

Book Reviews

Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments

Gary R. Bunt

London and Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2003. 237 pages.

This is Gary Bunt's second monograph on the Muslims' use of the Internet, the first being *Virtually Islamic* (Cardiff, UK: The University of Wales Press: 2000). It is a good contribution to the growing literature, and will appeal to students of contemporary Muslim societies and the sociocultural and religious influence of new communication technologies. The book provides a useful list of websites containing information on Islam and Muslims.

Bunt suggests that a substantial number of Muslims use the Internet as a propagation and networking tool, to dialogue with each other, and to conduct research. For some, it is an important way to bypass state censorship and access other media, and it acts as a means of local and global contact. The Internet is used to disseminate and obtain decisions and points of interpretation on current events, and, for some individuals who are relatively unknown or treated as pariahs locally, to achieve fame in the larger ummah.

Since September 2001, Muslims' activities and activism on the Internet have proliferated; meanwhile, those in power have increased attempts to restrict them. There has been an increase in websites, chat rooms, and e-mail lists. The author justifies linking Muslims' uses of the Internet with jihad and fatwas by stating that these two areas have seen the most significant integration of electronic activity with religion. However, he shuns alarmism about the Internet and Islam by presenting a rational analysis and discussion.

Bunt admits that a small, albeit growing, minority in Muslim-majority countries uses information and communication technologies. Muslim online discourses are part of the contemporary discussion about Islamic identities. The Internet "has not superseded traditional forms of political expression, but is a means through which conventional boundaries and barriers can be transcended" (p. 11).

The author views the spiritual striving aspects of e-jihad as expressed in the issuing of online fatwas and the militaristic aspects in hacking and cracking of other websites. Israeli and Indian sites have been attacked by Muslim hackers; however, the vice-president of the Islamic European Fatwa Council has sought to prohibit such hacking, except if initiated by the other side. Al-Qaeda has consistently used the Internet for messaging among its members, who have often used forms of encryption.

The book looks at several websites' discussions in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. A number of sites favoring militaristic jihad remained operative, despite being run by Internet service providers in the United States and the United Kingdom. Some openly supported Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. Many of these were later shut down in light of the governments' crackdown; however, some resurfaced in other guises. Bunt notes that certain Muslim leaders were critical of the jihadist websites, which were usually run by small organizations or individuals.

Interestingly, the site of the Algerian Front Islamique du Salut, which many governments view as a terrorist organization, strongly condemned the 9/11 attacks. The popular Islam Online, linked to the influential Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, produced a critical and immediate response by September 12, followed by an extensive commentary in later weeks and months. The Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project, one of the most prolific Shi'ah websites, described the event as a crime against humanity. These and other sites that were critical of the attacks tended to quote various Muslim leaders and Islamic scripture and present fiqh-based arguments to support their points of view.

The new technology has become a critical tool in the Palestinians' resistance to Israeli occupation, for it is being used to rally support in the West Bank, Gaza, and other parts of the world. The author quotes the following from a newspaper article,

... the Internet increasingly gives names, faces and voices to those involved in the intifida ... Last week as the city of Beit Jala fell under siege, local Palestinian biologist Ihab Lulas posted a letter online. "Even the birds have gone, my mother told me this morning." Days later, those words became the title to a piece published in the "Israeli" daily Haaretz by Gideon Levy, who quoted the entire letter in an article regarding the sieges on Bethlehem and Beit Jala. The next day, Palestinian-American activist Muna Hamzeh distributed that article online to people in America, the West Bank and Lebanon. For anyone who doesn't know, this is what is happening in this Holy Land (pp. 102-3).

Some websites seek to link the Palestinian struggle with those in Kashmir and Chechnya.

One of the Internet's most contentious aspects is how it enables people to bypass traditional channels of authority. The book devotes four chapters to describing and discussing how online "Islamic decision-making" takes place. Muslim Internet users often seek answers to queries regarding the practice of Islamic beliefs in contemporary societies, including ethical issues that are common outside of traditional Muslim societies. There is a tendency to seek religious "remedies" to life's problems. Chat rooms exhibit vigorous debates about whether answers are to be sought only from traditionally trained Muslim scholars (some of whom are considered out-of-touch with current realities) or if others are qualified to interpret the scriptural sources and *fiqh* according to their abilities. These online discussions in Sunni and Shi`ah contexts have brought the issue of *ijtihad* into sharp focus.

One of the book's problems is that it comes close to reducing contemporary expressions of Islam merely to the electronic activities of some adherents. An historical overview of how current Internet use fits into the broader communication activities of Muslims would have helped to provide a proper context. Finally, even though this is an important book that traces present-day trends, it does not provide a sufficiently vigorous theoretical framework that can contribute to future studies of this nature.

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