

# Rivals in the Gulf: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Abdullah Bin Bayyah, and the Qatar-UAE Contest Over the Arab Spring and the Gulf Crisis

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DAVID H. WARREN

David H. Warren enriches the rising literature on ‘ulama’ and the “Arab Spring” with his first book, which provides an overview of the history of Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Abdullah Bin Bayyah’s relations with Qatar and the UAE, respectively; both ‘ulama’ and states’ engagement with the “Arab Spring”; and the political thought of both ‘ulama’ and its connection to both states’ foreign policy. After describing the book’s structure here, I discuss the book’s methods and core arguments. I then engage methodologically with some of its arguments and conclude with why this book is a good model for scholarship on the ‘ulama’.

This relatively short book consists of an introduction, five chapters in two parts, and a conclusion. The first part is on al-Qaradawi and Qatar. The first chapter tackles al-Qaradawi’s history with Qatar and the role he and other Azharite ‘ulama’ played in the education system, which led to the decline of Qatar’s Wahhabi ‘ulama’. The following two chapters tackle al-Qaradawi and Qatar’s engagement with various Arab uprisings.

Part two focuses on Bin Bayyah and the UAE. In two chapters, the book discusses the UAE-Bin Bayyah relations and their engagement with the “Arab Spring.”

Warren situates his discussion in two bodies of literature across two disciplines: (1) state branding as a foreign policy strategy of small states like Qatar and the UAE (Political Science); (2) ‘ulama’ and politics (Islamic Studies). In addition to the broad spectrum of secondary literature he draws on, his data includes primary texts of the ‘ulama’ (books, sermons, etc.) and information from his fieldwork in Qatar in 2012-2013 and the UAE in 2019. However, the book does not provide a methodological discussion on how the data was collected or analyzed—a feature that is common in many accounts in Islamic studies, at least in the ‘ulama’ literature I am aware of.

The book argues that Qatar and the UAE utilize religious branding as a foreign policy strategy to secure US protection in a hostile region. Al-Qaradawi and Bin Bayyah, Warren argues, “have played crucial roles in how Qatar and the UAE have crafted alternate brands of Islamic reform” (2) through their Jurisprudence of Revolution and Jurisprudence of Peace, respectively. Those diverging intellectual projects, according to Warren, are built on similar intellectual roots: *wasatiyya* (centrism or moderation), Rashid Rida’s “model of refashioning once-marginal classical concepts and modes of reasoning and bringing them to the center of Islamic legal thought” (74), majoritarian understanding of democracy, conceptualizing the state as a neutral entity, and “the modern tension that pre-supposes the lay believer as rational and capable of self-governance while maintaining a continued need for the personal authority of a scholar” (8). While al-Qaradawi responds to the modern threat of the ‘ulama’'s authority by cultivating an independent image, Bin Bayyah seeks the state’s intervention to institute this authority. Finally, the book argues that Qatar and the UAE should be considered centers in the Muslim moral geography alongside traditional hubs.

Warren’s much-needed, innovative work extends these arguments from the secondary literature. The argument about the ‘ulama’'s “crucial role” in “shaping” these states’ religious vision may need a clearer articulation, as it may ambiguously apply to shaping the rulers’ beliefs (a deep

impact), on the one hand, or only shaping their instrumentalist discursive strategies (superficial impact), on the other. The book approaches Qatar and the UAE as utilitarian actors, although it does not consider Qatar's pro-Arab Spring stance as a form of opportunism or *realpolitik* (40). (Warren holds the same position on Qatar's pro-Muslim Brotherhood stance.<sup>1</sup>) While this is explained by al-Qaradawi's long-lasting deep ideological influence on many Qatari officials through his education efforts, the book later returns to a utilitarian conceptualization, claiming that Qatar's "sponsorship of al-Qaradawi was contingent upon Qatar's foreign policy goals" (62). In that regard, the book seems inconsistent about the extent of al-Qaradawi's influence. On the other hand, the UAE seems to have a consistent utilitarian image in the book, showing that Bin Bayyah's impact is merely through the state's appropriation of his discourse. Effectively, then, the book considers the role of the 'ulama' as being to provide discourses that states happen to find beneficial for their foreign policy.

As I have stated elsewhere, Warren provides the richest analytical account so far of al-Qaradawi's "Arab Spring" politics because he studies different uprisings and pays attention to how contextual factors (like his network) are as important as textual (discursive and ideological) factors.<sup>2</sup> This is partly due to the abundance of his data obtained through a myriad of sources (including al-Qaradawi's rich autobiography), including timely fieldwork with al-Qaradawi himself. On the other hand, the book explains Bin Bayyah's absolutist political stances merely through a single (textual) factor: his concern over the chaos of religious discourse (103). It contextualizes this using Hussein Agrama's work on how the state blurs the line separating the secular and the religious to further its intervention. This explanation is not as robust compared to that accorded al-Qaradawi, which might reflect to a comparative data shortage on Bin Bayyah. A thorough investigation of Bin Bayyah's biography, the context where he developed his thought, his network, and the details of how his cooperation with the UAE started would be necessary to a fuller account. Unlike al-Qaradawi, who spent most of his life in Qatar, understanding Bin Bayyah requires us to go beyond his recent context in the UAE to earlier contexts like Saudi Arabia and Mauritania.

Finally, Warren's emphasis on Rashid Rida's influence on both 'ulama' resembles his earlier work on Rifa'ā al-Tahtawi's influence on Ali Gomaa's politics.<sup>3</sup> This line of research traces current 'ulama's politics to its "modernist roots."<sup>4</sup> Though such a project is appealing from an intellectual history perspective, establishing the concrete effects of this connection is tenuous, and requires substantive work to show how these 'ulama' were influenced by those predecessors at the level of particular issues.

Granted these notes, *Rivals in the Gulf* provides a model of scholarship that is much needed. I believe that a synthesis between the humanities (and Islamic studies, in particular) and social sciences is crucial for our studies of the 'ulama'. I deeply appreciate empirically-rich descriptive works like Usaama al-Azami's both panoramic and detailed *Islam and the Arab Revolutions*.<sup>5</sup> But also, as a social science student, I find Warren's analysis and explanation integral for deepening our debate on how to understand the 'ulama's politics. It is especially fruitful when both textual and contextual, ideal and pragmatic factors are studied rigorously. This is established through the interdisciplinary, multi-methodological approach that Warren adopts.

In short, *Rivals in the Gulf* is an essential read to understand how two major competing Islamic political visions are developed in the intersection between the 'ulama' and states in a regional and international political context.

MUHAMMAD AMASHA  
PHD STUDENT, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY  
YALE UNIVERSITY  
NEW HAVEN, CT

## Endnotes

- 1 David H. Warren, “Qatari Support for the Muslim Brotherhood Is More Than Just Realpolitik, It Has a Long, Personal History,” *Maydan*, July 12, 2017, <https://www.themaydan.com/2017/07/qatari-support-muslim-brotherhood-just-realpolitik-long-personal-history/>.
- 2 Muhammad Amasha et al., “Roundtable on State Islam after the Arab Uprisings” (Jadaliyya, November 17, 2020), <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/41990>; David H. Warren, “The ‘Ulamā’ and the Arab Uprisings 2011-13: Considering Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the ‘Global Mufti,’ between the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Legal Tradition, and Qatari Foreign Policy,” *New Middle Eastern Studies*, March 21, 2014.
- 3 David H. Warren, “Cleansing the Nation of the ‘Dogs of Hell’: ‘Ali Jum‘a’s Nationalist Legal Reasoning in Support of the 2013 Egyptian Coup and Its Bloody Aftermath,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 3 (August 2017): 457–77.
- 4 David H. Warren, “The Modernist Roots of Islamic Autocracy: Shaykh Abdullah Bin Bayyah and the UAE-Israel Peace Deal,” *Maydan*, August 27, 2020, <https://themaydan.com/2020/08/the-modernist-roots-of-islamic-autocracy-shaykh-abdullah-bin-bayyah-and-the-uae-israel-peace-deal/>.
- 5 Usaama Al-Azami, *Islam and the Arab Revolutions: The Ulama Between Democracy and Autocracy* (C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2021).