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Fatwa helpline gives UK Muslims access to Arab scholars British Muslims get 'dial-a-sheikh' from Egypt



Muslim scholars in Britain worry about the relevance of Middle East based fatwas to Muslims in Europe

CAIRO/DUBAI (Marwa Awad and Mona Moussly)

The world's most popular Islamic hotline, the Egyptian based 'dial-a-sheikh,' is launching in Britain to help the nation's 1.6 million Muslims deal with everyday dilemmas, but has some questioning the relevance of Middle Eastern-based fatwas to the realities of Muslim minorities in Europe.

At just 75p (about \$1) a minute, British Muslims will be able to access scholars from Egypt's al-Azhar University through al-Hatef al-Islami helpline where they can call in and seek help with their daily problems.

Callers will be able to speak to a sheikh, who is authorized to issue a fatwa, or religious ruling, about their problems and expect to receive an answer, using a pin code, within the next 48 hours of the call. The facility also includes email advice sent in English, Arabic and Urdu.

"With one-third of the U.K.'s Muslims under 16, there's a need to assist in delivering credible and authoritative Islamic advice," al-Hatef al-Islami's founder, Cherif Abdel Meguid, told the U.K.'s Guardian.

Meguid explained the importance of an authentic portal for young Muslims to seek guidance on how to lead an Islamic life and warned that the internet was rife with false information.

"More and more young Muslims are using the internet to develop an understanding of Islam. This is both good and bad. The internet can be a good resource for Islamic information but is also replete with poorly based and unqualified Islamic guidance as well as out of context critiques of Islam," Meguid, who launched the service in Egypt nine years ago, told the paper.

Relevant to British Muslims?

Yet some scholars in Britain, who welcomed the initiative, nonetheless worried that fatwas and advice from sheikhs not based in Europe may lack the necessary cultural knowledge and understanding of European society and the challenges particular to the British context.

"Fatwas or a religious ruling must always be based on the time and place in which the problem occurs," Dr. Nuh al Qadri from the Dublin-based European Council for Fatwa and Research told Al Arabiya.

"The person issuing the fatwa must therefore know what the reality of living in Britain for Muslims is like so that the answer given strikes a chord with them and suits their surroundings," he explained.

"Imam Shafi'i [one of the four main Sunni imams], for instance, gave different fatwas and legal opinions when he was in Iraq and Egypt, because the context of where he lived changed and therefore the application of Islam differed from place to place," said al-Qadri.

Imported imams

The fatwa helpline comes as experts have called for greater regulation of religious channels that offer instant fatwas, such as "text-a-fatwa," as they often promote an extreme interpretation of Islam.

Dr. Kamal Helbawy, a Muslim Brotherhood member living in the U.K. concurred with al-Qadri and noted the cultural gap often found between imams imported from the Muslim world and the young Muslim congregants in Europe who associate more with their European surroundings than with their ethnic homelands.

"The fatwa line is a good and well meaning initiative, but the question is how relevant and culturally aware will its advice be to the reality of Muslims in Europe, who constitute a religious minority not a majority like the sheikhs from Egypt who will be giving them advice," Halbawy told Al Arabiya.

The U.K. is the first English speaking market to be tapped into and Meguid explained that making a link between Islamic philosophy and modern times was no easy task and he hoped to promote "a more centrist, classical and authoritative interpretation" of Islam.

"We need to fill the void that has been created by the absence of the University of al-Azhar scholars in the U.K.," he told the paper.

Although there are other Islamic helplines available in the U.K., such as Muslim Youth Helpline and the Islamic Sharia Council, al-Hatef el-Islami is the first time people in the U.K. will have access to scholars from the world's most prominent Sunni Islamic learning institute.

Al-Qadri also commended the fatwa helpline initiative, saying that "Islam is one religion with many different applications," and said he hoped Europe's Council and the Azhar fatwa helpline would collaborate to serve British Muslims more effectively.