



Arabs Denounce Cleric's Fatwa on 'Immoral' TV

Many Arabs denounce Saudi cleric's edict for killing owners of 'immoral' TV stations

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Arabs across the ideological spectrum, from secular-minded liberals to Muslim hard-liners, are denouncing a top Saudi cleric's edict that it was permissible to kill the owners of satellite TV stations that show "immoral" content.

Many expressed worry the recent comments by Sheik Saleh al-Lihedan — chief of the kingdom's highest tribunal, the Supreme Judiciary Council — would fuel terrorism, encouraging attacks on station employees and owners.

The edict, or fatwa, has also focused the spotlight on Saudi Arabia's legal system because of al-Lihedan's senior position in the judiciary. The system is run by Islamic cleric-judges, many of them hard-liners, and has increasingly been criticized by some Saudis because of the wide discretion judges have in punishing criminals and the perception that many judges are out of touch with the realities of the world.

Even conservative clerics who agree that Arab satellite networks show too many "indecent" programs said al-Lihedan had gone too far.

"Our religion prevents Muslims from watching films that provide seduction, obscenity and vulgarity," said Sheik Hazim Awad, an Iraqi cleric, who, like al-Lihedan, is Sunni Muslim.

But "the real Muslim can just cancel (subscriptions to) these channels," he said.

Many conservatives frown on the Arab world's numerous satellite networks for airing music videos — often with scantily clad women singers — or Western movies and TV shows like "Sex and the City," from which nude scenes are sometimes but not always cut.

Obscenity isn't the only thing that disturbs some. On Tuesday, another Saudi cleric, Sheik Mohammed Munajjid, said the cartoon character Mickey Mouse should be killed. Munajjid said in an interview with a religious Web site that under Islamic law, rats and mice are considered "repulsive" and as "soldiers of Satan."

"For children they've become something great and beloved. Like this Mickey Mouse, who is seen as a great figure, even though under Islamic law, Mickey Mouse should be killed," said Munajjid, who is a well-known cleric but does not hold a government position.

The controversy over al-Lihedan's fatwa began a week ago, when the cleric was answering questions from callers to the daily "Light in the Path" religious program on Saudi state radio. One caller asked about Islam's view of the owners of satellite TV channels that show "bad programs" during the holy

month of Ramadan, which began more than two weeks ago.

"I want to advise the owners of these channels, who broadcast calls for such indecency and impudence ... and I warn them of the consequences," al-Lihedan said in the program. "Those calling for corrupt beliefs, certainly it's permissible to kill them."

The remarks were especially surprising because many of the most popular Arab satellite networks are owned by Saudi princes and well-connected Saudi and Gulf businessmen.

On Sunday, reportedly under pressure from senior government figures, al-Lihedan appeared on Saudi state TV to explain his comments, apparently to prevent vigilante killings. He said owners should first be brought to trial and then sentenced to death if other penalties don't deter them.

He said his "advice" was aimed at owners who broadcast witchcraft, indecent programs, shows mocking Islamic scholars or religious police and comedies inappropriate for Ramadan.

The edict chilled managers of satellite networks. Several channels based in Dubai declined comment. One network representative said the staff was taking the fatwa very seriously, but he did not want his name or channel revealed. "Why select yourself as a target by commenting on it?" he said.

Saudi Arabia's judiciary is a bastion of hard-line clerics implementing Islamic law under the strict Wahhabi interpretation. Judges are appointed by the king on the recommendation of the Supreme Judicial Council and have complete discretion to set sentences, except in cases where Islamic law outlines a punishment, such as capital crimes.

King Abdullah has said reforming the legal system is one of his priorities, but so far few changes have been announced — a sign of wariness in confronting the powerful clerics.

One Saudi cleric challenged al-Lihedan, telling the Saudi Al-Jazirah newspaper that the new edict would "lend support to terrorism."

Militants will "recruit our youths to take lives and blow up stations and the properties of the owners of the stations, all based on (al-Lihedan's) grave response," said Sheik Abdul-Mohsen al-Obaikan, an adviser at the Justice Ministry and a member of the appointed Consultative Council, which acts like a parliament.

In Jordan, hard-line cleric Ibrahim Zeid Kailani said although the networks are spreading "decay" among the youth, it's the responsibility of the government and not individuals to deal with the issue.

"Such edicts, which call for killing people, instigate sedition," said Kailani, who heads the Islamic Action Front's Scholars Committee, a hawkish group. "They could transform the countries into internal battlefields."

Around the Arab world, many said el-Lihedan was out of line.

"He shouldn't give such a judgment because he's not God," said Noora Baker, a 27-year-old folkloric dancer from the Palestinian city of Ramallah. "I am against religion interfering with the matters of society."

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