that dislocate embodied identity from the self online and how such a dislocation enables one to enact multiple, contradictory identities. In fact, very few theories of identity in digital media culture tackle the ways that virtual identities are deeply connected to the non-digital world

(Murphy 2004).   Since the process of individual identity construction is an ongoing reflexive process between the individual and the social surroundings, the context, in which the above mentioned cultural symbols, myths, and rituals appear, is of paramount importance.   Among the most important aspects determining the Arab video game production is the local perception of the medium *per se* as predominantly Western, i.e. non-Islamic and in some case even morally "corrupted."

The alleged impact of popular digital media on Muslim youth and the fact that substantial amount of its production is of Western (or more generally, non-Islamic) origin constantly concerns many researchers, authorities, and public policy makers in the Arab and Muslim world.   For example, some researchers suggest that watching satellite television is linked to a desire for materialism and Westernization among Egyptian youth, including "the desire to leave the country, to indulge in fast food, and to follow the latest in Western style and fashion" (Elewa 1998; Qulaini 1997; both quoted from Abdulla 2007, p. 22).   Others argue that contemporary video clips exhibit explicit sexuality, commodification of female bodies, and desensitization to violence, which corrupts Muslim youth's moral behavior (Darwish 2007).   By the same token, the fact that open access to various forms of new media and particularly the Internet is seen by many authorities as a threat to Arab or Muslim culture, values, and traditions, is repeatedly confirmed by several researchers (e.g. Amin & Gher 2000; Boyd 2003; Abdulla 2007; Mernissi 2006; Wheeler 2005).

3.2 Islamic Revival and Consumer Culture

The term "Islamic revival" has been commonly used as an umbrella term, referring to various contemporary Islamic movements and their emerging presence in the public space in recent decades. Lapidus (1997) defines "Islamic revival" as both a response to the conditions of modernity – to the centralization of state power and the development of capitalist economies – and a cultural expression of modernity. The revivalist movements emphasize Islamic values and strive to cope with contemporary problems through a renewed commitment to the basic principles, though not the historical details, of Islam. Mahmood (2004) recognizes three important components that make up the Islamic revival: state-oriented political groups and parties, militant Islamists, and a network of socio-religious, non-profit organizations that provide charitable services to the poor and perform the work of proselytizing. At the same time, she stresses that the term refers not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups, but also more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim communities. According to her, this sensibility manifests itself, among others ways, in marked displays of religious sociability, including adoption of the *hijāb* (veil) or brisk consumption and production of religious media and literature.

In this chapter, I use the term "Islamic revival" in its broader sense of Islamization of the socio-cultural landscape of media and society. This refers specifically to the growing role Islam and Islamic piety play in the public space, which is visible and audible through books, music, clothes, and new media (Olsson 2007). As I have mentioned above, most media analyzed within this chapter are targeted to younger generations. Young people, in turn, constitute a large and creative part of the Islamic

revival (Abu-Lughod 1998). They consume new technologies and are innovative, when it comes to new political organizations and social movements, including social networks enabled by ICT. Media producers are well aware of this fact and therefore Islamic video games and video clips are designed with the youth consumer base in mind and tend to incorporate and reflect its tastes, fantasies, and expectations. Abaza (2005) describes similar linkages as "a happy marriage between religion and consumer culture in the making" (p. 39). This phenomenon, which Haenni (2005) calls "market Islam," is by no means limited to the realm of new media. It is also becoming increasingly visible in other segments of popular culture as well, such as markets for toys (Kuppinger 2009), for women's fashion, or for rap music (Alim 2005). The fact that culture and religion are increasingly becoming a market issue prevents clear distinction of the religious, educational, and economic motivations among media producers – if such a thing were ever possible. As I will demonstrate below, the Islamic new media market is open to various subjects with significantly different backgrounds, motivations, and agendas.

3.3   Video Games and Video Clips in the Arab world

Video games and video clips stand for emblematic examples of neglected media. Both constitute a popular leisure time activity for a substantial part of Arab youth. At the same time, they are increasingly gaining economic and social relevance within the fabric of Arab consumer culture. Helal Saeed Almarri, general director of Dubai World Trade Centre, has recently stated that digital gaming has turned out to be a very important market in the Arab world, with not only the young population of the region,

but also a wider adult audience increasingly investing a higher proportion of its disposable income in specialized hardware and software (Fakhruddin 2008).

However, the rising video game culture is not limited to only the wealthy Gulf states. The growing emergence of cyber cafés facilitates wide access by consumers in many Muslim countries to the latest game industry products (Baune 2005). As Abdulla (2007) reports in her survey, there is currently a huge number of internet cafes in Egypt: even in the most rural and poorest areas of the country. Especially in *sha'bī* (popular) quarters of Arab cities, one can find plenty of specialized cyber cafés dedicated to gaming. They are equipped with networked computers and occupied till late at night by a predominantly young, male audience – playing games and socializing around these activities. I have to emphasize that this emerging "gaming culture" is not characterized only through playing the games, but through the systems of exchange and discussion that surround them; watching and commenting others playing, swapping of software and cheats, downloading new games from peer to peer networks, etcetera, i.e. activities seen as centrally important aspects of what makes games an important social activity (Facer 2003, p. 8). Thus, the consumption of games is by no means only a passive process, but rather it is a dynamic interaction between production and fulfillment of expectations, meanings, and messages.

Unlike other audiovisual media, video games immerse consumers into action and engagement, rather than inaction and passive reception. At the same time, they provide youngsters with a convenient source of cultural symbols, myths, and rituals as they produce their identities. The question of identity construction is thus central to video

games, since they enable a risk-free and socially acceptable way of engaging in a virtual body play. As Murphy (2004, p. 224) puts it

> One gets to repeatedly 'do over' an action or re-live an experience infinitely until one has perfected the necessary game skill to advance through the game. This play with the virtual body, which we could also call an avatar or what gamers call a player-character, is also a play with identity.

Conversely, video and audio clips have had a presence in the region for a long time and have already established themselves as important conveyors of religious, cultural, and political messages. Anyone who has carried out fieldwork research in the Arab world has most likely noticed the overwhelming number of audiocassettes, CDs, DVDs, and VCDs with music, movies, lectures, sermons, and other content that are available on every street corner. These media pervade much of society and play an important role in the reproduction of culture. Most popular Islamic lay preachers make sure that their lectures are available both in print and in audio format (Olsson 2007, p. 8).

3.4 Theoretical and Methodological Framework

In the last few years a new critical approach towards video games has emerged, largely referred to as "game studies," which places video games in their broader social context (Frasca 1999, 2004; Juul 2005; Prensky 2005; Bogost 2006). Game studies, as a relatively new discipline, utilize a large spectrum of research ventures, coming mostly from literary and film studies, cultural studies, psychology and computer science

(Reichmuth & Werning 2006, p. 46). Unlike film or other audiovisual media, videogames are interactive which implies that any content analysis has to cover three intertwined levels: audiovisual signifiers, narrative structure and a game play, which is the rule system governing the players' interaction with the game. On all these levels, cultural, social, or even politically relevant messages can be communicated to the players. The hidden system of rules is particularly important, because it shapes and limits the choices and decisions player can make during the game. Therefore, as Turkle (1995) notes, the very process of game-playing can be viewed as learning to understand the "rules code." In a similar vein, Frasca (2004, p. 21) argues that

> Video games not only represent reality, but also model it through simulations. This form of representation is based on rules that mimic the behavior of the simulated systems. However, unlike narrative authors, simulation authors do not represent a particular event, but a set of potential events. Because of this, we have to think about their objects as systems and consider what laws govern their behaviors.

The interactive element of game play is of crucial importance for the gaming experience, yet it poses substantial theoretical and methodological difficulties for analysis. The game rules cannot be described using classical audiovisual methods like segmentation into sequences and shot-by-shot analysis. Several methodological approaches exist for the description of non-determinist structures in game narration. For this chapter's purposes I have utilized Finite State Machines and Petri Nets analysis for game description (Natkin & Vega 2003; Brom & Abonyi 2006) and segmentation and shot-by-shot analysis for video clip description (Vanoye & Goliot-Lété 2001).

Bogost (2007, p. vii) suggests that video games are an expressive medium, which represent how real and imagined systems work, and invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them. Regarding the above-mentioned rule systems, Bogost argues that video games open a new domain for persuasion and instruction, thanks to their core representational mode, procedurality. He calls this new form "procedural rhetoric" and defines it as the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions, rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures. As Bogost (2007, p. ix) explains

> This type of persuasion is tied to the core affordances of the computer: computers run processes, they execute calculations and rule-based symbolic manipulations. […] Among computer software, I want to suggest that videogames have unique persuasive power. […] In addition to becoming instrumental tools for institutional goals, video games can also disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change.

Just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively, procedural rhetoric is the practice of authoring arguments through computation and execution of processes. In the case of video games, the term procedural rhetoric means that the rules of the game themselves convey a persuasive message to the player. Therefore, it is precisely the procedural rhetoric of games, which I analyze in the following case studies, drawing from FSM and Petri Nets analysis of the game play, description of visual signifiers, and accompanying text materials (such as manuals and booklets). The materials for this

research were gathered during fieldwork in Syria (2005), Lebanon (2005), and Egypt (2006, 2007-2008). A significant number of games and clips have been downloaded from freely accessible websites, such as You Tube, Islamic Torrents, etc. The materials include more than 300 video games and video clips. All the European and American games were played in English whereas the Arab games were played in Arabic. Moreover, during the fieldwork in Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon, I have interviewed several key game designers and developers. These interviews were recorded in Arabic.

As has been mentioned above, video games constitute an important part of the entertainment media fabric in the Arab world. Until recently games of western origin have almost exclusively dominated the market. Unsurprisingly, local authorities, researchers, and game designers are concerned about the negative influence of western games on Arab youth. For example, an Egyptian psychoanalyst, Dr. Khalil Fadel (quoted in Mernissi 2006, p. 121), stated that "games invade our children's rooms and are available in the cyber-cafes which now exist on every street corner." According to Fadel, games are responsible for inciting violent behavior among Arab youth because they glorify "solitude, narcissism, and hatred of the other," all of which reflect the cultural choices of the Westerners who produce them. By the same token, Kuwaiti Imam Nabil Al Awadi criticizes western video games for "corrupting morals."[88] As a result, some western games have even been banned in several Arab countries, usually

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[88] Washington Post: Is There a Video Game War Between Islam & the West? *Game Politics*, [online]. 2006, October 9, [cit. 2010-11-14]. Available online: <http://www.gamepolitics.com/2006/10/09/washington-post-is-there-a-video-game-war-between-islam-the-west>.

for explicit display of sexuality or violence, as was the case of the game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, Inc. 2004) in the United Arab Emirates.[89]

Similar criticism of violent video games and their promotion of aggressive behavior is regularly voiced in the United States and Europe (Anderson & Bushman 2001). Yet, Western video games are furthermore criticized in the Arab world for misrepresenting Islam and Muslims, such as the game *Call for Duty*.[90]

In fact, a substantial part of video games take place in the Middle East or anonymous, yet overtly Middle Eastern, settings. The ways in which Western games represent Middle East, Arabs and Muslims have been already analyzed by both Western and Middle Eastern scholars (Marashi 2001; Reichmuth & Werning 2006). Generally speaking, as I will discuss in the following chapter, these games exhibit very similar stereotyping and schematizations already known from other media. The two dominant modes of representation can be labeled as "digital orientalism" and a conflictual framework based on current political and military affairs. Particularly strategy and action games (esp. first-person shooters) based on real or fictitious Middle Eastern conflicts tend to portray Arabs and Muslims as enemies in the narrative framework of fundamentalism and international terrorism. These games in particular have already

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[89] GTA IV Banned in UAE. *Game Politics*, [online]. 2008, May 3, [cit. 2010-11-14]. Available online: <http://www.gamepolitics.com/2008/05/03/gta-iv-banned-in-uae>.

[90] Washington Post: Is There a Video Game War Between Islam & the West? *Game Politics*, [online]. 2006, October 9, [cit. 2010-11-14]. Available online: <http://www.gamepolitics.com/2006/10/09/washington-post-is-there-a-video-game-war-between-islam-the-west>.

raised serious concern among researchers and game designers in the Arab world and influenced local game production.

3.5   Representation of Arabs and Muslims in Video Games

The term "representation" refers to the construction of meaning through symbols and images.   In the digital age, video games have established themselves as a form of mainstream media that shapes our comprehension and understanding of the world by constructing, conveying and iterating various representations.   Galloway (2006, p. 71) has extended the traditional debates concerning representation into the realm of video games, considering "whether images (or language) are a faithful, mimetic mirror of reality thereby offering some unmediated truth about the world, or conversely whether images are a separate, constructed medium thereby standing apart from the world in a separate semantic zone."   According to Galloway, the discursive of visual or textual representation of meaning is no longer sufficient in game studies.   Instead the actions and the game world in which they transpire must be analyzed.

In-game representations of Arabs and Muslims have to be contextualized in a broader narrative structure that covers Islam as it appears in news and popular media (Said 1978, 1997; Shaheen 2000; Poole 2006; Wingfield & Karaman 2001; Pintak 2006; Karim 2006).   The dominant mode of representation of Arab and Muslim cultures in European and American media generally exploit stereotypical generalizations and clichés. As Wingfield and Karaman (2001, p. 132) have noted

The Arab world – twenty two countries, the locus of several world religions, a multitude of ethnic and linguistic groups, and hundreds of years of history – is reduced to a few simplistic images.

Nevertheless, in the post 9/11 world bi-polarized rhetoric has intensified in both Western and Arab media. The dichotomy between "us" and "them" helps to reinforce simplistic ideas of a collective Self and its hostile Other. Recent surveys and research have revealed some disturbing findings about how the Muslims are being "othered" in European and American media

1. The dominant discourses overwhelmingly present most followers of Islam as a threat (Karim 2006; Poole 2002; Richardson 2004).

2. Islam is most likely linked with terrorism (Karim 2006; Miller 2006; Manning 2006).

3. The representation of "ordinary Muslims" is marginalized (Richardson 2004).

4. A conflictual framework dominates (Karim 2006; Manning 2006).

Particularly significant among these is the research of Shaheen (1984, 2000, 2001), who has studied the manner in which popular culture has projected and reified images of Muslim Arabs for more than two decades. Shaheen presents us with an analysis of selected media portraits, paying specific attention to American television programs and motion pictures and the impact that these images have on Arab and Muslim identities. The stereotypes he has found, he argues (Shaheen 2000, p. 2, 4), can lower self-esteem, injure innocents, impact policies, and encourage divisiveness

On the screen, the Muslim Arab continues to surface as the threatening cultural Other. […] He/She lacks a human face and lives in a mythical kingdom of endless desert dotted with oil wells, tents, run-down mosques, palaces, goats, and camels.

Video games, as "cultural artifacts," presumably don't stand outside of these broader tendencies. Moreover, they seem to exploit the above-mentioned stereotypes and clichés in more apparent manner than other forms of media. As Reichmuth and Werning (2006) have argued, stereotypical representations tend to be reproduced in neglected media in more explicit forms partly because these media are considered less relevant in cultural discourse and thus less subject to media critique.

At the same time video games possess certain specific, distinguishing features. Frasca (2004, p. 93) suggested that game simulations fundamentally possess the potential for developing a tolerant attitude

Unlike narrative, simulations are a kaleidoscopic form of representation that can provide us with multiple and alternative points of view. By accepting this paradigm, players can realize that there are many possible ways to deal with their personal and social reality. Hopefully, this might lead to the development of a tolerant attitude that accepts multiplicity as the rule and not the exception.

Thus between the more critical argument of Reichmuth and Werning and the supportive outlook of Frasca exists a certain tension: do video games merely reinforce and intensify received cultural stereotypes, or do they contain the potential for challenging and undermining these stereotypes?

In this chapters I am addressing the apparent discrepancy between the above-mentioned statements and argue that although the production of European and American mainstream video games exhibit a strong cultural bias when constructing and reinforcing stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims, the medium possess the potentiality to deliver culturally balanced representations. I will demonstrate this by examining iconographical representations of Muslims and Arabs, narrative structures and game play in European and American video games. Furthermore, the Chapter 3.5.4 analyzes genuine attempts to transcend the simplifying patterns of representation in video games which can be found in the emerging genre of so-called "serious games." In this respect the potentialities of simulation, as proposed by Frasca, are investigated in practice. Finally, in the Chapter 3.6, I will examine how these misrepresentations directly concern Arab game designers and have influenced local game production. Essentially, I will demonstrate how video game creators esteem games introducing "their" point of view, but will argue that this Arab and Islamic point of view does *not necessarily* destroy or subvert bi-polar cultural representations.

Research examining ethnic and racial issues in video games is to date relatively sparse (Everret 2005; Chan 2005; Leonard 2006). Everret (2005) has analyzed the ways in which video games reinforce, reject, or alter iconographical representations. Similarly, Chan (2005) has suggested that we develop a critical attentiveness to the constituencies

of racialized difference and the ways in which these differences are structured and represented in game world contexts. Leonard (2006) has described the so-called "emerging military entertainment complex" in the US and the various tropes of representing the enemy in war games.

Symbolic and ideological dimensions of in-game representational politics related to Arabs and Muslims have been analysed from different perspectives (Machin & Suleiman 2006; Marashi 2001; Reichmuth & Werning 2006). Marashi (2001) has introduced the stereotypical modes of representation of Arabs in selected combat video games focusing on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Reichmuth and Werning (2006) have described the exploitation of Oriental *topoi* in various genres of western video games. Finally, Machin and Suleiman (2006) have compared the discursive of two Arab and American war video games, focusing on the ways in which they recontextualize and frame real-world events.

3.5.1 Orientalism in the Digital Age

Video games inherently provide a schematized image of the world. Game characters, apart from the heroes who posses background and personality, are often being depicted by several distinctive symbols only. The in-game surroundings and setting are similarly frequently rendered by iteration of limited number of textures and schemes. This also applies to the considerable amount of games which adopt Middle Eastern settings in quasi-historical or fantasy manner, e.g. *Prince of Persia* (Broderbund 1989); *The Magic of Scheherazade* (Cultural Brain 1989); *Arabian Nights* (Krisalis 1993); *Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse* (SSI 1994); *Beyond Oasis* (Sega 1995); *Persian Wars* (Cryo 2001);

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Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones (Ubisoft 2005) etc. Although some of these games stand out due to their graphics or plot and are considered milestones within their genre, such as *Prince of Persia* or *Al-Qadim*, they more or less share the visual and narrative features of "Orientalist" imagery.

Said, in his classic work (1978), has analyzed the "Orientalist" discourse of 19th and early 20th century which re-creates Islamic society as a timeless and exotic entity. Fine arts and photography which presented the Middle East in a naive and historicizing way had, according to Said, served to exclude it from the "modernity" and thus have endorsed the patronizing and colonial approach of real politics. When examining the visual signifiers used by the above-mentioned games to create the "Middle Eastern" impression, we find very much the same patterns. These include motifs such as headscarves, turbans, scimitars, tiles, and camels, character concepts such as caliphs, Bedouins, djinns, belly dancers and Oriental topoi such as deserts, minarets, bazaars, and harems. However, as Reichmuth and Werning (2006, p. 47) have noted, Said's concept that the Western imagination construes the Orient as one ahistorical entity, conflating historical fantasies with contemporary reality, is usually not evident in video games. Games portraying a contemporary and a historical/ fantastical Middle East constitute separate categories, mostly using different imagery, narrative and game play, as we will see below.

Barthes (1982, p. 195) gives a diagnosis of how imitative arts comprise two messages: "a denoted message, which is the analogon itself, and a connoted message, which is the matter in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it." Unlike the fine arts video games often contain a narrative. Although this narrative

usually serves only as an introduction to a larger "quest," together with the images and game play it shapes the broader connoted message of the game as a whole. In the majority of the model games analyzed in this section the plot begins with the kidnapping of a woman (princess, sister, daughter) by an evil character (vizier, caliph, demon) and the hero's in-game *raison d'etre* is to save her and gain revenge. (In *Al-Qadim*, to the contrary the caliph's beautiful daughter Kara is a final reward for the young hero.) In *Prince of Persia*, *Arabian Nights* and *The Magic of Scheherazade* the hero is unjustly imprisoned in a caliph's dungeon and his quest is to save himself from beheading, in *XZR* (Renovation Game 1988) he has to assassinate the caliph. Although these narratives are typical for common medieval fantasy settings, such imagery is particularly dominant in the frame of reference to the "Middle East," reinforcing stereotypical notions of arbitrary cruelty and barbarism.

As was already mentioned, almost all of these games construct "fantastical" Middle East using quasi-historical elements in order to give the player an oriental impression. Only a few games concerning Middle East are based on real historical events, e.g. *Age of Empires 2* (Microsoft 1999) which contains the campaign of Saladin. This is particularly remarkable when compared with the number of European and American historical games which usually provide the player with substantial amount of factual information. On the other hand, the narrative of the above-mentioned games evokes realm of *Thousand and One Nights*, constructing Middle East as a place without history. This prevalent "Orientalist" mode of representation can thus be perceived as an exclusion from constructive discursive, overshadowing the represented contribution to contemporary reality.

3.5.2   Representation of Enemy

When speaking of the "other," we may refer to somebody like ourselves, whom we identify as "one of us," a stranger ("one of them") or even the unknowable other (what Lévinas calls *autrui*). In the majority of action games (esp. first-person shooters, FPS) the point of the game is to kill "others" who typically belong to the category "one of them" (Dahlberg 2005). The key question, then, is how the "others" are constructed by the game.

The Middle East is a favorite virtual battleground. Action-genre games like *War in the Gulf* (Empire 1993); *Delta Force* (NovaLogic 1998); *Conflict: Desert Storm* (SCi Games 2002); *Full Spectrum Warrior* (THQ 2004); *Kuma/War* (Kuma Reality Games 2004) and *Conflict: Global Terror* (SCi Games 2005) take place in the Middle East or in ostensibly anonymous yet overtly Middle Eastern settings.

Generally speaking, the player controls American or coalition forces, while enemy units are controlled by the computer. Playing for the other side is typically not allowed. The enemy is depicted by a set of schematized attributes which often refer to Arabs or Muslims – head cover, loose clothes, dark skin color. In many cases the in-game narrative thereafter links these signifiers to international terrorism and/or Islamist extremism. *Delta Force: Land Warrior* presents a scenario in which Arabs from several countries have banded together into a terrorist organization bent on undermining the activities of the United States. *Full Spectrum Warrior* is set to a fictional but overtly Muslim country of Zekistan, "a haven for terrorists and extremists" (Leonard 2004). While the US or coalition soldiers are usually humanized and individualized, e.g. by

their nicknames or specific visual characteristics, the enemy is collectivized, and linguistically functionalized as "various terrorist groups," "militants," and "insurgents" (Machin & Suleiman 2006). At the same time, the moral mission, professionalism, and courage of the forces controlled by the player are emphasized by the in-game narrative and scripts. The enemies are on the other hand presented in a way which suggests they are not "real" soldiers, which thereby removes legitimacy of their actions (Machin & Suleiman 2006, p. 9). This could be manifested even on the level of the artificial intelligence controlling the enemy soldiers via scripts including undisciplined poses, shouting and yelling (*Full Spectrum Warrior*), raising weapons above their heads, laughing mockingly after they kill (*Delta Force*), etc. Thus the in-game behavior of the enemies to some extent exemplifies the concept of "unlawful combatants." This is reminiscent of what Žižek (2002) has referred to as the Agambenian term of *Homo sacer*, an individual who is foreclosed from the political space proper and whose resistance is regarded as criminal act.

Unlike the games already mentioned, the strategy *Command & Conquer: Generals* allows the player to choose from three sides of a fictional conflict: the United States, China, and the Arab "Global Liberation Army." Again the description of these struggling factions is significant: "The United States has powerful and expensive units, including well-armed infantry and vehicles that can heal themselves. Their superior intelligence capabilities and flexible air force allow them to strike quickly anywhere on the map" (Chick 2003, p. 1). The Arab Global Liberation Army, on the other hand, is distinguished by "terrorists with car bombs and truck bombs, suicide bombers with explosives strapped to their bodies, anthrax and biotoxin delivery systems and angry mobs of Arabs wielding AK-47s" (ibid). In such cases, as Greenfield (2004, p. 2) has

noted, "the choosing to be 'enemy' adds no objectivity, it just makes it harder to win – the enemy is still depicted in racist terms."

Nina Huntemann stated in an interview with Barron (2004) that "9/11 is so culturally significant that the games take on a new meaning." Apart from a dramatic increase in games whose objective is fighting terrorism and combat games set in the Middle East, the militarization of the public sphere is a trend that has modified digital entertainment as a whole. Recent studies examine increasing collaborations between the games industry and the military in the United States (Li 2004; Leonard 2004; Barron 2004; Nieborg 2006). Video games are being used as a public relations tool for promoting the U.S. Army and recruitment (*America's Army*) or as a means of explaining and vindicating the "War against Terror" (*Kuma/War*). The latter is a FPS action game based on real campaigns of the U.S. Army, mainly from the War in Iraq. New downloadable missions are available every month covering recent operations, with Arab or Afghani terrorists or insurgents as enemies. Missions like *Spring Break Fallujah* (2004) and *Battle in Sadr City* (2005) allow the player to engage in "Operation Iraqi Freedom." *Assault on Iran* (2005) even anticipated America's potential further engagement by carefully changing the depiction of enemies to Iranians.

When a game is set in a particular Middle Eastern country and based on real conflict, the re-telling of the narrative inevitably reshapes its comprehension and evaluation, schematizing complex political relations into a bi-polar frame. Huntemann (quoted in Barron 2004) compares similar games with the *Why We Fight* war films made by Hollywood directors in the 1940s but comments that the interactive character of the video games medium makes the game's message more like *How We Fight*. She noted

that such games are provided with an overwhelming load of technical information about weaponry and technology of war but fail in providing background for the deeper understanding of the conflict and its outcome. Similar opinion has been expressed by Li (2004, p. 118) in his analysis of *America's Army*

> The ergodic virtual representation of war in video games engages the public in a participative mimesis within the confines of instrumental media system, so thereby detaching it from actual communicative reasoning.

Therefore, the militarization of video game trope, having reinforced the bi-polar frame of the good Self and the evil Other, obviates any further explanation of the reasons for the conflict.

3.5.3 Introducing the Other

If there is one example that constitutes an attempt to challenge this broader pattern – matching in particular Frasca's claims concerning simulation – it is surely Sid Meier's *Civilization* series (1991 – 2006). The famous strategy games allow players to act on the part of various civilizations and engage in building cities, establishing trade routes and interacting with others on a diplomatic or military basis through thousands of years of virtual history. Each civilization has its own unique traits and all are presented in a very culturally-sensitive way. The balanced game play allows the player to choose any side and generally rewards cooperation. *Civilization 3: Conquests* (Atari 2003) has introduced historical Middle Eastern scenario, being one of the few exceptions mentioned above. The game is equipped with an encyclopedia containing a substantial

amount of historical, ethnographical and cultural information. In the words of McKenzie (2004, p. 69) "Sid Meier turns history and anthropology books into strategy game." The in-game description of many features of Islamic civilization is unique for its correctness and sensitivity, e.g. the description of Jihad.[91] The same sensitivity applies to the selection of the representative figure for game diplomacy: the first caliph Abu Bakr and not the prophet Muhammad, whose depiction in a video game would be a considerably delicate subject.

On the other hand, the ideological frame of *Civilization* has been challenged by Friedman (1999). He argues that the game proposes imperialism by rewarding violent exploration and expansion. The *Civilization* series have evolved considerably from the time of Friedman's essay and the game play has been changed in favor of cooperation and nonmilitary approach. Moreover, simulations intrinsically transcode historical realities into specific mathematical models and make any axiological judgments problematic. As Galloway (2006, p. 103) has noted

> "History" in *Civilization* is precisely the opposite of history, not because the game fetishizes the imperial perspective, but because the diachronic details of lived life are replaced by the synchronic homogeneity of code pure and simple.

To relate this broader observation to our topic we can conclude that despite the possible contradictions in the ideological frame of *Civilization*, the game is one of the few

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[91] *Civilization III: Play the World* [online]. [cit. 2010-4-25]. Available online:

<http://www.civ3.com/ptw_prof_arab.cfm>.

exceptions in which Arabs and Muslims are not functionalized as enemies nor depicted in Orientalist manner but constitute a possible representation of the player's Self.

3.5.4 Serious Games

Finally, the European and American attempts to transcend the culturally biased representations should be mentioned. Most of them can be found in the emerging media of so called "serious games." The term refers to games with an agenda, whose aim is not only to entertain but also to deliver some message to the audience. In the context of racial stereotypes related to Arabs and Muslims three serious games are worth mentioning. *Real Lives* (Educational Simulations 2004) is a life simulator which gives the player an opportunity to "grow up" and "live" in almost any country in the world.[92] *Global Conflicts: Palestine* (Serious Games 2007) puts the player into the role of a journalist who has just arrived to Palestine and whose task is to write an unbiased article about the unfolding events.[93] *PeaceMaker* (ImpactGames 2007) is a strategy game which allows the player to be Israeli Prime Minister or Palestinian President while his task is to establish peaceful and stable solution to the conflict.[94]

In these games a culturally balanced representation is central to the design in most of the terms analyzed in this chapter, i.e. visual signifiers, narrative, and game play. These games are meant as educational tools and provide additional materials for students and teachers. In *Global Conflicts: Palestine* the game characters, both Arabs and Israelis,

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[92] *Educational Simulations* [online]. [cit. 2010-4-25]. Available online:

<http://www.educationalsimulations.com>.

[93] *Global Conflicts* [online]. [cit. 2010-4-25]. Available online: <http://www.globalconflicts.eu>.

[94] *Peace Maker* [online]. [cit. 2010-4-25]. Available online: <http://www.peacemakergame.com>.

are individualized by distinctive graphical features and humanized by their background stories, presented to the player via textual interface. As a journalist, the player of *Global Conflicts* gains information by talking to locals, e.g. a Palestinian imam, an Israeli soldier, a Palestinian mother of a martyr, or an Israeli teenager. Communication is central to game play and constitutes the only action the player can perform. The reality in the game is constructed through personal memories, whose presentation to the player varies according to the relationship he has maintained with the particular speaker. This is reminiscent of Bruner's (2003) notion of narrative reality construction and its negotiability. Moreover, by choosing the role of a journalist – whose perception of events is mediated by subjective testimonies – as the representation of player's virtual *self*, the authors immerse the player in this negotiability and allow him to explore it in a particular conflict. In the realm of video games, *Global Conflicts* is unique in constantly contesting the reality it creates, utilizing the persuasive power of the media for a critique of its own authenticity. In other words, *Global Conflicts* engages player in the game's reality construction, making a meta-commentary on the instantiation of an event and its media re-creation.

PeaceMaker, on the other hand, is a strategy game in which the player acts as Israeli Prime Minister or Palestinian President and needs to establish a peaceful solution to the conflict. The game play of *PeaceMaker* is based on the feedback from player's counterpart and representation and introduction of the other is thus a key element of the game. Compared to the hyper-realistic, computer-generated imagery of the action games mentioned above, *PeaceMaker* utilizes only still photos and news-like articles for in-game events. Yet, as Adams (2007) notes, it succeeds in giving a realistic impression

There's no animation in *PeaceMaker*, nothing cute, nothing that someone

can dismiss as 'only a game.' When a missile strike goes awry, or a suicide

bomber strikes, the blood and bodies you see on the screen are those of real

people. More than any other game I've ever played, *PeaceMaker* portrays

the truth – or a subset of it – both the good and the bad.

The veracity of images extends itself to the perception of the whole game as portraying

"the truth," although in this case as a serious learning tool. The reality constructed by

PeaceMaker introduces an important novel aspect in the domain of procedurality:

asymmetric game play. The Israeli side has direct control over those issues that most

strongly affect the Palestinians: curfews, border controls, and trade restrictions, and the

Israeli PM can send or withdraw his armies at will, bulldoze Palestinian homes, or order

missile strikes. Yet he can also, after suitable diplomatic maneuvering, invest in

Palestinian reconstruction and infrastructure. The Palestinian President, by contrast, has

very limited powers and has to beg for just about everything: money from the world

community for domestic projects and security concessions from the Israelis (Adams

2007). By subverting one of the fundamental rules of strategy games – the balance of

both sides – *PeaceMaker* and its procedural forms re-create the actuality of the real-life

conflict perhaps better than most more technically advanced mainstream video games.

Given the relative novelty of these games, a proper consumption study is not yet

available, but preliminary results from implementation of *Global Conflicts: Palestine* in

Danish high schools are promising (Egenfeldt-Nielsen & Buch 2006). Although serious

games can presumably expand their influence in the realm of digital entertainment and

contribute to subvert the dominant stereotypes of ethnical representation, their impact on the mainstream game production cannot be overestimated.

3.5.5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has explored stereotypical representations of Muslims and Arabs in European and American video games on three different levels – iconographical, narrative, and game play, i.e. the rule system governing the player's interaction with the game.

First general observation on its underlying logic is that the mode of representation seems to depend to a great extent on the genre of the game. Adventure and role-playing games typically portray the Middle East in fantasy or quasi-historical manner, exploiting what Said calls "Orientalist" imagery, whereas action games and especially first-person shooters present the Middle East in a contemporary and decidedly conflictual framework, schematizing Arabs and Muslims as enemies. The latter exhibit strong cultural bias on a variety of levels and particularly demonstrate Reichmuth's and Werning's concept of "neglected media." The reason for this dependency is closely connected to the question of stereotyping and schematization in video games itself and lies in the linkage between production and consumption. Since video games are usually produced with their consumer base in mind, they tend to incorporate and reflect general imaginations of the Arab Muslim world which prevail among Western public as well as audience's expectations regarding particular genres. The producers logically "intend on maximizing revenue and implement their own assumptions of their audience's tastes, expectations, and consumption habits" (Reichmuth & Werning 2006, p. 47). Moreover,

the highly competitive nature of the game market together with high production costs reinforces the iteration of proved and successful patterns in game genres and content (several commercially successful games laid down frameworks which have dominated the market for years, e.g. *DOOM*, ID Software 1993; or *Dune 2*, Westwood 1992).

In this respect the media analysis of Karim (2006) is worth mentioning, with his findings that "the more closely a journalist report reproduces the common stereotypes of a particular people, the greater the likelihood that it will be highlighted in a newspaper." As I have shown, similar logic seems to determine the tropes of representation in video games.

Second, although in this chapter I have been using the term Arabs and Muslims, in the vast majority of European and American games the diverse ethnic and religious identities of the Islamic world have been flattened out and reconstructed into a monolithic representation. Although this corresponds to the broader tendencies of reporting on Islam and the Middle East in Western media (Karim 2003; Poole 2002), in video games this simplification and schematization seems to be even more prevalent. Apart from missing academic reflection and media critique the reason could be also technological. As was previously mentioned the non-player characters are often depicted by a limited number of reiterating textures, models, and other visual signifiers. The technological limitations thus intrinsically promote schematization which leads to social stereotyping.

Today we are in crucial need of critically understanding the symbolic and ideological dimensions of in-game representational politics. Obviously no single factor leads to stereotyping. As Shaheen (2000, p. 11) pointed out: "Undeniably ignorance continues to

be a contributing factor." The most dangerous effect of stereotyping is that the negative images are sometimes perceived as real portrayal of the other culture. This applies mainly in the absence of positive ethnic images, particularly when these schematizations remain unchallenged.

3.6 Self-representation of Arabs and Muslims in Video Games

The production of video games in the Arab is in the early days of its development. Nevertheless, there is a strong notion among game designers that Arabs and Muslims are being misrepresented and that their image is being distorted by Western production. Radwan Kasmiya (quoted in Roumani 2006), the executive manager of the Syrian company Afkar Media says

> Most video games on the market are anti-Arab and anti-Islam. Arab gamers are playing games that attack their culture, their beliefs, and their way of life. The youth who are playing the foreign games are feeling guilt.

Similar concern has been expressed by the Central Internet Bureau of Lebanese Hezbollah movement

> The problem behind video games is that most of them are foreign made, especially American. Therefore, they bear enormous false understandings and habituate teenagers to violence, hatred and grudges. In addition, some enfolds humiliation to many of our Islamic and Arab countries, where battles are running in these Arab countries, the dead are

Arab soldiers, whereas the hero who kills them is – the player himself –
an American. [95]

Consequently, this concern has resulted in many attempts to craft video games which would reflect Middle Eastern reality with more historical, cultural and religious relevance. Thus the appropriation of originally Western media of video games has been from the beginning engaged. Video games have not been perceived as neutral containers by the Arab and Muslim producers and they mostly do not utilize them as such. Arguably the first game with a specific "Islamic" content was *Rumāh al-hijāra* (*Stone Throwers*) created by Syrian student of medicine Muhammad Hamza in 2000. A technically very simple game deals with the Intifada Al-Aqsa and puts a player into the role of a Palestinian defending the Al-Aqsa Mosque from Israeli soldiers.

The Arab game production has developed and significantly polarized from the time of Stone Throwers, bringing various concepts and interpretations of Islam, Islamic culture, and Muslim identity into the realm of digital entertainment. In the following case studies I will briefly introduce the key recent distinctive approaches towards the articulation of Arab and Muslim identity in video games.

Essentially, given the above-mentioned misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims in mainstream Western video games, there has been an urge to present Arab youth with alternative games, which would reflect their culture and religion in a more appropriate way. As such, the emerging Arab video game industry has been engaged from its very

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[95] *Special Force* [online]. [cit. 2005-3-30]. Available online:

<http://www.specialforce.net/english/indexeng.htm>.

beginning, perceiving games not as neutral containers but as a medium communicating significant cultural, political and religious messages to youth. Beyond first-person shooter games based on real conflicts with Israel in Palestine and Lebanon, which provide Arab youth with heroes of their own and retell the story of the conflicts from the Arab perspective (Tawil-Souri 2007), a large number of educational games appeared on the market, aimed at teaching the basic tenets of Islam, the history of Islamic civilization, or promoting "positive and family values" as opposed to the perceived depravity and violence of Western mainstream games.

3.6.1 Video Games, Education, and the Communication of Values

As Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) have argued, play is a crucial method through which we test ideas, develop new skills, and participate in new social roles. In this respect early video games raised various expectations about their educational value. Given the fact that motivation is regarded to be a key aspect of effective learning, the popularity of games among younger generations has inspired many educators. Indeed early research on arcade-style games has demonstrated that games create intrinsic motivation through fantasy, control, challenge, curiosity, and competition (Malone 1981; Cordova & Lepper 1996).

Soon early video games were appropriated by private companies operating within the framework of various religious traditions. As Campbell (2010) notes, the key focus within early religiously-inspired video games was to entertain while teaching players about important aspects of their religion and culture. The history of religious video games dates back to the late 1980s when the company Wisdom Tree started to develop

Christian games for the Nintendo Entertainment System (Bogost 2007, p. 287). Perhaps the most successful of these was the *Bible Adventures* (Wisdom Tree 1991), recreating three Bible stories: Noah and the Ark, the story of the baby Moses, and David and Goliath. Recently another prominent Christian game appeared on the market, the real-time strategy game *Eternal Forces: Left Behind* (Inspired Media Entertainment 2006), based on a popular book series and dealing with the final confrontation of believers with the forces of the Antichrist. Similar examples of religious edutainment can be found also in Judaism, such as *The Shivah* (Manifesto Games 2006), an adventure game in which a Rabbi must solve the mystery behind a monetary gift made to his congregation in order to make sure that it has not been cursed (Campbell 2010).

Regarding the procedural rhetoric of religious video games, Bogost (2007, p. 287) argues that recent movements in the video game industry have utilized procedural rhetoric mainly in order to create games supporting existing social and cultural positions, including stable moral systems and organized religion. To a large extent this is the case of most educational video games with an Islamic emphasis, as I demonstrate below, although distinctive exceptions exist.

3.6.2 Islamic Edutainment

The majority of educational games with an Islamic emphasis fall into the category of so-called edutainment (i.e. educational entertainment). Most edutainment products are designed according to a behaviorist paradigm, exposing players to educational content, testing them (via quizzes and puzzles), and finally allowing them to play the game as a reward. Nevertheless, despite their simplicity, the Islamic edutainment games seem to

be quite successful economically, at least from their increasing presence in the market. Their marketing strategies usually target parents, offering them "safe" entertainment for their children, more or less connected with education on the basic tenets of Islam. The following advertisement by the US-based company Islam Games represents a generic example

> Our goal is to provide you with quality, Islamic entertainment for both you and your children. Thanks to high levels of interaction, video games are actually a great learning tool. Yet, unfortunately, many games available on the market address issues contrary to the teachings of Islam. This results in our children tending to identify with secular values and concepts more than with those of Islam. By providing an alternative to mainstream video games, we can help our children, in a subtle way, learn to identify with Islamic values, and thereby become more closely attuned to the teachings of Islam.[96]

Significantly, the first educational games that introduced Islamic moral values into the realm of virtual entertainment appeared in the West and were designed in English. A parallel is to be found in the first Islamic websites, designed and managed by Muslim students in Europe and the United States (Hofheinz 2007).

To date Islam Games has produced four games (*Arabic Letter Bazaar*, *Maze of Destiny*, *Ummah Defense I* and *II*). In most of them children learn about Islam through simple puzzles and quests, like putting together *al-fātiha* from Arabic letters or memorizing the

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[96] *Islam Games* [online]. [cit. 2005-6-20]. Available online: <http://www.islamgames.com>.

verses from Qur'ān. The most famous game by Islam Games is undoubtedly the *Ummah Defense*, particularly because it has been accused of spreading religious hatred by Thomas Friedman in New York Times (Friedman 2005).[97]

Similar examples of Islamic educational games can be found in *Islamic Fun CD* (Innovative Minds 1999). The authors advertise the game as follows: "Your child will learn about Islam by playing lots of exciting games full of colorful animations and cute sound effects."[98] Islamic Fun CD contains a compilation of short puzzles and quizzes teaching children the basic tenets of Islam, *suwar* (chapters of the Qur'ān) and *ahādīth* (deeds and sayings of the prophet). The set also contains controversial game *The Resistance* in which the player represents "a farmer in South Lebanon who has joined the Islamic Resistance to defend [his] land and family from the invading zionists."[99] Again, as was the case with *Ummah Defense*, *Islamic Fun* has provoked many critical reactions in the Western media. For example, Spencer (2002) argued that Islamic Fun "instills ancient Islamic resentments in today's youth." The reason for this was not only the controversial game *The Resistance* (clearly referring to the Lebanese Hezbollah movement) but also some quotations in other puzzle games, like the presentation of

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[97] *Ummah Defense* is a very simple action game dealing with a fight against evil robots that attack the Earth. The introductory message, which started the previously mentioned alarmed reaction, says that in the distant future all of humankind will embrace Islam (whereas the attacking robots are labeled as "unbelievers"). The game has surely an ideological implicit meaning but not much more than the usual Western action games, in which the united Earth of the future is depicted clearly as today's Euro-American civilization.

[98] *Islamic Fun CD* [online]. [cit. 2008-4-5]. Available online: <http://www.inminds.co.uk/islamic-fun.html>.

[99] Ibid.

Mustafa Kemal as "a hater of Islam, [who] forbade the use of Arabic in Turkey, banned the hijab and closed down the Aya Sofya Mosque in Istanbul."[100] The webpage of Innovative Minds is registered in the city of Crawley in the UK and apparently has a shia background, which can be found e.g. in their latest game *Lion of Allah*, whose purpose is to: "learn about the life, courage and wisdom of Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (AS)."[101]

A typical product of Islamic edutainment are CDs and DVDs, with a set of simple games, puzzles, and quizzes, aimed at teaching the hadith (sayings and deeds of the prophet Muhammad), verses of the Qur'an, prescriptions for ritual ablution and prayer, etc. Besides games, they often contain short, animated video clips with educational or moral messages, e.g., Syrian educational CD *Ta'līm al-salawāt*. The video clips follow a typified narrative structure, usually exposing the main character to a temptation that he or she overcomes with the help of the teaching of Islam. In the end the reference to the corresponding hadith or Quranic verse is included. Other educational products (e.g., Egyptian *Arkān al-Islām*) simply instruct children how to behave in particular situations, like giving thanks before meals, proper Islamic greetings, etc. If a game is intended to communicate Muslim values to the player, it reflects the same patterns using basic interactive elements, like choosing the right (*sahīh*) scenario from among various options (Egyptian game *Al-Muslim al-saghīr*), putting together Quranic verses from Arabic letters, or adventure games focused on searching for collections of hadith (i.e., the U.K. game *Abu Isas, Quest for Knowledge*, Abu Isas Games 2006). In this respect

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[100] Ibid.

[101] *Fun Learn: Islamic Game Series* [online]. [cit. 2008-4-5]. Available online:

<http://www.inminds.co.uk/fun-learn.html>.

these Islamic educational games somehow resemble popular TV shows, in which children compete in their knowledge about religion, as described by Kawakibi (2007).

Close examination of the above-mentioned advertisement by the company Islam Games reveals that the text is in fact marketing two different things to parents. First, the obvious Islamic educational content, and second, the educational potential of video games *per se*. In most cases, however, the game and the educational content constitute two separate elements. Oftentimes, an educational video clip is followed by a classic video game without any Islamic emphasis, serving only as a possible reward and motivating factor for the children (e.g., Egyptian *al-Mughāmirūn*). Given the high popularity of video games among youth, they are often used for promotional purposes (Šisler 2005). In 2007, a number of U.S. churches used the commercially successful, first-person shooter game *Halo 3* for so-called LAN parties to attract young to people to the church.[102] A similar strategy, i.e., including games on their websites, was recommended to internet evangelists.[103] Many Islamic websites dedicated to *da'wa* (invitation to Islam) have been actually using the same concept for years – e.g., NetMuslims.com. In this context, the games themselves have no educational or proselytizing content – they are purely fun and a vehicle for peaking interest in the web-page content. In some cases, the economic motives behind the production of so-called

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[102] Thou Shalt Not Kill, Except in a Popular Video Game at Church. *The New York Times* [online]. 7 October 2007 [cit. 2010-9-21]. Available online:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/us/07halo.html?_r=1>.

[103] "By offering a range of fun games to play, an evangelistic website can become more sticky – i.e. encourage return visits and enhance the perceived value of the site. In this context, the games themselves have no evangelistic content—they are purely ethical fun." *GospelCom* [online]. [cit. 2008-4-5]. Available online: <http://guide.gospelcom.net/resources/games.php>.

"Islamic" games seem to be more relevant than the religious ones. For instance, the U.K. game *Abu Isa's A New Dawn: Learn Asma-ul-Husna* (Abu Isas Games 2006) is a classic action game that places the player in the role of spaceship pilot and is allegedly aimed at the teaching of *Asmā al-Husnā* (The 99 Most Beautiful Names of God). As the package labeling says: "Battle your way through enemy planets while learning the names and attributes of your Creator." The educational aspect of the game manifests itself only via the display of a random *Name of God* on the screen every time the player scores.

In this regard, Bogost (2007, p. 291) argues that many of the religious video games address the consumption of religion as much as, or perhaps more than, the principles of religion. As such, these games offer not only a poignant commentary on the general function of religion in the marketplace but also a deeper insight into the emerging Muslim consumption culture and its relation to global consumerism. As Haenni (2009) describes it, this growing Muslim consumption culture appropriates global brands and products and refashions them along the lines of Islamic, *halāl* principles. This commercialization of religion – or the Islamization of commerce – therefore becomes an important cultural, religious or even political tool: mirroring the relationship with the West; mirroring, above all, Muslim societies' views of themselves, as well as the identity transformations that affect them (p. 329).

Despite the fact that markets in many Arab cities seem to be flooded by such Islamic edutainment products and a substantial number of these are produced also by American and European companies, recent research suggests that the high expectations that early edutainment would enhance learning have not been achieved. The reasons mentioned in

this regard are that such tools were poorly designed, simplistic, repetitious, and did not allow players any active exploration opportunities (Egenfeldt-Nielsen 2005). Moreover, simple games and animated video clips seem to satisfy mainly younger kids (6-10 years old). For older audiences, these games pale in technological and conceptual comparison with mainstream game production. As a reviewer noted about the Islamic educational game *Maze of Destiny*, produced by Islam Games: "Not at all what we expected, far too boring for children by today's gaming standards" (Samina Saeed).[104] Similar observations have been made regarding edutainment products in general – simple educational games do not easily attract teenagers (Egenfeldt-Nielsen 2005).

3.6.3 Replaying the History of Islam

Pink (2009, p. xvii) has argued, that educational media, including video games, that communicate religious values and try to appeal to adolescent and adult audiences, have to be conceptually and technologically as up-to-date as their non-religious counterparts in order to successfully achieve their educational goals. By the same token, McDonnell (1993, p. 98) stated that

> Education, including religious education, has on the whole been
> comfortable with the language of print and the logical, sequential mode of
> thinking that print favors. Now, religious education has to find ways to

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[104] *Simply Islam* [online]. [cit. 2008-9-21]. Available online:

<http://simplyislam.com/iteminfo.asp?item=54854>.

understand and appreciate the non-linear, associative mode of making sense of the world.

These observations relate noticeably to the afore-mentioned Islamic edutainment products, which do not really utilize the fundamental features of video games – i.e. interactivity, immersion and exploration. The recent trends in using video games for learning and education stray from the *digital game-based learning* paradigm (DGBL). The idea of DGBL has been around for more than three decades (Coleman 1971), but it got its second wind with the recent information technology and Internet boom. Most full-fledged video games differ from basic edutainment games in two aspects. First, they immerse players in complex and rich environments, allow them to explore numerous strategies for action and decision, and require them to complete demanding tasks with increasingly difficult objectives (de Freitas 2006). Second, at least some full-fledged video games, most notably strategy games, are actually based on well-developed, sound theories of learning in order to engage players and instruct them how to play and win the game (Gee 2007). Many suggest that by situating players in these games' worlds, where they can freely move and act, the games can promote problem-solving, goal-oriented behavior, engagement and motivation (Gee 2007; de Freitas 2006; Squire 2005). Generally, it seems that full-fledged video games could be particularly useful for generating a deeper understanding of certain key principles of given topics: mainly when dealing with complicated and multifaceted issues, which are hard to comprehend through factual knowledge only.

Among the first full-fledged video games published in the Arab world, conceived with an educational purpose in mind, was *Prophet's War* (Future Soft n.d.), a strategy game

aimed at teaching players the early history of Islam by situating them in virtual re-enactments of key historical battles between Muslims and pagan Arab tribes. As the description of the game states

> In the application The Prophet's War you will witness in detail the events of the Islamic conquest (Badr, Uhud, Khandaq) and see how the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his Companions dealt with them. You'll explore the style of war, tactics, and maneuvers of the Messenger of God during the fights between Muslim soldiers and the idolaters. You will witness how it was possible for the Prophet to lead his soldiers to victory and to the establishment of the Islamic state through interactive animations and audio explanations. By these means the places of the battles will be re-created and you will become a member of the Muslim forces. You will be excited about their zeal as you will stand among them to hear the verses of God and the words of the Prophet.

Although the game's graphics pale in comparison with its mainstream counterparts, for the first time it offered Arab players a Muslim hero and real historical scenarios reconstructed primarily according to Islamic historiography, such as Ibn Ishāq's *Al-Sīra al-nabawīya*. In contrast to the above-mentioned Islamic edutainment, this game utilizes the full potential of the video game medium by situating the player inside a virtual and interactive reconstruction of real historical events. In this regard, Malone (1981) distinguishes two main categories of learning games: intrinsic and extrinsic. In an intrinsic game, Malone argues, the content is an integral part of the game structure. A typical example of an intrinsic game is for example a flight simulation game, where

the game itself is about flying a plane, or *Sim City*, where players learn the rules of urban development by trying and succeeding or failing. Extrinsic games, on the other hand, are games where the content and the game structure are less closely linked, or not linked at all. The paradigm here is the question or trivia game, where the questions can be about any subject, but the game remains essentially the same (Prensky 2005, p. 115). As we have demonstrated above, most Islamic edutainment games fall into this category, using questions about the basic tenets of Islam as a mechanism for progress in a separate video game. On the contrary, *Prophet's Wars* is one of the first examples of an Islamic educational game that meets the criteria of Malone's (1981) intrinsic learning game – through integrating the tactics and strategic decisions made by the Prophet into its game structure.

Probably the most-developed intrinsic educational game with an Islamic emphasis is *Quraish*, created by the Syrian company, Afkar Media. Similarly to *Prophet's Wars* this real-time strategy game deals with the origin and spread of Islam, as well as the pre-Islamic Bedouin wars and the early Islamic conquests (*al-futūhāt al-islāmīya*). Its author Radwan Kasmiya describes the game as follows

> Quraish sheds light on luminous pages of the Arab and Islamic history in a
> new and indirect method. It attempts to liberate reason in a world of
> amusement dominated by instinct. It simply tries to turn amusement into
> constructive rather than destructive industry. [...] We have tried to give
> replies to plenty of questions through Quraish, such as whether Muslims
> were the same as other invaders who crossed the path of the world? What

gives them distinction over others? How could they defeat the greatest two empires in the world?[105]

Radwan Kasmiya strongly believes in the educational potential of video games.[106] In *Quraish*, published both in English and Arabic, his aim was to challenge the misconceptions of the West about Islam, as well as educate Muslim youth in Islamic history. According to him young Muslims "do not read anymore" so new ideas about how to approach them are needed. In the same time he wants to reestablish a "digital dignity" of Islamic civilization, which he perceives as being distorted by Western media.[107] In his rather ambitious mission video games are perceived as cutting edge technology for cultural dialogue, conveying different points of view and enabling the exchange of ideas. *Quraish* is his most distinctive attempt in this respect to date, and differs significantly from his previous games (see below).

The game is a clear appropriation of the real-time strategy genre as established by *Dune 2* but cultural distinctions can be traced on all three levels relevant from the point of content analysis, i.e. visual signifiers, narrative and game play. Although the game theoretically allows the player to control four different nations – pagan Bedouins, Muslim Arabs, Zoroastrian Persians and Christian Romans – the main campaigns can be played only through the perspective of a Bedouin chieftain Hani, or Muslim general Khālid Ibn al-Walīd. The campaigns cover all the main military affairs of pre-Islamic

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[105] *Quraish User Manual* (2007, p. 7).

[106] Personal communication with Radwan Kasmiya, Damascus, May 2005.

[107] Ibid.

Arabia and the early Muslim state, i.e. *al-jāhilīya* (First Encounter), *al-ridda* (Apostasy Wars), *futūh bilād fāris* (Conquer of Persia) and *futūh bilād al-shām* (Conquer of Syria).

The narrative of the game is based on classical Islamic historiography, like the opening scene which is built on Muhammad Ibn Ishāq's description of the Battle of Trench (*ghazwat al-khandaq*), taken from *sīrat rasūl allāh* (Life of Allah's Messenger).[108] *Quraish* in particular meets the above-mentioned Amin and Gher's (2000) claim of Arab oral culture heritage, as every mission starts with unusually long and well-developed introductory story narrated in classical Arabic. Through those introductions many concepts of pre-Islamic Arab culture and early Islamic history are communicated to the player, e.g. *sharaf* and *'ird* (Bedouin honor codes), *thar* (*lex talionis*), or *murūwa* (manliness). During the particular missions the player takes part in many real historical events, e.g. the war between Ghassanids and Lakhmids, and visits places like Hira, Ukaz, or Medina, which topographies seem to be based on available historical descriptions.

The same cultural sensitivity is manifested on the visual level. Although the game covers the most important period in the history of Islam, the prophet Muhammad, whose depiction would be a highly delicate matter, is present in the game only through memories and dialogues with his companions. This approach is in a way somehow similar to the one which the authors of the movie *Al-Risāla* (The Message, 1976) have chosen. At the same time, the "ordinary" visual signifiers, like the Bedouin tents,

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[108] *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* is a traditional Muslim biography of the prophet Muhammad compiled by Muhammad Ibn Ishāq (Medina 85 A.H. - Bagdad 151 A.H.). It survives mainly in the later editions of Ibn Hishām and al-Tabarī.

clothes and facilities have been arguably designed with respect to their historical function and presumed outlook.[109]

As has been mentioned above, video games as an interactive medium possess some fundamental features which cannot be described using classical audiovisual methods, like segmentation into sequences and shot by shot analysis. There exists several methodological approaches how to describe non-deterministic structure of the game narration, e.g. Finite State Machines (FSM) or Petri Nets (PN). As Natkin and Vega suggest (2003, p. 83), the main structuring aspects of most games can be divided into levels (the main linear part of the game structure), quests (the unity of a goal, obstacles and the resolution method) and transactions (the atomic action of a player). Petri Nets is then a particular case of transition system formalization, i.e. graphic representation of structuring aspects. Fig. 1 presents an example of Petri Nets analysis of one *Quraish's* level. It consists of transactions (activities which can occur in the modeled system), places (current states of the system) and arcs that connect them. For better clarity only quests are depicted, although in fact all the transactions required by the particular quests could be modeled as well.

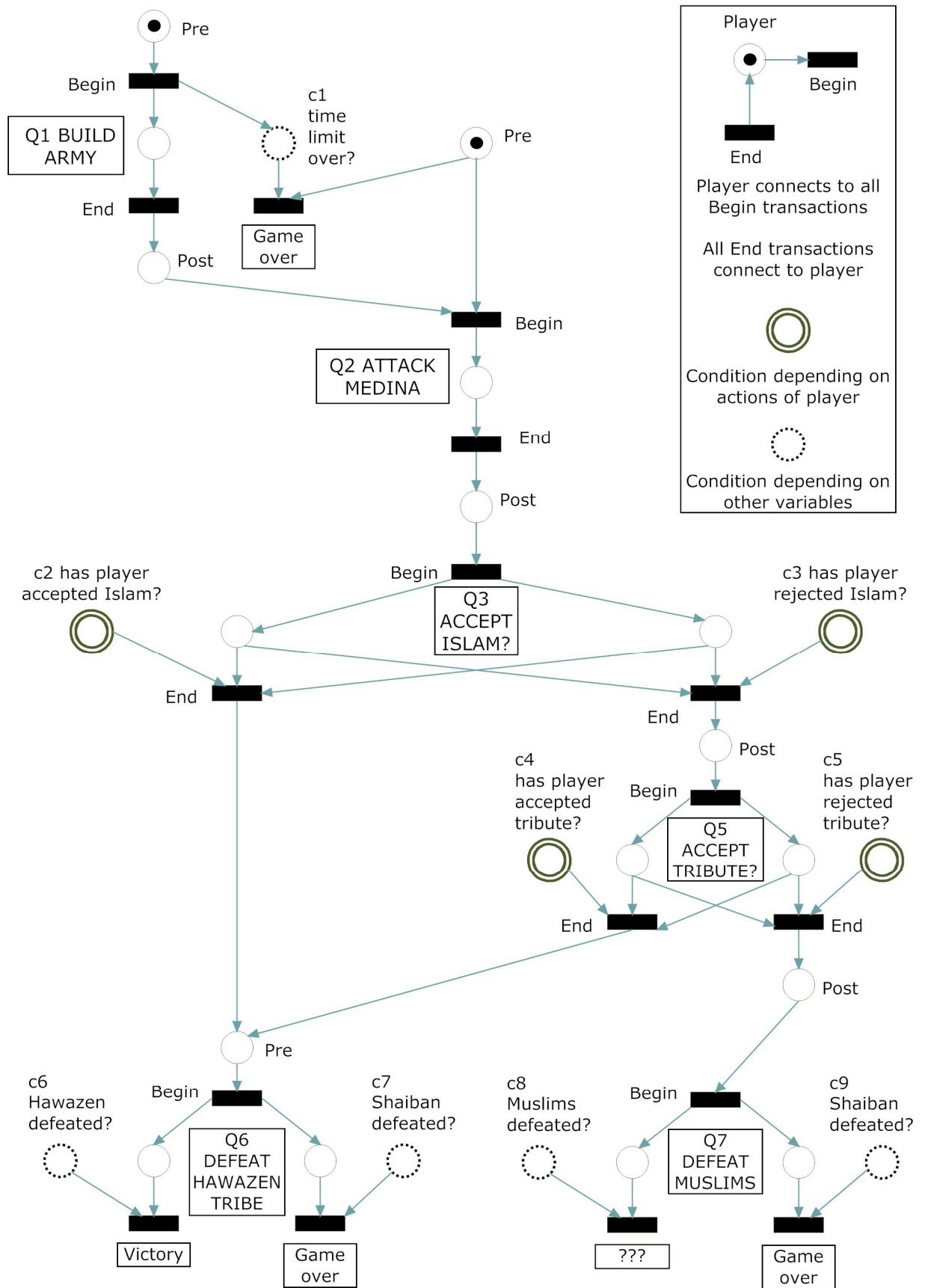[109] Personal communication with Radwan Kasmiya, Damascus, May 2005.

Fig. 1. Petri Nets description of the game play of the *al-Khiyār* level from the Quraish game.

For this methodological excursion I have chosen the 6th level of the game called *al-khiyār* (The Choice) hence it puts player in front of decisions directly concerning identity construction and generally unusual in the realm of digital entertainment. The player represents a leader of the pagan Shayban tribe which is allied with the Quraish tribe during the time of their struggle with Muhammad's Muslim forces in Medina. The player's first quest (Q1) is to build an army and then (Q2) join the tribes besieging Medina in the famous Battle of the Trench. In this historical battle (627 AD) the outnumbered Muslims under Muhammad's command successfully defended the city of Medina, partly because of the trench they dug around it. The game's main narrative follows the historical events so after the unsuccessful charge the leaders of the Quraish tribe decide to withdraw from the battle. The player with his Shayban tribe is then offered Islam (Q3). If he accepts (Q6) the Shayban tribe joins Muslims in order to defeat the rest of the attacking Hawazin tribe (his former allies). If he refuses he is given another option (Q5) to keep his religion and pay a tribute (*al-jizya*) to the Muslims. Again, if he accepts the game follows as has been already mentioned (Q6). If he refuses both Islam and the tribute his quest (Q7) is to defeat the forces in Medina.

The game play analysis of this particular mission demonstrates how Afkar Media have transcended both the simplistic pattern of edutainment and ideological schematizations found in the above-mentioned former Islamic educational games. Instead of limiting the educational and persuasive aspect of games to simple exposure to Islamic and thus *sahīh* (proper) content, they have constructed an immersive environment which allows player to explore numerous strategies for action and decision, enabling him finally to experiment with the very identity of his virtual Self. Although the preference of the

authors is clearly communicated through the game play (i.e. defeating the Muslims (Q7) borders on the impossible), they have introduced the concepts of free will and explicit identity construction into the realm of Islamic educational games.

Unlike previous Islamic educational games, Afkar Media products cannot be simply lumped into the framework of the Islamic revival, since their mission is more educational and cultural in nature. Radwan Kasmyia has explained to me that he refuses the concept of *da'wa* in video games and perceives the latter rather as a cutting-edge venue for cultural dialogue.[110] In this respect, he has also coined the phrase "digital dignity" to describe his work. According to his explanation this concept is comprised by pride, self-esteem, and aptitude. "It is how an Arab teenager feels when he puts his hands on a game that reflects his point of view, knowing that non-Arabs may play it too."[111] From the perspective of Arab gamers even a normal fantasy action game like *Qalat al-Nasr* (*Castle of Victory*, Afkar Media 2003) could have cultural meaning in the sense that the hero who fights evil is Arab and speaks the Arabic language.

3.6.4 Immersive Virtual Worlds

A recent trend in game-based learning is built on the concept of so-called "immersive virtual worlds." Immersive virtual worlds are defined as given environments, which may be explored in a nonlinear way by learners (de Freitas 2006). They include artifacts and objects and allow users to learn by exploring the environment and its objects in a relatively open-ended way. Moreover, multi-user virtual worlds enable

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[110] Personal communication with Radwan Kasmiya, Damascus, May 2005.

[111] Ibid.

collaboration among players and thus promote social networking, teamwork and group decision-making (Brom *et al.* 2010).

There exist many examples of multi-user virtual worlds on the internet today. The most prominent and famous example is represented by the privately-owned, subscription-based 3D application *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003) that went live online for public use in 2003. As Radde-Antweiler (2007) describes it, for the most part *Second Life* resembles various traditional Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MORPG), but differs in some important points. First, *Second Life* does not have a specific goal or quest like the conquest of land or defeat an enemy. Instead, the game places emphasis on user creativity and it offers the possibility of creating things and buildings. As such it presents an entirely user-created environment in which players use official game design tools to shape the in-world (Radde-Antweiler 2007, p. 187). Many educational institutions, including universities, have created their own virtual educational environments in *Second Life*, conceived as cutting edge venues for learning and instruction.

The most-developed example of an educational Islamic environment in *Second Life* represents a virtual re-creation of the city of Mecca and the simulation of the hajj pilgrimage. The simulation was sponsored by Islam Online, a popular and comprehensive Islamic website discussed in the Chapter 2.6.4. As Derrickson (2008) describes, the Mecca simulation was released in December 2007, just prior to the 2007–2008 hajj season, with the purpose of educating Muslims about how to participate in the hajj and non-Muslims about this important ritual and the various steps that pilgrims take. In the simulation all parts of Mecca relevant to the hajj are recreated, together with clearly-defined paths marked by large, chronologically-ordered numbers placed

throughout. These numbers, once "touched," activate a note card that gives virtual pilgrims specific information about their present station and instructions for that station. The project designers say the degree of interactivity in the 3D virtual world provides participants the ultimate step-by-step guide to the hajj

> The Second Life Hajj project is exceptional in that it breaks all the traditional limits of training. It allows the trainees to actually interact and be part of the program, in addition to providing them all the textual material they may need.[112]

Although there is a current controversial discussion whether *Second Life* could be defined as a game from an emic perspective (Radde-Antweiler 2007), it nevertheless uses technologies appropriated from online video games and, when it comes to learning, utilizes the concepts known from educational immersive worlds (de Freitas 2006). When analyzing the "game play" of the hajj simulation in *Second Life*, the distinction between virtual worlds, edutainment products, and full-fledged Islamic video games becomes clear. The hajj simulation in Second Life reconstructs a realistic environment and allows users to freely explore it, move from one stage of the simulation to another, and interact with its objects. Yet, and this more importantly, it allows users to share their experience with others through both visual representation of their avatars and a textual in-world chat and messaging system. Therefore, through creating the perception of mutual "presence" among its individual visitors, the hajj simulation can be

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[112] *Islam Online* [online]. [cit. 2008-9-21]. Available online:

<http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&pagename=Zone-English-News/NWELayout&cid=1196786035497>.

experienced collectively and even facilitate "ritual experience" for some of its users, as reported by Heidbrink (2007) and Derrickson (2008).

The potential of multi-user, virtual worlds for the performance of religious rituals is even more evident in the existence of several virtual mosques in *Second Life*. As Derrickson (2008) notes, as of April 2008 there were eight mosques in *Second Life*. In addition to the Mecca complex described above, Second Life has others, most of which are based on famous real life mosques. The Chebi mosque, for example, is a replica of Cordoba's Mezquita mosque. The Hassan II mosque is based on its real counterpart in Casablanca, Morocco. Others copy the Blue Mosque of Istanbul and the Alhambra.

Despite the fact that most Islamic authorities do not deem a prayer conducted in such virtual environments as valid (Brückner 2001) – although it is widely agreed that multimedia applications, including video games, are a vital tool for learning how to perform the prayer – for many individuals the virtual mosques constitute sacred places where they gather to "pray" (Heidbrink 2007). For example, the introductory notecard to the Chebi Mosque reads

> For the benefit of those who use the masjid (mosque) as a place of worship, we kindly request that visitors behave with the same level of respect as they would visiting a mosque in real life. It is customary for people entering a masjid to remove their shoes.

In this respect Radde-Antweiler (2007) argues that an increasing number of *Second Life* residents use this multi-user world not only as a kind of virtual playground, but also as an extension of their real-life possibilities that have to be taken seriously. The users are both socially and religiously very active and consequently transfer real life activities,

and therefore also rituals, into virtual space. Radde-Antweiler predicts that with the shift of technical boundaries, former seemingly fixed religious and ritual frameworks will be modified and transformed.

Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) have described online multi-user worlds as virtual "third places" which create "spaces for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace and home […] that typically function to expose the individual to a diversity of worldviews." The examples of the hajj simulation and the Chebi Mosque in *Second Life* illustrate how virtual, multi-user environments based on the immersive worlds paradigm and user-created content can serve both for presenting someone else's worldview and faith as well as important social and educational tools for a given religious community. These simulations create "third places" that enable users to create and share their own content that guides, teaches, and instructs. At the same time they facilitate on-line social networking among individual users, and, at least for some, serve as environments for performing religious rituals.

In January 2008 the release of a new Islamic educational game based on the concept of immersive world was announced. The game, which was conceived in Saudi Arabia and is supposed to be developed in Europe, looks to help children learn about the hajj pilgrimage. Players will supposedly be able to lead pilgrims through the different stages of hajj by acting as security guards, first-aid workers, or other service providers. According to the authors, educational bodies and psychologists from Saudi Arabia will oversee the game's development. The hajj game aims to provide a positive learning experience for children, a feature that is arguably missing in popular video games. As Amer bin Mohamed Al-Mutawa, one of the designers, says

Most video games available on the local market today do not contribute to increasing the skills or the intellectual capacities of consumers and do not encourage good deeds among children. Furthermore, these games rely heavily on the concept of "survival of the fittest" through theft, kidnapping, murder, destruction, and the creation and manipulation, for example, of mafia groups in order to win the game.[113]

The hajj game is clearly morally and religiously focused, in a way similar to the educational games mentioned above. Nevertheless, the concept of immersive 3D virtual environment, which allows players to engage directly in the organization of the hajj, transcends the simple framework of edutainment and situates the players in a virtual world which encourages them to experience various situations and processes firsthand.

3.6.5 Digital Resistance and Global Muslim Identity

A direct answer to the above-mentioned Western war games schematizing Arabs and Muslims as enemies (like *Delta Force* or *America's Army*) came from the Central Internet Bureau of Hezbollah in 2003. The action game, entitled *Al-Quwwat al-Khāsa* (*Special Force*, Solution 2003), is a promotional tool for the movement, deals with the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon and glorifies the role of Hezbollah in the retreat of the Israeli Army.[114]

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[113] Hajj Video Game Coming to a Gaming Console Near You. *Asharq Alawsat* [online]. 8 January 2008 [cit. 2010-9-21]. Available online: <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=7&id=11393>.

[114] *Special Force* [online]. [cit. 2006-6-5]. Available online: <http://specialforce.net>.

Special Force can essentially be perceived as a manifestation of a broader phenomenon which I refer to as "digital resistance." This is an umbrella term for substantial amount of games created in the Arab world, which are based on real-world conflicts (mainly in Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon). In almost unvarying manner these games appropriate the genre of first-person shooter and, by the authors' own admission, were mostly created in a response to the previously mentioned Western war games schematizing Arabs and Muslims as enemies. As such they do stress the Muslim and Arab identity of the main character, i.e. the virtual representation of the player's self, and retell the story of a conflict from Arab and Muslim perspective.

The game *Special Force* constructs two basic types of Arab and Muslim heroes. The first is a figure controlled by the player, a fearless warrior winning against the odds, despite being outnumbered by Zionist forces. The second type of hero is that of the fallen comrade. Throughout the game these "real fighters of the Hezbollah" are consistently referred to as martyrs (*al-shuhadā'*), and the player character finds their photographs at various points throughout the game. Essentially, the concept of the game is not different from Western first-person shooters; it has merely reversed the polarities of the narrative and iconographical stereotypes mentioned above by substituting the Arab Muslim hero for the American soldier. The primary difference is that instead of stressing camaraderie and brotherhood between the individual members of a beleaguered Army platoon, it stresses the soldier's Muslim identity and higher obligations to Hezbollah as a part of a collective spiritual whole.

A slightly different approach to the topic of self-representation can be found in the Syrian game *Tahta al-Ramād* (*Under Ash*, Dar al-Fikr 2002) which deals with the First Intifada. The game is unusually emotional in the way it presents players with a story starting with the Palestinians' conflict with Israeli soldiers at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The first mission introduces the main hero Ahmad in a demonstration. The Palestinians throw stones at the Israeli soldiers who answer with rifle shots, and the scene is full of shouting, shooting and moaning of the wounded. The task of the player is to get out of the demonstration alive; then the story goes on into the classic scheme of action games with the hero joining the Palestinian resistance. Combat is central to the game play but killing of civilians is prohibited. According to the authors, *Under Ash* is a "call for justice and realization of the truth, the prevention against the wrong and aggression."[115] Despite its low technical quality more than 50 000 copies were sold in a market where most gamers copy and burn video games.[116] The players discussing the game on the Internet have often esteemed the fact that it presents "their" point of view, e.g.

> From a gamer's point of view its one of the worst games I have played. The idea behind the game is admirable though. To give Arab youth their identity back after it has been lost in the western media. (Xenon 2, Dubai)[117]

Fadel Abu Hien, although referring to "real" games, made an observation concerning the re-playing of skirmishes by Palestinian children

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[115] *Under Ash* [online]. [cit. 2006-6-5]. Available online: <http://www.underash.net/emessage.htm>.

[116] Sales figures were received via email from Radwan Kasmiya, May 2007.

[117] *Tbreak* [online]. [cit. 2007-5-13]. Available online:

<http://www.tbreak.com/forums/showthread.php?t=37702&page=2>.

It's a way to have some feeling of power in a real-life situation where they are powerless. If a boy can 'fire' the same weapon as the occupier, if he can imitate the sound of a mortar or rocket which he sees as the Israeli source of power, then he 'owns' that power too and feels more in control.[118]

From this point of view, *Special Force* and *Under Ash* can be considered as the first attempts to participate in video games' construction of Arab and Muslim self-representation. Although the first is blatantly ideological and propagandistic, whereas the latter pales in technological comparison with similar U.S. and European games, for the first time the Arab gamer was offered congruence between his political reality and its in-game *mimesis*. As Galloway (2005) put it, "If one is to take the definition of realism a documentary-like attention to the everyday struggles of the downtrodden, leading to a direct criticism of current social policy then *Special Force* and *Under Ash* are among the first truly realist games in existence."

The direct sequel to *Under Ash* is *Tahta al-Hisār* (*Under Siege*, Afkar Media 2005). Unlike its predecessors the game introduces real events to the virtual world. It begins with a killing in the Mosque of Abraham in Hebron, where in 1994 a radical Jewish fundamentalist, Baruch Goldstein, shot 29 Muslims during the Friday prayer. The player controls Ahmad, who has to survive the first minutes of Goldstein's shooting hidden between pillars and in the right moment disarm him. In a narrative similar to

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[118] Playing the Game Professionally. *Rafah Notes* [online]. 19 November 2005 [cit. 2010-11-24]. Available online: <http://rafahnotes.blogspot.com/2005/11/playing-game-professionally.html>.

Under Ash he is then engaged in a fight with Israeli police and Army. All the main characters in the game are individualized and humanized by a very emotional background stories which are presented to the player by cinematic sequences. Radwan Kasmiya, manager of Afkar Media, told me: "It was our aim to show what happens in Palestine behind politics, to show people stories and problems."[119] Like its Western equivalents, the game fails in its schematization and instrumentalization of enemies (Israelis), although it does make an attempt to overcome this problem. The game world is inhabited by civilians (Israelis and Palestinians) whose killing is penalized by an automatic "game over." This constitutes a substantial difference from the majority of Western war games, where the Middle Eastern cities are depicted as being without inhabitants and the allied war effort is thus shown not to hurt civilians (Leonard 2004). Nevertheless, on the level of game play combat remains the only interaction possible with the Israelis.

Recently, more distinctive examples of digital resistance appeared on the Arab market. For example, *Jenin: Road of Heroes*, created by Tamir Majed Malas and Ali Fayez Ismail in Jordan (n.d.), has a plot based on the famous Battle of Jenin which took place in April 2002 in Palestinian refugee camp. According to the authors

> The Battle of Jenin summarizes the issue of Palestine. On one side, a
> heavily armed enemy supported by the Western colonial forces and on the

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[119] Personal interview with Radwan Kasmiya, Damascus, May 2005.

other side, unarmed and isolated people of Palestine fighting with rocks and light weapons captured from the enemy or produced locally.[120]

The game starts with *basmala*[121] followed by a long introductory video about the history of Palestine, the Jenin refugee camp, and the Battle of Jenin itself. The video combines real historical footage with digitally produced material in a way which somehow resembles pro-Palestinian activist videos or propagandistic movies of Lebanese Hezbollah movement. The Muslim and Palestinian identity of the hero is stressed in the training mission by audio and video signifiers, like *al-takbīr* (call *allāhu akbar*), religious *nashīd* (hymn) in the background, or Palestinian flags and posters of Al-Aqsa Mosque on the walls. The narrative of *Jenin* is loosely based on real events, in the sense that the player witnesses the initial attack of Israeli helicopters, takes part in installing landmines in order to prevent Israeli soldiers to enter the camp, etc. At the same time, as is the case in the Western war games, the reality is depicted in a very selective way, reshaping the overall comprehension of the conflict, its reason and outcome in favor of one side.

A new game has recently been released by the already mentioned Lebanese Hezbollah movement. The first-person shooter *Al-Wa'd al-sādiq* (*Tale of the Truthful Pledge*, W3DTEK 2007) is a sequel to the previously mentioned Hezbollah's game *Al-Quwwa*

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[120] *Jenin: Road of Heroes*, booklet. This statement, perhaps unwillingly, also summarizes the position of the Arab video game production itself, while it relies heavily on appropriated Western games or local cottage industry.

[121] The phrase *bismi-llāhi ar-rahmāni ar-rahīmi* (In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful) constitutes the first verse of every *sūra* (chapter) of the Qur'ān (but one) and is often used as an opening phrase in letters, books and public speeches.

al-Khāsa (*Special Force*). This new game retells a story from 2006 war between Israeli defense forces and Hezbollah. Most of its game play does not differ from the scheme typical for the genre, like destroying army trucks, eliminating snipers or retrieving confidential documents from the enemy's military camp. Nevertheless, some mission objectives exhibit an ideological bent, e.g. preventing Israeli soldiers from raising a flag in a Lebanese village or shooting katyusha rockets at the Israeli settlement. The game even features virtual collective prayers in cut scenes in between the missions.

By situating the player into immersive simulation of real conflicts in Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq these games strengthen his identification with the struggles of Muslim communities and contribute to the notion of global Muslim identity. The focus point is the idea of defending Muslim *umma* against outside aggression, the emphasis on just and moral cause of the fight, and the glorification of the Muslim fighters. By schematizing complex and diverse conflicts into single bipolar scheme of good and evil these games in fact echo their Western blueprints more than the authors are ready to admit; including the collectivization and functionalization of enemies and legitimizing authors' point of view by highly selective references to the real events.

3.6.6 Arab and Muslim Identity in Mainstream Production

In November 2006, BreakAway Games, a US-based developer of video games, announced *Arabian Lords* (*Sādat al-sahrā'*), a bilingual, PC strategy game inspired by the rise of Islam, during the seventh to thirteenth centuries. Arabian Lords were from the beginning intended to ship exclusively to regions in the Arab world. According to the developers maintaining appropriate content, historical accuracy, and cultural

sensitivity were crucial for the design of the game.[122] Therefore they have collaborated

with Jordanian company Quirkat. As Mahmoud Khasawneh, CEO of Quirkat, puts it

> This is the first time an established player like Breakaway has expanded its
> development effort in partnership with a Middle Eastern studio like Quirkat,
> to bring to the region a unique blend of gaming quality and cultural and
> historical references.[123]

According to the authors' statement, their goal was to create a fun, exciting strategy

game that would appeal to Arab and Muslim gamers

> With this product historical accuracy and cultural relevance became
> important guiding factors. We knew that, on a cultural level, religion
> played a major role during the time span covered in the game, and that it
> still does today. We wanted to make sure to include this in a way that
> would honor its significance, while being sensitive to all religious and
> cultural concerns.[124]

The *Arabian Lords* game enables the player to assume the role of a medieval Muslim

merchant, and its game play involves building cities, municipal politics, diplomacy,

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[122] *Arabian Lords* [online]. [cit. 2008-4-5]. Available online:

<http://www.arabianlords.com/Public_News/Nws_PressReleaseDetails.aspx?lang=3&site_id=2&page_id
=3&NewsID=95&Type=P&Path=64>.

[123] *Arabian Lords* [online]. [cit. 2008-4-5]. Available online:

<http://www.arabianlords.com/Public/public_master.aspx?Site_Id=2&Page_Id=922&Path=66>.

[124] Ibid.

espionage, etc. It includes many distinguishing features of early Islamic civilization, such as poetry contests, camel markets, etc. Nevertheless, regarding all levels of the game – including narrative, game play, and visual signifiers – designers have paid attention to the delicate subject of representing Islam, e.g., in the role of imam in the game. *Arabian Lords* are available in both English and Arabic, and, according to the producers, the game "was an instant success in the Arab world."[125] As a result, Quirkat and BreakAway Games are preparing a new project based on Arab mythology, which is again designed primarily for Arab markets – a trading-card game called *Mythic Palace* (*Qasr al-asātīr*).[126]

Arabian Lords indicate the growing interest among Western game developers in the Arab market. With the prospects of lower piracy rates another major players are starting to enter the region. Chris Deering, president of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, has stated as early as in 2003

> We are committed to developing and introducing Arabised titles in the region. In fact, the first of these is scheduled for release next year. If piracy were not such a big issue here we would have introduced Arabised titles much earlier.[127]

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[125] *Break Away Games* [online]. [cit. 2008-9-21]. Available online:

<http://www.breakawaygames.com/entertainment/feature/>.

[126] *Mythic Palace Game* [online]. [cit. 2008-9-21]. Available online:

<http://www.mythicpalacegame.com>.

[127] *Gulf News* [online]. 26 November 2003 [cit. 2008-9-21]. Available online: <http://gulfnews.com/>.

The cultural and religious sensitivity can thus be perceived as more of a pragmatic step aiming to ease the acceptance of the product than a result of a broader cultural mission.

More recently, another mainstream game *Abu Hadid* (*Abū Hadīd*, Khayal 2007) has been released in Egypt. It is an action game based on a popular comedy movie Booha (Rami Emam 2005), telling a story of a young countryside man who arrives to Cairo in order to claim his inheritance. Both the movie and the game are full of specifically Egyptian cultural references and humor, including distinctive colloquial Arabic of Upper Egypt. Nevertheless, the authors of the game are knowingly appropriating and subverting concepts dominating the Western video game industry. As they say

> Abu Hadid is an Arab 3-D computer game inspired by the Egyptian environment. An Arab game means that the hero speaks Arabic and the story takes place in Egypt. Moreover, it means that he uses cudgel instead of shotgun, drives microbus instead of Porsche, rides donkey instead of tank, meets *falāhīn* (farmers) instead of marines and encounters *sa'āyida* (Upper Egyptians) instead of aliens.[128]

References to Egyptian culture are communicated to the player on all the three levels of the game's content. The visual signifiers realistically copy many details of workaday Cairo, from people's clothes and *sha'bī* (popular) cafés to distinctively colored scaffolding on the buildings. Similar references are to be found on the level of game play; the hero regains his strength by eating *fūl midammis* (cooked horse beans; national dishes of Egypt), quarrels with *butagāzī* (street vendor of bottled butane) and takes part

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[128] *Abu Hadid* (Khayal 2007), booklet

in a ritualized quarterstaff fight. All the characters in the game speak Egyptian colloquial Arabic (ECA) with notable distinctions representing their social status. This constitutes substantial difference from all the above-mentioned games which stick to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Given the fact that the latter represents dominant mode of communication in issues related to religion and politics in the Arab world, this linguistical shift could be also perceived as a kind of proclamation; deliberately drawing a line between *Abu Hadid* and previous educational, political, or religious Islamic and Arab games. Although *Abu Hadid* is clearly ironic, the emphasis on cultural identity and subversion of the concept of what they call an "American superhero" was from the beginning an integral part of authors' motivation. As Mustafa Ashur, one of the designers, says: "We are proud that Abu Hadid is 100% Egyptian, from technology to the content."[129]

Unlike the rather pragmatic aims behind *Arabian Lords*, *Abu Hadid* stems more from the needs of the authors to articulate their Arab and Egyptian identity through the media which they see predominantly Western. Yet, these games signalize the emergence of new Arab mainstream game industry. These recent games seem to be less engaged politically and in promoting Islamic faith then their predecessors. At the same time, they are well-designed and technologically advanced. The articulation of cultural identity seems to express the beliefs of the designers as well as response to expectations and demands of the audience.

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[129] Interview for *Dream TV*, 16 December 2006.

3.7 Video Blogging for Islam

The use of ICT for education and communication of values within the sphere of popular youth culture is not limited only to educational video games or video clips distributed on CDs, VCDs, and DVDs. Recent surveys show that young people in the Middle East increasingly utilize the internet for entertainment, research, socializing, and social networking (Baune 2005; Hofheinz 2007; Abdulla 2007). One specific format that seems to be popular among Muslim youth is video blogging – posting short video clips created by individual users on the internet, mainly through public venues such as You Tube or on individual blogs. Many of these video blogs share the same agenda as the games discussed above – i.e., *halāl* entertainment, education, and the spread of the Islamic message; for example, Ummah Films[130] or Dawah Works.[131] The latter's mission statement is again generic for a broader group of blogs

> We at Dawah Works are not professional filmmakers, but we will attempt to bring halal entertainment and information to Muslims and non-Muslims. With the popularity of other film groups we realized that the medium of video blogs can aid us (Inshallah) in promoting Islam. We would like to interact with and initiate thought among Muslims & non-Muslims.[132]

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[130] *Ummah Films* [online]. [cit. 2008-9-21]. Available online:

<http://www.ummahfilms.com/home.html>.

[131] *Dawah Works* [online]. [cit. 2008-9-21]. Available online: <http://dawahworks.com/>.

[132] Ibid.

Most of the clips posted on such video blogs feature the authors expressing their beliefs, commenting on various social topics (e.g., wearing hijab, drinking alcohol, smoking, dating) and sharing their perspectives on Islam with others. Often they post materials borrowed from satellite channels and other websites they find interesting. A symbolic example of the latter is the series *Shaitan: Video Blog from the Devil*, originally broadcast by the Al-Resalah channel and then posted on You Tube by a user called KnowledgeIsLight27.[133] The series soon appeared on many other sites and provoked heavy comment and discussion by other users. Table 1 shows a transcript of the popular *Hijab* episode.

Table 1. Transcript of Shaitan: Video Blog From the Devil – Hijab episode

Bedroom. Probably evening. A dim lamp is switched on. A girl in a modest plain abaya is adjusting her hijab in front of a mirror.	
Suddenly she hears the voice of the devil.	Devil (in colloquial Arabic): "Are you going out like that?"
The devil (dressed as a young man in black) appears in the mirror.	"What would people say?"
They both closely inspect the girl's face in the mirror.	"Your face looks so pale…"
The girl starts to seem uneasy. She touches her face.	"… and your eyes are swollen as if you have just got out of bed."
	"No, no..."
Close up of girl's face. She examines herself with growing disaffection.	"You must at least wear some makeup! Just a little, no one will notice."
The devil teases her.	"Are you going to a funeral?"
He walks around her in pretentious dismay.	"Oh my God, what are you wearing?! It makes you

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[133] Shaitan The Way The Devil Works. *You Tube* [online]. 27 January 2008 [cit. 2010-11-24]. Available online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUS0ZeGRkEY>.

	look like a black bag."
The devil stands behind the girl and looks directly into her eyes in the mirror.	(in a serious voice) "Do you want your friends to make fun of you? What do you want them to say about you?"
	(in an ironic voice) "You couldn't find anything to wear except to wear your mom's abaya?! You must pick a cool abaya that suits you!"
The girl slowly unties her hijab… The devil has a satisfied look on his face.	"Who told you that you must cover all your hair? Loosen it a bit!"
Cut. The devil hides himself in a wardrobe and closes the door behind him. On the other side of the door is a mirror.	"The guys won't bite you!"
We can see the girl in this mirror. She has make up on, her loose hijab revealing her hair and decorated abaya.	"Now you look so cool and beautiful and your hijab is just the same…"
Phone rings. The girl answers. Camera slowly moves around her body. Fade out.	Girl: "Yalla, yalla, I'm coming." (We can hear the devil breathing.)
Cut. The head of another devil appears surrounded by darkness.	Second devil: "Hijab you say, huh?"
The Quranic verse appears on the screen.	Narrator (in MSA): "And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that they should not display their beauty and armaments except what (ordinarily) appear there of."

The narrative structure of the *Shaitan* video clips follows the same pattern as the above-mentioned animated videos for children, although its target audience is considerably older. The actors in the clips face temptations, which they can resist with the help of the teachings of Islam, or alternatively they give in to them. Sometimes viewers see both options and their subsequent results. In the end, there is always a reference to the

particular rule of law, i.e. Qur'an or hadith. The important and novel aspect of video blogging is that it effectively creates a space for discussion, exchange of opinions, and self-expression, as is demonstrated in many commentaries posted under the video, e.g.

> wow! someone actually feels the same as i do?! amazing, ALLAH HAFIZ to all muslimahs! (cabwhisperer)[134]

> Thank you KnowledgeIsLight27. I love your creativity you show thru your videos. Very interesting. I wasnt a religious person (altho i never smoke, never drink, never clubbing & partying, etc) but i was very lazy when it came to Solat. Sometimes i did, sometimes not. Thanks to YouTube, i regained Hidayah from Allah. Praise to Allah the Most Merciful. He still loved me, and He wanted me to change, to be a better person. I love you, ya Allah! Give me more of your Hidayah and Light! (ladynox200)[135]

Given the global character of the Internet, video blogging in fact effectively creates a specific manifestation of what Eickelman and Anderson (2003) call the Muslim "transnational public sphere." The audio-visual character of the medium, as well as the chat-like nature of the subsequent commentaries both exemplify the above-mentioned Ong's (1982) concept of second orality, with its participatory, interactive, and communal aspects. At the same time, the non-hierarchical and do-it-yourself character of the blogging culture appeals to youth and provides them a space for construction and

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[134] Ibid.

[135] Shaitan how he makes you not wake up for morning prayer. *You Tube* [online]. 30 January 2008 [cit. 2010-11-24]. Available online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bto0xikkcW4&feature=related>.

representation of their individual identities. The combination of entertainment, youth consumer culture, and Islamic piety echoes the above-mentioned examples of video games. By utilizing various mainstream media the video and game producers, in fact, transcend confinement to Islamic movements and generally promote a more religious, rather than cultural, concept of Muslim identity. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter this concept has started to be slowly, albeit increasingly, accepted by the mainstream media.

3.8 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have introduced the concept of neglected media as generally understudied media with strong popular appeal and economic relevance. Consequently, I have discussed the ongoing process of cultural appropriation of two specific forms of neglected media in the Arab and Muslim world, i.e. video games and video clips, and analyzed the ways in which Arab and Muslim identity are articulated in it. The study of neglected media has to be conducted in a broader interdisciplinary framework and has to encompass a broad variety of different media, like video clips, comics, music, board games, etc. When related to the Arab world, most of these media in fact constitute a new research agenda.

Generally speaking, we can observe all the patterns discussed above in the contemporary Arab Muslim popular media production. In the framework of Islamic education it is for example *Karīm* (Afkar Media, 2006), Syrian rendered animation

movies advertised as "funny 3-D clips for youngsters to understand Islam",[136] Egyptian

Al-Muslim al-saghīr (*The Young Muslim*, Safeer n.d.) which "increases the knowledge

about Islam through cute animations and songs",[137] or *Qisas al-anbiyā'* (*Prophets'*

Tales, RDI 2001). Similarly, many digitally rendered movies deal with the ongoing

conflicts in the former's framework of "digital resistance," like Saudi Arabian *Shahīd*

al-'ālam (*Martyr of the World*) depicting the killing of Muhammad al-Durra, Lebanese

Hārib al-'ustūra (W3DTEK 2007) based on Lebanon 2006 war, or Syrian *Jidār fī al-*

qalb (*Wall in my Heart*, Afkar Media 2006) which is "a new drama series for teenagers

about life under occupation in Palestine."[138] Nevertheless, neglected media are not

confined to digital technologies only. Especially the production in the latter game's

broader context of cultural identity uses more "traditional" media, like the famous

Egyptian comics *Abtāl al-'arab* (*Middle East Heroes*, AK Comics) which according to

the authors "creates a new vision for the Middle East and its nations"[139] and features the

Muslim character of Jalila, a superwoman protecting Jerusalem and all its three

religions against evil, or the board game *Mecca to Medina* (Muslim Games 2005), "a

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[136] *Karīm* [online]. [cit. 2008-4-5]. Available online:

<http://afkarmedia.com/index.php?PageTitle=Kareem&Type=movies&Status=Details&ID=1>.

[137] *Al-Muslim al-saghīr*, booklet

[138] *Jidār fī al-qalb* [online]. [cit. 2008-4-5]. Available online:

<http://afkarmedia.com/index.php?PageTitle=Wall%20In%20My%20Heart&Type=movies&Status=Details&ID=2>.

[139] *Abtāl al-'arab* [online]. [cit. 2008-4-5]. Available online:

<http://www.akcomics.com/AbtalAl3arab.wmv>.

game of fun that piques the curiosity those who want to learn more about Islamic history and Islam itself."[140]

Although each form of neglected media requires distinctive methodology, such as the descriptive tools for analyzing the nondeterministic structure of videogames, their role in the construction of Islamic knowledge and shaping Muslim identities has to be interpreted in one broader context. Today, popular digital media play an important part in forming youth culture in the Arab and Muslim world. At the same time they are often perceived as originally Western and their content as thus, inappropriate and non-Islamic. Therefore the appropriation of various forms of neglected media in the Arab world is from the beginning concerned with the question of religious and cultural identity. This phenomenon is particularly demonstrated in the case of video games; most of the up-to-date regional production is socially or politically engaged. This is to a great extent the result of the fact that European and American games are not perceived as neutral containers by Arab and Muslim producers, as I have stated above.

At the same time, this political and social engagement does not directly contest established local authorities and institutions. On the contrary, many video games are created by such authorities or are at least favor them, like the game *Special Force*. This is in particular significant when compared with European and American serious games, which, besides promotional or training games developed by e.g. the above-mentioned *America's Army*, largely serve as a vehicle for political activism (*September 12th*, Newsgaming 2003) or social criticism (*McDonald's Video Game*, La Molleindustria

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[140] *Muslim Games* [online]. [cit. 2008-4-5]. Available online:

<http://www.muslimgames.com/reviews.html>.

2006) directly attacking established political and economic structures. The activism and engagement of Arab games seems to be more in line with official proclamations, serving the promotion of Islamic values or particular causes, like the issue of Palestine or Iraq. The games created by Radwan Kasmiya, which contest the "dictate of entertainment" with its schematizing framework itself, constitute rather an exception. As I have stated in the Chapter 2, early information and communication technology and the Internet have been used extensively for dissemination of dissenting opinions and direct political criticism of the status quo in the Arab world. The reasons why this is not the case in video games is still an open question. The answer lies probably in the general perception of games as a leisure time activity, in the higher production costs which makes the developers more vulnerable and dependent on the authorities, and in the Western influence over the content of video game majorities, which appeal strongly to Arab and Muslim designers.

Neglected media address mainly youth generations, and the producers are well aware of the fact. Moreover, as has been said, many of them consider such media an effective tool in educational practice. Although the results of case studies concerned with using games in education are to some extent ambiguous, pointing out substantial incompatibilities between game-based learning and formal schooling systems (Facer 2003), the interest of public policy makers, the authorities and developers in the persuasive power of video games is obvious. In the Arab and Muslim world this phenomenon can be perceived as an attempt to translate the Islamic message into new semiotic language. A parallel can be found in the new transglobal Muslim rap music which Alim (2006) describes as radical form of information transferal and arguably some of the most cutting edge conveyors of contemporary Islam. Blending the teaching

of Islam with entertainment aspects also follows a broader pattern in which operate many popular preachers addressing young Muslims, e.g. Amr Khaled (Olsson 2007).

When compared with other new media participating in the construction of Islamic knowledge, video games and video clips tend to iterate some already observed patterns, like the already mentioned contribution to the emerging notion of global Muslim identity. As we have seen, a substantial amount of games express global issues of the imaginary Muslim community, like the conflict in Palestine or the war on Iraq. This echoes the growing numbers of cyber fatwas dealing with these global issues or the flow of real videos from Iraq, Chechnya, Kashmir and Palestine posted on-line (Bunt 2009). The interactivity of video games enables even virtual participation of the players in the conflicts, thus arguably increasing their emotional investment and stressing the message. As Murphy (2004, p. 235) has noted

> The in-game structures that enable the identification of the gamer with the onscreen character – perspectival modes, narration, cinematics, audio cues, force feedback, densely orchestrated game levels and worlds – all serve to deepen the connection between the game world and the real world.

In all these games the Muslim identity of the hero is stressed and communicated to the players, strengthening their identification with the struggles of Muslim communities in the world. As I have already mentioned, the high percentage of games dealing with these issues actually finds its similarity in the earliest days of the World Wide Web, when young Muslims were quick to embrace the new medium to promote a global Islamic consciousness, using a similar agenda (Hofheinz 2007, p. 72).

New media constitute an important factor in a socialization of the younger generation (Wheeler 2005; Abdulla 2007). Similarly, social networking is an indivisible part of gaming culture. Peer groups of gamers exchange games, discuss their qualities and circulate information helping to win particular game. With spreading of the Internet these social networks are manifested by fan sites, blogs and peer to peer servers, effectively creating transnational youth communities. Sharing experience creates collective bond which is a fact often exploited by game designers. For example the U.S. Army successfully uses the concept of branding in its promotional campaign wisely combining its videogame America's Army with other PR activities (e.g. military exhibitions) and collaborative bulletin boards and forums for the players (Li 2004). A similar concept was adopted by the Lebanese Hezbollah movement; the game *Al-Wa'd al-sādiq* is presented during military exhibitions and players are encouraged to take part in online discussion forums.[141] Such peer groups and collaborative networks play an important role in the construction of youths' identity. As Brown et al. (1994, p. 814) have noted, adolescents use media and the cultural insights provided by them to see both who they might be and how others have constructed or reconstructed themselves.

Until recently there has not been any mainstream (i.e. not directly engaged, whether religiously or politically) video game production in the Arab world to speak about. The fact that games with an agenda preceded mainstream production is probably the most noteworthy feature of Arab and Muslim gaming culture. The emergence of games like *Abu Hadid* or *Arabian Lords* signalizes that this situation is about to change. The

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[141] *Special Force 2* [online]. [cit. 2008-4-5]. Available online:

<http://www.specialforce2.org/forum/index.php>.

growing mainstream video game industry would be probably more likely to promote the concept of identity based on a cultural basis, i.e. using historical references as is the case of *Arabian Lords* or references to popular culture, as is the case of *Abu Hadid*, than the more straightforward concepts of the engaged Islamic games discussed above.

4 Conclusions

This dissertation has analyzed the impact of information and communication technologies and new digital media on the production of Islamic knowledge and the construction of Muslim identity in Muslim communities in the Arab world and Western Europe. At the same time, it aimed to transcend the media-centric logic and to analyze the impact of ICT and new media in the light of the emerging ICT and new media interdependency and hybridization within broader social, cultural and linguistic context. By doing so, it particularly focused on two separate, yet simultaneously entangled, phenomena. First, it discussed fatwas and other normative content issued and/or disseminated by various Islamic websites for the Muslim minorities living in non-Muslim majority countries, particularly in Western Europe. Second, it analyzed Islamic video games and video clips produced in the Arab and Muslim world and discussed the ways in which these new media forms articulate Muslim identity and communicate Islamic ethical and moral values to the youth.

On an overarching level, this dissertation has argued that the unanticipated assemblages formed by ICT and various new media outlets contribute simultaneously to preserving traditional cultural norms and religious values while unsettling the existing arrangements and promoting new organizational forms; appealing to a local audience while addressing transnational communities; and asserting conformity with established religious institutions while fueling fragmentation of authority and individualization of faith.

First, regarding the fragmentation of authority and individualization of faith, I find particularly relevant the research on the production of Islamic knowledge on the Internet. The Chapter 2 of this thesis focused on Sunni websites providing normative material for Muslim minorities in Europe and explored their fatwas and other forms of counseling addressing the specific issues arising from living as a minority in a non-Muslim majority setting. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the underlying logic behind the Islamic cyber counseling emphasizes the role of the Self, the privatization of faith, and the increasing insistence on religion as a system of values and ethics. In this regard, I have also argued that the growing popularity of Internet preachers and muftis converges with the broader transformation of contemporary religiosity, which similarly emphasizes the role of the individual. In other words, such transformation promotes a ready-made and easily-accessible set of norms and values that might order daily lives and define a practical and visible identity; such as the easily accessible and searchable fatwa databases. Nevertheless, I have also discussed how most of the muftis associated with the key Islamic websites are in fact deeply entrenched in traditional and established religious structures. Therefore, the Internet has in the long term in fact reinforced culturally dominant social networks and while undoubtedly fueling individualization and privatization of faith, it simultaneously asserts conformity and compliance with established religious authorities.

Similarly, in the process of construction of Muslim identity in the Arab and Islamic video games and video clips, we observe the participation of both the established political and religious structures, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah movement and private religious entrepreneurs, such as private companies and individuals. The latter

phenomenon needs to be considered, within the broader framework of the above-mentioned Islamic revival or piety movement, as an ongoing contribution to the above-mentioned privatization of Islamic knowledge production. As Haenni (quoted in Lindsey 2006) points out

> When we speak of Islamic revival, we always focus on politically-organized groups intent on gaining power. But "private religious entrepreneurs" are just as important a phenomenon. These entrepreneurs target the upper middle class, and focus on personal enlightenment rather than political engagement. They're socially conservative and opposed to what they see as the decadence of much of Western culture. But they want to benefit from Western science, education, and progress, and they condemn violence and extremism. [...] They fully use all the means of mass culture, [like] chats on the Net, chat shows on TV, Islamic rap in the West.

Whereas the producers associated with established political and religious structures promote more straightforward and directly engaged notion of the Muslim identity, the games produced by private entrepreneurs offer more differentiated concepts of it. Where the games produced by the Lebanese Hezbollah Movement immerse the player in a virtual recreation of the struggle with Israel, video games and video clips produced by private companies strive to promote "positive" or "family" values, deliberately distinguishing themselves from "Western" game production, which is labeled as "morally corrupt," "violent," or simply "not promoting the good values." As such, these products are marketed to a broader audience, which does not necessarily have to

be Muslim. For example, the animated characters of the Egyptian educational series *Al-Muttahidūn* (New Way Group n.d.) are advertised as "the good heroes, who at all times strive for justice and promote good and kindness." The key underlying message for parents is that the product is safe to buy. This strategy resembles the advertising campaigns of the so-called "Barbie non-Barbie dolls," Razanne and Fulla, which are reportedly also being bought by Arab Christian families who are dissatisfied with the explicit sexuality of Barbie (Kuppinger 2009). Finally, there are games, such as *Quraish* produced by Afkar Media, which aim to educate the player about the history of Islam and, at the same time, engage in a cultural dialogue with the West. The identity construction in this game is a deliberately open-ended process, forcing the player to contemplate on broader social, political and religious consequences of his or her actions.

Second, this dissertation has discussed how the unanticipated assemblages formed by ICT and new media appeal simultaneously to local audiences while addressing transnational communities. In the domain of the production of Islamic knowledge on the Internet, this is particularly relevant in the cases of the web-ring of Fatwa-Online and the website of the Islamic Shari'a Council respectively. While the former provides global connectivity to the *salafī* Muslim community, it simultaneously links this community with local students in Mecca and Medina through participation in collective rituals, such as *badal hajj*. Conversely, the website of Islamic Shari'a Council, although originally established in order to solve problems of local Muslim community and primarily facilitating face to face appointments, today offers a large and searchable fatwa database; reminiscent in a way of those of the above-mentioned global Islamic websites. Where the global sites such as Fatwa-Online or the former IslamOnline (and

today's On Islam) invite the believers in the rebuilding of the imaginary global Muslim *umma* through the Internet, the sites of Islamic Shari'a Council or Muslim Arbitration Tribunal establish arbitration and reconciliation platforms for local communities; yet simultaneously linking these offline institutions with the global Muslim audience. As I have mentioned above, although the Council has launched its English website relatively late, it gained substantial traffic and its fatwas are sought by many young people of various and multifaceted background. Therefore, this case in particular exemplifies what Anderson (2008) describes as "migration online" of established religious networks and institutions, which, at first being slow to adapt and thus preceded by "new Islam's interpreters," eventually proved adept at deploying the underlying technologies to their own ends and re-established their presence and authority online.

Similarly, in the domain of the construction of Muslim identity in new media, we have seen that a substantial amount of Arab and Muslim video games express global issues of the imaginary Muslim community, like the conflict in Palestine or the war on Iraq. By doing so, these games contribute to the emerging notion of global Muslim identity. In all these games the Muslim identity of the hero is stressed and communicated to the players, strengthening their identification with the struggles of Muslim communities in the world. At the same time, there is an emerging local production at the level of national Arab game markets referring exclusively to the local conditions and local concepts of identity. In games such as Abu Hadid, the references communicated to the player on all the three levels of the game's content, i.e. the visual signifiers, narrative, and game play, link mainly to local, in this case Egyptian, popular culture. These games constitute substantial difference from the above-mentioned global Muslim games

and, together with the growing cooperation between Arab and Western game producers, indicate the possible future development of the localized Arab video game production.

Third, this dissertation has discussed the ways in which ICT and new media contribute simultaneously to preserving traditional cultural norms and religious values while unsettling the existing arrangements and promoting new organizational forms. As both chapters of this thesis have demonstrated, the traditional and established Muslim authorities are apparently aware that their message in order to be heard has be recast in accordance with new cultural and media ecology. Moreover, many of them proved very successful in utilizing the new media technologies. Regarding the production of Islamic knowledge on the Internet, this thesis has demonstrated how the technology enabling the communications between individual petitioners and religious scholars favors bottom-up approach, since the fatwas issued depend on the petitions the website has aggregated. In this respect, El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009, p. 217) argue that the Internet and the various media outlets it enables constitute a new manifestation of a Muslim *umma* that is not based on authority, but on public participation; in a way similar to other Internet social networks. This claim is supported by the fact that it is the petitioners, not the muftis, who set the agenda for the issues to be discussed on most of the websites that we analyzed. Nevertheless, as I have argued above, despite the agenda being set by the individual petitioners, it is the traditional established authority, oftentimes closely linked to existing religious institutions, who issues the fatwa or give the advice. Yet, these authorities, in order to be successful in disseminating their message, have to understand and utilize the organizational forms promoted by network communication – coalitions, networks, campaigns, and mobilizations (Dean et al. 2006)

– and the politics of "reputation management" that trades on knowing how and showing up (Anderson 2009).

Similarly, in the chapter 3 I have demonstrated how the developers and designers of Arab and Muslim video games aim to translate the Islamic religious and cultural message into a new semiotic domain, with which today's youth generation is naturally familiar. In other words, they strive to meet the needs and expectations of what Prensky (2005) calls "digital natives." Moreover, authors of these games perceive video games not only as state-of-the-art environments for learning and instruction, but also essentially as persuasive media. They, albeit to a different degree, share the concern about the negative effects Western mainstream video games have on today's Arab youth. On the one hand, similar to the West these concerns are related to the alleged promotion of violent behavior and explicit display of sexuality in many mainstream video games; especially of the action genre. On the other hand, more religiously and culturally specific concerns stem from what these authors perceive as misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims. Therefore, as I have argued above, beyond the translation of the Islamic message into a new semiotic domain, particularly the Islamic educational games constitute safe, *halāl* alternatives to the mainstream global production. By no means should we consider this phenomenon as specifically Islamic; we have witnessed similar "safe" appropriations of video games and toys by many other world's religions, including Judaism and Christianity. More importantly, when considering the new media literacy, we have to understand that gaming constitutes a specific culture with its own dynamics and developments. This gaming culture is to a large degree conservative. Several patterns and game genres have firmly established themselves and are regularly being repeated and remixed by software companies over and over again.

To win, for example, a real-time strategy game or first-person shooter game requires distinctive skills and a substantial understanding of the rule system typical for the genre, which in turn doesn't change a lot. Therefore, by appropriating mainstream, mainly Western video game patterns, the authors of Islamic educational games benefit from the existing skill sets with which players are already familiar. In other words, they utilize what Bogost (2007) calls procedural rhetorics pertaining to particular game genres. For example, the game *Quraish* appropriates the pattern of the real-time strategy game *Age of Empires,* whereas the hajj simulation directly uses the technology of *Second Life*. Therefore, on a symbolic level these games are clearly Islamic, with Muslim heroes and values, yet on a structural level they are Western – which in fact clearly corresponds with the aims of the developers, who want to deliver their message and at the same time reaffirm their belonging to and benefit from the existing global gaming culture.

In this respect, Campbell (2010) has argued that religious groups and users often undergo a complex negotiation and decision-making process in their determination about whether they will incorporate new media technologies into the life of their community. According to Campbell, this negotiation can lead in one of three directions: acceptance and appropriation; rejection and resistance; or reconstruction and innovation – or a combination of these strategies. In acceptance and appropriation media is embraced as a neutral tool to be used for religious purposes or to enhance the life of the community. In rejection and resistance media is approached with caution due to problematic features or the results it generates. So some aspects of the technology may be rejected and some uses or outcomes resisted. In both reconstruction and innovation the decision is made to re-shape the technology in some way in order to enhance the community. As I have demonstrated within the phenomena of production

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of the Islamic knowledge on the Internet and construction of Muslim identity in new media, we see a trend toward the acceptance and appropriation of ICT and new media in the Arab and Muslim world, as religious narratives and goals are easily projected onto various gaming genres and Internet social networks are utilized for dissemination of the Islamic message and networking of the Muslim communities.

Finally, when exploring the content of Islamic new media we find inherent continuity with many traditional literary genres in the Arab Muslim world similarly blending entertainment and education. For example, the opening scene from the game *Quraish* is based on the Ibn Ishaq's *as-Sira an-Nabawiyya* (The Life of the Prophet) and the first campaign of the game departs from the *Ayyām al-Arab* (The Days of the Arabs, i.e. stories of the tribal wars); *Prophet's Wars* quotes *Futūh* (stories of the early Islamic conquests); games such as *al-Muslim as-Saghir* and *al-Mughamirun* appropriate many distinctive traits of the *adab* (medieval anecdotal form of prose designed to be both edifying and entertaining); and the hajj simulation in Second Life is in fact a technologically updated version of the popular hajj and Umrah illustrated step-by-step guides. Similarly, as I have demonstrated above, many of the fatwa-issuing websites, beyond providing normative content in *stricto sensu*, offer readers counseling, news, and stories providing both education and entertainment.

At the same time, the underlying logic behind the production and consumption associated with various Islamic websites and video games, which blend instructive content with popular entertainment, follows the patterns already manifested in many variations and different media outlets in the Arab world, such as the private-owned Islamic satellite TV channels that aim to present "excellent television programs and

materials that deal with Muslim issues and meet with the Muslim's spiritual, cultural, and social needs" (Tash 2004; see also Bentzin 2003); the "Islamic music videos" which have already gained enormous popularity among Arab youth (Pond 2006); or a broad scale of market products ranging from Islamic fashion to *halāl* toys (Kuppinger 2009; Bunt 2010).

Nevertheless, as Armbrust (2003, p. 121) suggests, it would be a mistake to think of this kind of consumption only as a product of digital-age technology developed over the last two decades. Despite the fundamental changes, which new digital technology promotes in the ways of processing information and the production and consumption of knowledge, the content of Islamic websites and video games preserves continuity with discourses developed over a long period. In other words, to characterize this emerging production solely in terms of reaction to the expansion of global or Western culture or as a manifestation of an Islamic revival movement would be ahistorical. From a broader theoretical standpoint, the production of Islamic knowledge on the Internet and the construction of Muslim identity in new media can be used as a prism through which specific aspects of the transformation that Arab and Muslim societies have undergone in the past decades can be studied and better understood. Given the rapid technological development and the growing dissemination of new information and communication technologies in the Muslim world, the emerging media outlets described in this thesis can easily become the future of what Bunt (2003) calls the "cyber Islamic environments;" translating the Islamic message into a new semiotic domain, yet maintaining an inherent link with Arab Islamic cultural heritage.

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