

CYBER FATWAS

Although Internet penetration is still in the single digits in most Muslim countries, a growing number of Web sites have Islamic themes. One of the most popular and interactive features of many of these Web sites has become online *fatwas*, or religious judgments.

Writing in Arabic or English, readers submit questions ranging from the political, such as the permissibility of attacks on civilians, to the mundane, such as “how a person should fill his spare time.” In traditional communities, a local mufti, or legal scholar, would answer such questions. Yet, online clerics have audiences that stretch not only across countries but between continents.

Where some see the Internet as allowing reasoned judgments free of local political and social constraints, others see it as an anarchic forum lacking accountability and filled with misinformation. The anonymity of cyber *fatwas* has shifted power from traditional experts to lesser-known (and often younger) ones, as well as to the users themselves. Almost anyone, no matter how unconventional or ill informed, can issue a *fatwa* online, and there is no centralized quality control.

Online users can and do ask the kinds of questions they would likely be reluctant to ask at their local mosques, dealing with sensitive questions on issues such as sex or politics. But the variety and anonymity of the Internet empowers Web surfers in another way: If they don't like what they hear, they can engage in “*fatwa* shopping” by looking for another more satisfying opinion elsewhere. ■ - JJ

POLITICS NOW, DIPLOMACY LATER

By Jon B. Alterman

Politics and diplomacy are related but distinct. Politics is often about drawing lines that force opponents to embrace unpopular views, while diplomacy is about removing barriers and stressing common interests.

Throughout his career, former Palestinian prime minister (and likely Palestinian president) Mahmoud Abbas has shown far more skill at diplomacy than politics. In the near term, he will need to put in a bravura political performance, and his most important help may come from an unlikely place: Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon.

Mahmoud Abbas, or Abu Mazen as he is commonly known, spent decades as part of Yasser Arafat's inner circle. His ambit was exploring diplomatic solutions to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In this role, he both helped negotiate the Oslo Agreement and worked with Israelis to sketch the shape of a potential final settlement, known colloquially as the “Beilin-Abu Mazen Document.”

Through years of negotiations, Abu Mazen built trust with the international community. In recent years, he has bluntly told Arab audiences—in Arabic—that the militarization of the current Palestinian uprising was a strategic mistake. To foreign audiences, especially U.S. and Israeli ones, Abu Mazen is a welcome relief from what they see as a sad record of a double-talking Palestinian leadership that laments violence on the one hand, while using it as a political and diplomatic tool on the other.

Yet Palestinian public opinion polls over the last half decade have persistently revealed Abu Mazen as the first choice leader of only 1 in 20 Palestinians, lagging far behind other secular and religious figures. The same factors that make him popular on the international stage make him unpopular on the domestic one. He seems not to share the anger of the street, nor to feel its pain. He seems to lack passion. And ultimately, many Palestinians question his commitment to Palestinian interests.

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FREEDOM HOUSE

Last month, Program Director Jon B. Alterman traveled to New York City to serve as an Academic Adviser to Freedom House for their annual publication, *Freedom in the World*. Freedom House has been publishing the volume since 1978, recording advances and reversals in freedom around the world according to a uniform set of criteria. Each country or territory is evaluated separately for political and civil rights, and the report includes a narrative description of conditions in each country. Many in the international community see Freedom House's surveys as the gold standard for rating political conditions around the world. The Millennium Challenge Corporation, for example, partly relies on the ratings to determine eligibility for grants. The 2005 report will be released in the spring. Last year's report is accessible at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2004/intro.htm>. ■

The January 9 election to succeed Yasser Arafat is the least of Abu Mazen's challenges. He has worked assiduously to ensure that the PLO is unified, that his Fatah movement is united, and that any alternative to his leadership is unthinkable. Marwan Barghouti's decision last week to challenge Abu Mazen is a sign of possible trouble, but come January, Barghouti is more likely to support the Fatah consensus than destroy it.

More problematic is Abu Mazen's task of uniting the Palestinian community politically, while simultaneously moving it toward diplomacy (and ultimately, concessions). It is here that his commitment to the national cause will be most under fire. Is now, at a moment of national weakness, the time to make a deal? Can Abu Mazen make the same deal that Arafat, the long-time father of the Palestinian cause, himself rejected? And most troubling, would Sharon ever come close to agreeing to the deal that Prime Minister Ehud Barak narrowly rejected in January 2001?

To have any hope of squaring this political circle, Abu Mazen needs simultaneously to demonstrate his nationalist *bona fides* while demonstrably improving the lives of ordinary Palestinians. He needs to do this at a time when the Palestinian Authority is little more than a brand name, with crippled (and competing) security forces, a threadbare bureaucracy, and a devastated national economy.

He cannot do it without Israel. The collapse of the Oslo process has meant that Palestinians are in constant contact with Israeli troops, not only to travel or trade outside the West Bank and Gaza, but to move within those areas as well. Israel also controls the transfer of taxes collected from Palestinians, amounting to tens of millions of dollars per month. Finally, Israeli policies—from the route of the security fence to new construction of settlements—send a powerful signal to the Palestinian public of whether their leadership is helping their cause or abandoning it.

Sharon understands this intimately. He is also one of the most skilled and underestimated politicians on the world stage. While seemingly embroiled in perpetual crisis, Sharon has managed not only to marginalize any conceivable rival to his leadership, but also to determine the tempo and topic of Israeli politics. He has used the issue of Gaza withdrawal, for example, simultaneously to enforce party discipline, demonstrate his centrist credentials, and marginalize his foes on the left and right.

Sharon has a lackluster reputation as a diplomat, but Abu Mazen does not need diplomatic skills now—he needs political successes. The challenge on the Israeli side, however, will be how to help Abu Mazen improve the lives of Palestinians while concurrently demonstrating his nationalist credentials. Abu Mazen cannot afford to be seen as a puppet; he needs to wring concessions from Israel while hewing to a tough line. Sharon needs to grant those concessions without seeming to his own public like he is giving in. ■ 12/7/04

Links of Interest

Multi-lingual Islamic site with live fatwa sessions and fatwa bank:

www.islamonline.net

Categorized, searchable, and multi-lingual fatwa database:

www.islamqa.com

Categorized and searchable fatwa database (English):

www.askimam.com

Islamic site with categorized fatwa archive (English and Arabic):

<http://www.islamtoday.net/english>

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