

INTRODUCTION

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The primary subject of the present volume is Sunni ‘ulama’ (men of knowledge) in the modern Middle East, who acquired their formal religious training and credentials in established *madrasas* and religious colleges, and were identifiable by their attire of cloaks and turbans (*‘ama’im*). Ideologically, they did not form a monolithic group but harbored diverse intellectual voices, ranging from quite conservative to relatively liberal.

Most of the ‘ulama’ have been and remain closely affiliated with the state in terms of posts, salaries and institutions, acting as teachers, preachers, judges and administrators in the state religious system. Others, though, were unaffiliated scholars who adopted a more critical and activist stance and often clashed with official ‘ulama’ and the political authorities over religious and sociopolitical issues.

This definition of ‘ulama’ seems needed, given that religious learning and authority became fragmented and fluid terms in the Arab Muslim world of the colonial and post-colonial period, with the emergence of new social and intellectual strata from primarily autodidactic backgrounds. These sectors were molded by the exposure to Western culture, rapid urbanization, the expansion of education and growing social strife, embodied by both modernists and Islamists. The two groups differed in their perception of Islam: modernists tended to translate religion into an ethical code in order to adapt Muslim reality to the changing circumstances; Islamists, whether moderate or radical, sought to turn Islam into a social and political force—if possible under their leadership.

In spite of competing over the modern image of Islam and the right to speak on its behalf, modernists and Islamists shared a similar concept of man’s relationship to knowledge based on direct access to the sacred corpus—inter alia, by the proliferation of the mass media. Islamic rituals and doctrines were now discussed, debated and redefined far beyond the traditional mosque and the *madrasa*, in the printed and

electronic press, in audio- and videocassettes and in the newly emerging media—satellite channels and the Internet—in the late 1980s.¹

The “protestant” approach of modernists and Islamists to the scriptures was part of a broader project which, under the influence of modern national concepts, sought to transform the individual into an active agent in molding the moral and political landscape of his community. It was Hasan al-Turabi (b. 1932), the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan, who aptly redefined the concept of the religious scholar in modern times:

What do I mean by ‘ulama’? The word, historically, has come to mean those versed in the legacy of religious (revealed) knowledge (*‘ilm*). However, *‘ilm* does not mean that alone. It means anyone who knows anything well enough to relate it to God. Because all knowledge is divine and religious, a chemist, an engineer, an economist, or a jurist are all ‘ulama’. So the ‘ulama’ in this broad sense, whether they are social or natural scientists, public leaders, or philosophers, should enlighten society.²

Al-Turabi’s broader definition of ‘ulama’ was an essential component in the remaking of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Al-Turabi denounced the historical *fiqh* for being dogmatic and stagnant; he advocated a new legal methodology that would incorporate both Islamic and Western legal sources as a precondition for an Islamic renaissance. In his view, modern developments had expanded the horizon of human knowledge, so there was an urgent need also for the legal, social and natural sciences practiced in the European tradition in order to administer such complex realms as government, the economy and foreign relations.³

The appearance of new, lay intellectuals thus entailed the pluralization of religious knowledge, as well as breaking the ‘ulama’ monopoly over shaping the self-image of society. In Augustus R. Norton’s depiction, “a generation ago, the authority of the ‘ulama’ was presumed; now

¹ On the impact of modern modes of communication on the Islamic discourse, language and audience see Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (eds.), *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, Bloomington 1999; Dale F. Eickelman, “Clash of Cultures? Intellectuals, their Public, and Islam,” in S. A. Dudognon, K. Hisao and K. Yasushi (eds.), *Intellectuals in the Modern Islamic World: Transmission, Transformation, Communication*, London 2006, pp. 289–291, 300–302.

² Hassan al-Turabi, “The Islamic State,” in John L. Esposito (ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, New York 1983, p. 245.

³ See Aharon Layish and Gabriel R. Warburg, *The Reinstatement of Islamic Law in Sudan under Numayri: An Evaluation of a Legal Experiment in the Light of Its Historical Context, Methodology, and Repercussions*, Leiden 2002, pp. 79–94.

it is contested.”⁴ In a pluralized Islamic discourse community with various actors, institutions and communication devices for debating public issues and concerns, an *‘alim* is quite likely to be an engineer or a doctor.⁵ The present volume seeks as far as is possible to redraw the blurred lines and better delineate the religious scholar within the modern Islamic spectrum.

SUNNI ‘ULAMA’ AND MODERNITY IN WESTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Throughout Muslim history, the *‘ulama’* served as the gatekeepers of Islamic learning, constituting one of the pillars of the social order in the Muslim lands. The social base of the *‘ulama’* was diverse, but their religious knowledge enabled them to emerge as a distinctive group possessing legal expertise and control over ceremonies and *fatwas*, as a means to guide the believer along the right path. *‘Ulama’* who were closely affiliated with the Sufi culture held additional powers more abstract in nature—namely, the attribution of *baraka* and sainthood, which brought them in close touch with the populace. Thus *‘ulama’* were active within both the “great tradition” of formal culture of learning and the “little tradition” of informal and more popular culture.⁶

Moreover, early integration of the *‘ulama’* into the state system turned them into a regulated and structured body, and paved their way to an influential status and economic privileges. And despite social mobility, the scholarly elite achieved a kind of self-reproduction, which led to the emergence of a dynasty of scholars.⁷ Integration, however, also engendered an intimate dependency of the *‘ulama’* on their political patrons. This dependency was to become their Achilles heel in the encounter

⁴ Augustus R. Norton, “The New Media, Civic Pluralism, and the Slowly Retreating State,” in Eickelman and Anderson (eds.), *New Media in the Muslim World*, pp. 19–20. See also John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, Oxford 2001, pp. 11–22; Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, London 2002, pp. 158–171.

⁵ Eickelman, “Clash of Cultures?” p. 301.

⁶ See Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1880*, Cambridge 2003, pp. 224–257; 224–230; Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, London 1978, mainly pp. 23–29; also Nelly Hanna, *In Praise of Books*, New York 2003, p. 10.

⁷ Cl. Gilliot, “*‘Ulama’*,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., Leiden 1998, vol. 10, pp. 802–803.

with the new reality effected by European colonial encroachment during the nineteenth century, a period that witnessed the expansion of state authority and a reconfiguration of local society. Thus the codification of the *shari'a*, which invested legislative authority in the national legislatures, along with the spread of secular education, ended the historical monopoly of the 'ulama' over the judicial and educational realms. Their social and economic status, too, eroded following the introduction of state reforms in the *waqf* (endowments) institution—to the point of its total abolition in the Egyptian case.⁸

For historians, Islam's encounter with modernity and its repercussions on the status of the community of religious scholars also constituted a point of departure in the decline of the Sunni 'ulama'—or their “expulsion from Olympus,” to use Daniel Crecelius's description in the nineteenth-century Egyptian context.⁹ In theoretical terms, Crecelius's description was in line with a broadly reductionist approach to the role of religious functionaries in the monotheistic faiths in modern times. This approach was largely a by-product of the Eurocentric paradigm of modernization, which underlined a fundamental and inevitable clash between traditional and modern systems, with new values, institutions and cultural agents replacing indigenous ones.¹⁰ Accordingly, historians perceived the Sunni 'ulama' as a group in crisis under the pressure of radical forces of change.¹¹

Two major forces of change were nationalism, with its interventionist nature, which sought to reduce religion to only one of several elements in the collective identity; and fundamentalism, with its defiant nature, which rejected the authority of the 'ulama', accusing them of being religiously rigid and politically quietist. As a result of this dual encounter, the 'ulama' were viewed as having emerged bruised, exhausted and marginalized in the Muslim public sphere.¹²

⁸ See also Aharon Layish, “The Transformation of the Shari'a from Jurists' Law to Statutory Law in the Contemporary Muslim World,” *Die Welt des Islams* 44/1 (2004), pp. 85–112; Gabriel Baer, *Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt*, Chicago 1969, pp. 95–99.

⁹ Daniel Crecelius, “Non-Ideological Responses of the Egyptian Ulama to Modernization,” in Nikki R. Keddie (ed.), *Scholars, Saints and Sufis*, Berkeley 1972, p. 180.

¹⁰ See e.g., David Apter, *The Politics of Modernization*, Chicago 1965; Donald Smith, *Religion and Political Development*, Boston 1970.

¹¹ See also Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, Princeton, NJ, 2002, pp. 1–2; Meir Hatina, ‘Ulama’, *Politics and the Public Sphere in the Middle East: An Egyptian Perspective*, (forthcoming).

¹² See also my chapter in this volume.

The antithesis to the pale image of the Sunni 'ulama' was provided by the activism of their Shi'ite colleagues, who had independent communal and political assets and led the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran or served as ideological and political leaders of Shi'ite protest movements in Iraq or Lebanon. The differing status of the Sunni and Shi'ite religious communities in the modern world was aptly summed up by Shahrough Akhavi in 1995:

Although the Shi'i 'ulama' have performed many of the same functions undertaken by their Sunni counterparts, their political impact on society in the modern period has been more direct and incisive. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is but the latest example of the assertiveness of the Shi'i 'ulama' in the sociopolitical domain during the past two centuries.¹³

The triumph of the Iranian revolution turned the religious elite into the political ruling elite as well, based on Khomeini's concept of "the guardianship of the jurisconsult" (*vilayat al-faqih*), as he defined it at the end of the 1960s. This doctrinal innovation was debated among Shi'ite 'ulama', but it captured the imagination of Western scholars as the pinnacle of modern Shi'ite activism. As such, it cast a heavy shadow on the position of Sunni 'ulama', who were largely perceived as jurists with no political stand or say.¹⁴

THE AIMS OF THE BOOK

The objectives of the present volume are twofold. The first is to present an updated historical and contemporary survey of the 'ulama' in the Middle East in both urban and semi-tribal contexts. The two major compilations on this issue were published in the early 1970s: Gabriel Baer (ed.), *The 'Ulama' in Modern History, Asian and African Studies* 7 (special number, 1971); and Nikki R. Keddie (ed.), *Scholars, Saints and Sufis* (1972). The second, no less important, aim is to re-evaluate the position of these "guardians of faith" in an era of modernization, reform, nationalism and fundamentalism. These dual aims add

¹³ Shahrough Akhavi, "Shi'i 'Ulama'," in John Esposito (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, New York 1995, vol. 4, p. 261.

¹⁴ See e.g., Martin Kramer, "Introduction," in idem, *Shi'ism, Resistance and Revolution*, Boulder 1987, pp. 6–10; Said Amir Arjomand, "Shi'ism, Authority, and Political Culture," in idem, *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*, New York 1988, pp. 1–18.

historical depth and offer new insights to extant, albeit scant, revisionist works that focus on specific geographic areas and time frames. Mention should be made of Richard T. Antoun (1989) on Muslim preachers in Jordan; Malika Zeghal (1996, 2007), Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen (1997) and Tamir Moustafa (2000) on al-Azhar in Egypt; Meir Hatina (2003, 2004) on 'ulama' in the Middle East; Muhammad Qasim Zaman (2002) on the Deobandi 'ulama' in Pakistan, with comparative references to the Middle East; and İsmail Kara (2005) on the Ottoman 'ulama' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁵

The thirteen studies in this volume deal with four main areas: (1) the status of the 'ulama' in pre-modern Muslim history; (2) the encounter of the 'ulama' with the challenges of modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the intellectual, judicial and sociopolitical repercussions of these challenges; (3) the role of the 'ulama' in the semi-tribal milieu of the Middle East; and (4) relationships within the 'ulama' corps and with its ideological rivals.

The various studies provide a qualitative and integrative picture of Middle Eastern Sunni 'ulama' in the modern and contemporary periods, both geographically and cross-sectionally. Their topics include enlistment in national liberation struggles as well as intellectual and sectarian conflicts within the 'ulama' ranks, and the interaction between 'ulama' and the state and with other ideological agents, such as Salafis, Islamists and modernists/liberals, who also sought to mold the cultural orientation of the society. Key words running through the chapters are "debate," "adaptation," "reform," "struggle," "restraint" and "bridging," pointing to the vitality of the 'ulama' in the Middle Eastern landscape and beyond.

¹⁵ Richard T. Antoun, *Muslim Preacher in the Modern World*, Princeton, NJ, 1989; Malika Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'islam: Les ulama d'al-Azhar dans l'Égypte contemporaine*, Paris 1996; idem, "The 'Recentring' of Religious Knowledge and Discourse: The Case of al-Azhar in Twentieth-Century Egypt," in Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (eds.), *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, Princeton, NJ, 2007, pp. 107–130; Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State*, Leiden 1997; Tamir Moustafa, "Conflict and Cooperation between the State and Religious Institutions in Contemporary Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32 (2000), pp. 3–22; Meir Hatina, "Historical Legacy and the Challenge of Modernity: The Case of al-Azhar in Egypt," *The Muslim World* 93 (January 2003), pp. 55–62; idem, "Between Harmony and Dissent: 'Ulama and Nationalist Movements in the Middle East," in M. Gammer (ed.), *Community, Identity and the State*, London 2004, pp. 116–131; Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*; İsmail Kara, "Turban and Fez: Ulama as Opposition," in Elisabeth Özdsalga (ed.), *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, London 2005, pp. 162–200.

The first two chapters, constituting Part I of the volume, provide the historical infrastructure for exploring the communal status of Sunni 'ulama' at the heart of the Middle East in pre-modern times. In chapter 1 Michael Winter traces the functions of the 'ulama' during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, from the mid-thirteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Despite their foreign origin and status as converts to Islam, both empires faithfully upheld the principles of Sunni Islam. These attributes enhanced the importance of the 'ulama' as keepers of the *shari'a*, the basic law of the state. They were the teachers, judges, muftis and functionaries in the schools and houses of worship. In addition, they filled administrative and diplomatic positions. The 'ulama' did not have political power per se, yet even the most tyrannical sultan could not bend the principles of the *shari'a* at will without facing criticism and without risking that his disregard of property rights or social justice would be recorded in history.

Shmuel Moreh in chapter 2 goes beyond historical discussion and analyzes the Muslim historiographic perception of the 'ulama' in Muslim society through the critical writings of the late eighteenth century Egyptian chronicler, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti. In his book *'Aja'ib al-athar fi'l-tarajim wa'l-akhbar* (The marvelous compositions on biographies and chronicles), al-Jabarti lamented the fate of the Muslim nation and the quality of its scholars and rulers. He cited the repeated Ottoman defeats by the European forces, the conquest of Egypt by the French in 1798 and the aggressive policy adopted by Muhammad/Mehmet Ali, who took power in 1805. Emphasizing the illustrious past of the 'ulama' and their rank as third highest in the social hierarchy after Allah and the Prophet, al-Jabarti censured their conduct during his time. He charged that, with the exception of a few, they agreed to act in the service of the rulers, exploiting their jobs to get rich quickly through bribery and oppression. Al-Jabarti tried to revive the Islamic value system, Muslim solidarity and zeal for *jihad* against the infidels. Toward this end, he defied the entrenched, consensual status of the 'ulama', thereby laying an important intellectual foundation for the polemics of future reformists and modern fundamentalists.

Al-Jabarti's written work conveyed a sense of distress and anxiety in Muslim society with its entry into modern times. This is also the starting point of Part II of the volume, which deals with the response of the 'ulama' to a changing world penetrated by a colonial presence and dominated by the key concepts of modernization, reform and national discourse.

While modernization, progress and the establishment of an inclusive political community became supreme goals for the political elite, religion was relegated to a more clearly defined and limited role in the public space. How did the ‘ulama’ react to this changing context? What were the strategies they adopted and what venues did they use? In chapter 3 Amit Bein presents a discussion of these issues in Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, which, alongside Cairo, led the trend toward change in the Sunni world and went so far as to redesign the relationship between religion and state under the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP, 1908–1918).¹⁶ Bein reveals that during this period quite a few of the ‘ulama’, most prominently Mustafa Sabri Efendi, were determined to get involved in civil activity and formal politics in order to protect their interests and ensure the viability of Islamic institutions and values in light of the centralized, secularized policies of the CUP. Establishing a political party, occupying parliamentary seats and forming political alliances were seen as organic rather than as alien, to the function of the ‘ulama’. This immersion in daily politics signaled the transformation of late-Ottoman era ‘ulama’ into modern intellectuals with a critical attitude toward sociopolitical issues and an avidity for activism.¹⁷

Thus, in contrast to the common notion prevailing in official Turkish historiography and in the research literature, late Ottoman ‘ulama’ were not entirely absent from the public sphere, nor did they leave “an intellectual vacuum” to be filled by new intellectuals and social scientists.¹⁸ Under Atatürk’s aggressive secularization policy (1923–1938) the religious establishment was officially outlawed; however, in recent decades, the legacy of Sabri’s and his colleagues’ struggle to preserve

¹⁶ Some scholars view the twentieth-century trend of Turkish secularism as part of a continuity with roots that go back in history to the Ottoman Empire, and not only to the *Tanzimat* period in the nineteenth century but even a century earlier. See, e.g., Serif Mardin, “Continuity and Change in Turkey,” in Abdul Aziz Said, Mohammad Abu-Nimer and Meena Sharify-Funk (eds.), *Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, Not Static*, New York 2006, pp. 101–106.

¹⁷ The involvement of Ottoman ‘ulama’ in dissident politics was already evident in their opposition to the authoritative regime of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1908). In this opposition they found common ground with elements within the CUP. See İsmail Kara, “Turban and Fez: Ulema as Opposition,” in Elisabeth Özdsalga (ed.), *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*. London 2005, pp. 162–200. See also Kara, “Turban and Fez,” pp. 162–200.

¹⁸ See Recep Sendurk, “Intellectual Dependency: Late Ottoman Intellectuals between *Fiqh* and Social Science,” *Die Welt des Islams* 47 (2007), pp. 283–318.

the Islamic ethos has been revived by religious circles in the Turkish republic.

While secularization was formally institutionalized in Istanbul during the twilight years of the Ottoman Empire and thereafter, in the Arab-speaking provinces it remained a more artificial concept. Arab political and intellectual elites tended to adopt a “softer” or “thinner” version of secularism, in which the state sought to refashion society in rational ways but without denying the validity of religion or relegating it to the margins of the public sphere.¹⁹ This allowed local ‘ulama’ to display more ideological and political assertiveness. The advent of European colonialism did not essentially alter the ‘ulama’s function as mediators and as an integral component of the “politics of notables” in conveying the authority of the external government in the provinces. This was especially pronounced in Libya under the Italian conquest (1911). As Anna Baldinetti shows in chapter 4, the Italian colonial administration did not limit itself to forming close ties with the dominant Sanusiyya Sufi order; it also reached out to other elements in the local religious elite, mainly in Tripolitania, viewing them as a significant element for advancing its colonial policy. Whereas other European powers maintained a distant stance toward the ‘ulama’, as the British did in Egypt, or worked to diminish their communal stand, as the French did in Syria or in Algeria, Italy in Libya sought to recruit them as allies, *inter alia* because of its loose grip in the country.

Italy’s positive attitude toward Islamic rites and institutions was preserved under the fascist regime (1922–1943) as well, as part of a broader design to co-opt the Muslim elites against French and British hegemony in the area. Fascist propaganda devoted great efforts to presenting the Arabs as possible allies in the struggle for control of the Mediterranean basin. This policy was only partially successful, for, alongside manifestations of dialogue and cooperation, some religious circles also carried on polemical and even armed opposition to the Italian presence in Libya.

In neighboring Egypt, the opposition of al-Azhar ‘ulama’ to the British presence was also pronounced, characterized by systematic hostility. There, however, the heads of al-Azhar had to contend not only with an infidel colonial elite but also with a nationalist Muslim elite that sought

¹⁹ See also Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA., 2007, mainly pp. 1–4, 85–89.

to alter the collective identity of the Nile Valley and promote reform in its religious institutions. In chapter 5 Rainer Brunner examines the positions of al-Azhar on the issues of national identity and reform during the interwar period and beyond. He also points to the erosion of the Azhar monopoly over molding societal values in light of the new challenge posed by the neo-Salafi activist intellectuals headed by Rashid Rida, the influential editor of *al-Manar*. While some Azharis did work to diffuse the tension between the two protagonists of Islam, their efforts did not gain momentum.²⁰

Al-Azhar, in countering the Salafi attack, could no longer hide behind glosses and commentaries on medieval texts, but had to take a stand on the pressing questions of Islam in the modern world, including those of a political nature, such as the issue of the caliphate or of foreign missionaries.

A similar contest over the authority to define Islam and capture the imagination of the masses also emerged in Iraq in the interwar period. Orit Bashkin in chapter 6 reveals a vibrant domestic discourse by Shi'ite and Sunni 'ulama' there on the issues of change and reform, primarily how to remain a faithful believer and yet be open to the parameters of scientific knowledge and progress. This discourse showed that the Iraqi public was able to display tolerance toward various interpretations of the role of religion in society. Moreover, it was influenced by reformist and Salafi intellectual trends in Cairo and Damascus, highlighting the existence of a viable intellectual community in the Middle East that crossed geographic and ethnic boundaries, using new technologies of dissemination of ideas.²¹

The reformist ideology did not remain in the domain of intellect and discourse only but trickled into the political sphere and was part of the broader modernization enterprise initiated by the Middle Eastern states. In legal terms, this meant transforming entire fields of law—for example, private contract law—from the 'ulama's jurisdiction to the jurisdiction of national courts, and applying Western-imported legal codes. Yet, as shown by Ron Shaham in chapter 7, the introduction of

²⁰ See also Zeghal, "The 'Recentering' of Religious Knowledge and Discourse," pp. 115–116.

²¹ See also Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History*, Oxford 1995, pp. 50–72; Juan R. I. Cole, "Printing and Urban Islam in the Mediterranean World 1890–1920," in Leila Tarazi Fawaz and C. A. Bayly (eds.), *Modernity and Culture: from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean*, New York 2002, pp. 344–364.

modern legislation has been less traumatic, or at least less jolting, for the 'ulama' than some Western scholars have suggested, because all through history the 'ulama' were accustomed to legislative acts issued by the ruler, and to the operation of non-*shar'i* courts of law. Therefore, modern developments have not necessarily constituted a total break with the past: they have also contained dimensions of continuity. However, when state reform codification strayed from matters of public law and touched on matters of worship and family law, the 'ulama' in various places reacted in protest, sometimes fiercely. The 'ulama' not only responded to state codification, they also became involved in rewriting the theory of Islamic jurisprudence to accommodate changes evoked by modernity. Shaham's paper offers a critical reading of several key works on this topic, discussed in the context of the various legal regimes in contemporary Arab states.

In contrast to the urban milieu, the semi-tribal domain in the Middle East—the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf and North Africa—were less exposed to the waves of modernization and Westernization, and their rulers were viewed as having religious prestige. The 'Ulama' had less need to guard against the state's encroachment on the status of the *shari'a* or against damage to their interests. They served as an integral part of the struggle for independence and state building, and were co-opted into the ruling systems in key roles in the realms of justice, education and ethics. In actuality, they constituted the third arm of the state system, alongside the regime and the tribes. The roles of the 'ulama' in Morocco (Daniel Zisenwine) and Saudi Arabia (Muhammad al-Atawneh), which open Part III of the volume, illuminate historic examples of religious tenacity and influence.

In chapter 8, Daniel Zisenwine argues that during the struggle for independence in Morocco (1944–1956), the nationalists, who were mostly from traditional urban backgrounds, sought to preserve Morocco's social and political structures, rather than supplant them with new revolutionary frameworks. This feature of the nationalist cause provided a strong foundation for cooperation with the 'ulama', who also shared similar origins. Key figures in the Moroccan nationalist movement were successful in gaining the support of religious circles and could point to a number of 'ulama' who were among the founders of the Istiqlal (Independence) Party. Nationalist outreach to the rural tribal leaders proved to be a more complicated task. These leaders were less than enthusiastic about promoting an overarching nationalist ideology, which they feared would supplant local political affiliations with a

broader collective framework. Moreover, many tribal leaders were also adherents of various Sufi and other non-orthodox groups, a well-known phenomenon in the Maghrib tribal landscape, which the nationalists, who promoted a Salafi ideology, viewed aversely, especially with regard to the cult of saints. In the event, the urban-based 'ulama' failed to serve as a mediating influence on the nationalist-tribal dissonance, and were unable to make inroads in the rural and tribal sectors or enlist them in the struggle for independence, as they did in other semi-tribal settings of the Middle East.

A more constructive picture of the 'ulama' as a mediating and co-optive element is provided by Muhammad al-Atawneh in chapter 9 regarding the 'ulama' in Saudi Arabia with its strong fusion of religion and state and its deeply rooted tribal social system—the dual pillars of the Saudi dynasty. In terms of state formation, the religious establishment played a vital role there, continuing to be responsible not only for legislative and judicial procedures but also for bridging the discrepancy between tribalism and Islam and adjusting such tribal values as *'asabiyya* (group solidarity based on blood ties) and *tahkim* (arbitration) to Islamic law. Muhammad al-Atawneh's analysis of the written materials and legal opinions issued by leading Saudi 'ulama' in the last third of the twentieth century reveals a tribal system that, while strongly influenced by Islam, was still acknowledged as a source of reinforcement and legitimation for the royal family.

Part IV, the final section of the compilation, focuses on relationships within the 'ulama' and with other actors in the religious spectrum, mainly Salafi reformists, Islamists and liberals, revealing a dynamic portrait of an Islamic discourse community containing elements of unity, diversity, anathema and conflict. This section points to the importance of 'ulama' in responding to and debating the dilemmas of the modern era, as well as to their resilience in advancing their perceptions regarding the Arab-Muslim public arena through cooperation with, or opposition to, ideological rivals.

David Commins, in chapter 10, deals with the reciprocity between Wahhabis, Sufis and Salafis at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The Wahhabi ideology is to be found at the radical pole of the Islamic discourse in its claim that Muslims who do not accept its viewpoint are not true believers but in fact idolaters who must convert to Islam. Such doctrinal extremism naturally provoked a hostile reaction among the 'ulama' and Sufi shaykhs in the Arabian Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent, who believed themselves to be the proper believers and the Wahhabis heretical innovators. The Wahhabi

controversy underwent a revision at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Salafi reformists at the margins of the religious scholarly community in Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo presented Wahhabism in a more positive light. While rejecting the Wahhabi view that all borrowing from infidels is forbidden, Salafis did emphasize the common denominator in the struggle against such illegitimate conventions as scholastic *taqlid* practices or the Sufi practice of saint worship. Commins points out that the Salafi effort, both in written works and in practice, to present the Wahhabiyya as an authentic revival movement rather than a Kharijite anomaly outside the consensus ended Wahhabism's geographical and intellectual isolation by molding an audience receptive to the doctrine's proselytizers. This intellectual-political redefinition of Wahhabism in the Arab-Muslim world constituted a pivotal moment in modern Islamic history. Without it, Commins argues, Wahhabism could not have attained its contemporary global reach, even with generous financial backing from the Saudi government. With the support of the Salafi 'ulama' in the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, led by Rashid Rida, important elements of the puritanical Wahhabi philosophy, such as purification, *ijtihad* and *jihad*, became part of the modern resurgent Islamic agenda.

The fact that most spokesmen of Sunni resurgence were laymen, products of academic campuses, marked the Islamic protest in the historical and sociological literature as a modern phenomenon unrelated to past tradition or to its authorities, the 'ulama'. The Islamists accused the 'ulama' of betraying the Islamic cause by their submission to deviant regimes and adherence to rigid thinking. "Religious mercenaries" ('*ulama' al-sulta*) were a common theme in the Islamist discourse, which found its way into the academic works of leading scholars. For these scholars, politics and involvement in politics constituted the dividing parameter separating 'ulama' from Islamists. According to Olivier Roy, for the clerical scholar, politics remain contingent, in contrast to ethics deduced from texts, which are definitive. "The cleric who gets involved in politics is either an adviser to the prince or an exile," Roy argues. In contrast, for the Islamist, politics constitutes the *raison d'être* of his activity, in that it questions the very legitimacy of the state.²²

²² Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, London 1994, pp. 91–92; idem, *Globalised Islam*, p. 166.

In chapter 11 Meir Hatina provides a more nuanced historical picture, in which the stance of political subservience adopted by the official 'ulama' did not necessarily result in passivity, on the one hand, or absolute antagonism between them and the Islamists, on the other. Indeed, although these 'ulama' denounced the Islamists' defiance of the ruling system, they shared their core demand to reassert Islamic cultural authenticity and the Islamization of the public sphere. Translating ideals into deeds, both lower and senior 'ulama' in Egypt, Jordan and Palestine, and to a lesser extent in Syria and Lebanon, opposed the agents of secular culture and sought to reinstate traditional gender and religio-sectarian boundaries. The assertiveness of official Islam was even more pronounced in the semi-tribal monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain, where 'ulama' were formally in charge of supervising public morality. "Guardians of the faith," therefore, was not merely a slogan, even in modern times.

Islamists, for their part, did not burn their bridges with the religious establishment. As shown by Hatina, leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Palestine joined forces with the 'ulama' to provide Islamic guidance for society. Even the anti-'ulama' polemic of the radicals was not sweeping. Some Islamists actually praised the historic record of the 'ulama' in preserving the faith and standing firm against political upheavals. Moreover, the presence of 'ulama' in Islamic movements, especially the communal (*da'wa*) movements, in roles of spiritual guidance or political leadership also served to defuse tensions and create bridging points between establishment and oppositionist Islam.

However, if there were points of affinity between official 'ulama' and Islamists in their common defense of Islamic norms and its sacred ethos, there was mostly friction and animosity between official 'ulama' and liberals. This aspect is dealt with by Muhammad Abu Samra in chapter 12. Abu Samra shows that the liberal critics promoted an emancipatory social order, based on civil rights, equality and openness, by presenting a softer, more flexible historical interpretation of the Qur'an and the Islamic heritage. The liberal argument was that Islamic scriptures, rituals and laws have been shaped by the varied religious traditions that preceded them and influenced by the cultural, social and political conditions of the earliest Muslim community. They thus need to be discussed in their own historical context.

The attitudes of official 'ulama' to the liberals' historical rereading of Islam ranged from disregard to questioning the academic validity

of liberal texts and blacklisting them. However, high-ranking shaykhs expressed reservations about accusing liberals of blasphemy or apostasy (*takfir*), a practice resorted to mainly by Islamist activists or low-ranking ‘ulama’. In fact, these shaykhs denounced *fatwas* of *takfir*, which involved legitimizing violence against liberal critics. *Takfir*, especially since the 1990s, has become a violent tool used by radical Islamists against public figures and state institutions, and as such has been perceived as inviting social sedition. The cautious stance of establishment ‘ulama’, Abu Samra argues, highlighted their managerial strategies in seeking to balance religious with political considerations. Their dual aim was to restore the monopoly in matters of faith to the formal religious authorities and the monopoly on the use of force to the government—two issues that have been challenged by modern Islamists.

The contemporary sphere of activity of ‘ulama’ and their intense competition with ideological rivals have not been confined to their respective political communities but have been integrated into a globalized Islamic milieu that closely scrutinizes and reacts to what is being said and done regarding Islamic issues and concerns. At the disposal of the ‘ulama’ were now also the satellite-TV channels and the Internet, although not many of them possessed media-relevant skills. A prominent example is the headscarf controversy in France, which was first raised in 1989 and emerged again in 2003; Azhar authorities were active players in an Islamic transnational debate on the issue.²³ Another illustrative example, discussed in chapter 13 by Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, is provided by the so-called cartoon crisis that erupted after the publication of a pejorative caricature of the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper in September 2005. Skovgaard-Petersen discerns in this episode a new phase of Islamic internationalism, closely related to the developments in the media. The cartoon crisis offered opportunities for governmental and non-governmental ‘ulama’, alongside TV preachers or *da‘iya*, to reach out to a broad Muslim audience that was incensed by the affair and to realign themselves in new networks that cut across national boundaries.

Sunni ‘ulama’ have thus demonstrated a vocal presence not only in the Middle Eastern orbit but in the global one as well, thereby competing for status and influence with other propagators of Islam. The

²³ See, e.g., Zeghal, “The ‘Recentring’ of Religious Knowledge and Discourse,” pp. 123–128.

intensive *da'wa* activity of Egypt's al-Azhar and of the Saudi Muslim World League (MWL) in Africa, Asia and Europe, which goes back to the 1950s and 1960s, is well known.²⁴ In addition, two collective forums of 'ulama' were established in 1997 and 2004, respectively: the European Council for Fatwa and Research (*al-Majlis al-Urubi li'l-Ifta' wa'l-Buhuth*), and the International Union of Muslim Scholars (*al-Itihad al-'Alami li 'Ulama' al-Muslimin*). Their declared aims were defined as enhancing coordination between 'ulama' from all parts of the Muslim world, and providing religious guidance and services for believers.²⁵

Such global outreach by 'ulama' brings us back to the central theme of this compilation—namely, that modern Sunni 'ulama' did not only respond to new contexts, they also acquired renewed momentum and contributed to the public discourse on ethical, cultural and social issues. Some 'ulama' displayed intellectual openness; but many others adopted a more puritanical stance, mainly because of sociopolitical upheavals that left Muslims confused, exposed to colonial penetration, and lagging behind the West in the drive for material progress and political power. This historical predicament, which contrasted with the glory of the past, dictated less tolerance for cultural convergence or rapprochement.

The vitality of modern 'ulama' in the Sunni Middle Eastern milieu was not, as maintained by various scholars, merely the result of a religious resurgence from the 1970s onward that forced Arab elites to introduce state legislation sanctioned by Islam, and turning the 'ulama' into a strategic asset in combating dissident Islamic movements. This vitality went back in time to the late nineteenth century and was related to the historical reality that “nationalizing” Islam by various political elites also meant the creation of a new power base for the religious scholarship community, which thereby gained the status of a national institution endowed with educational bodies, jobs and budgets.²⁶ Another channel for showcasing the presence of the 'ulama' in the ideological marketplace of society was provided by the emergence of the mass print and electronic media. The 'ulama' sensed that preaching in mosques was not

²⁴ See also Daniel Crecelius “al-Azhar in Revolution,” *Middle East Journal* 20 (Winter 1966), pp. 34–49; Majda 'Ali Salih Rabi', *al-Dawr al-Siyasi li'l-Azhar 1952–1981*, Cairo 1992; David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, London 2006, pp. 152–153, 174–175, 190–193.

²⁵ *Al-Mustaqbal* (Beirut), 3 July 2006; *al-Mukhtar al-Islami* (Cairo), 31 August 2006, pp. 50–54.

²⁶ See also Hatina, 'Ulama', *Politics and the Public Sphere in the Middle East: An Egyptian Perspective* (forthcoming).

enough and like Islamist groups and Sufi orders they also recognized the advantages of modern modes of communication to promote their cause and expand their audiences.²⁷ After all, they were not the Amish, to quote Uri Kopferschmidt's observation on the impact of Western technology in the Middle East.²⁸ Thus, 'ulama' continued to adhere to a long discursive tradition of flexibility and adaptation to changing circumstances. As rightly argued by Zaman, "The 'ulama' of the twentieth or the twenty-first century are not very different from those of the earlier centuries."²⁹

The present compilation, in questioning the marginalized status of Sunni 'ulama' in the Middle East, joins a growing academic interest in 'ulama' in different geographical settings and in various aspects: intellectual, educational, social and political. Its findings remove another brick from the shaky foundations of the modernization theory by highlighting the historical complexity of modernity in the Arab-Muslim world, in which the relationship between tradition and change, old and new, were dynamic and interactive, rather than separate and conflicting.³⁰ As such, the volume makes a valuable contribution to the field of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies.

²⁷ See e.g., Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, "The Global Mufti," in B. Schaebler and L. Stenberg (eds.), *Globalization and the Muslim World*, New York 2004, pp. 153–165; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Consensus and Religious Authority in Modern Islam: The Discourse of the 'Ulama'," in Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (eds.), *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, Leiden 2006, pp. 153–180; Bettina Gräf, "Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi in Cyberspace," *Die Welt des Islams* 47 (2007), pp. 403–421.

²⁸ Uri Kopferschmidt, "Western Technologies, Big and Small, in the Middle East" (unpublished paper).

²⁹ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, p. 189.

³⁰ See also Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities*, 2 vols., Leiden 2003.