

The Grand Mufti

Objective	As a result of this lesson, students will be able to discover a deeper meaning of the teachings and practices of Islam in Egypt, including the institution that interprets Islamic law applying it to individuals and to public law.
Materials	Student Handout: What is a Grand Mufti?
Key Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is a Grand Mufti?• What is a fatwa?• How does the Mufti relate to fatwa?• How many fatwas are there?• How are they arrived at?• How does one become a Mufti?• What training does a Mufti receive?
Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Richard Saccone. Interview at Dar Al-Ifta in Egypt, July 2007.• The Dar Al-Ifta website. http://www.dar-alifta.org/• Jakor Skovgaard-Peterson. <i>Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwa of the Dar al-Ifta</i>. International Journal of Middle East Studies, vol 31, No.2.

What is a Grand Mufti?

**Religious
Leader;
Interpreter of
Law**

Actually, Grand Mufti is a title for the highest religious legal figure in a country practicing Sunni Islam. In Egypt, the Grand Mufti is an interpreter of Islamic Law (Sharia) and advises the Egyptian judiciary on matters where secular and religious law overlap. Traditionally, the early Muftis reviewed capital crimes and tackled religious questions such as determining the beginning of religious months and times of fasting. As the Grand Mufti gained the trust of the people his role increased allowing him to respond to ever broader religious questions of law and personal behavior. Eventually, the job became so great that a research institute, (the Dar al-Ifta), and staff were added to assist the Grand Mufti. The institution was the first of its kind in the world, established in 1895. It consists of researchers and other Muftis servicing the Grand Mufti.

**What Does He
Do?**

A Mufti is responsible for issuing a legal ruling or edict known as a fatwa. Such rulings are non-binding and act as religious advice. A fatwa can be issued to a person or to the government. It is designed to elevate the discourse between religion and society, attempting to reconcile Islamic principles with modern life and educate the public as a service to the community. Fatwas may address societal questions such as should women drive, may women sit on a bus next to a man, can a Muslim wear anything bearing a cross or can a Muslim choose western law as a career? The fatwa may even focus on particular personal issues applying to a specific question raised by an individual Muslim. In addition, the government may ask Dar-al-Ifta to rule on matters before it. For example, in Egypt, all capital crimes are still referred to the Mufti for a religious opinion. Dar al-Ifta fields about 30,000 fatwas per month (1,000 per day). Obviously, the Grand Mufti cannot answer these questions alone. The staff at Dar-al-Ifta conduct the legal research necessary to render a proper opinion. Each fatwa is considered public information and is properly archived. Modern technology has aided the system well. All current fatwa are posted on the official website. Older fatwa are consistently added to the database. Some Muslims have objected that since the Grand Mufti is a government appointed position in Egypt that it has lost its objectivity and ability to render just opinions. However, Dar al-Ifta insists it is an independent institution receiving no orders from the government; therefore, its opinions are objective and righteous.

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Fatwa Process

Fatwa are issued after an exhaustive process of research and study involving several phases. First, every Mufti must understand and consider Islamic law in its broadest sense. While there are 95 schools of thought in Islam, four main schools of thought are privileged. Muftis begin by examining an issue addressed anywhere in history looking for consensus among the varied thinkers. If no general agreement exists, the Mufti will determine the methodology employed in previous rulings searching for the logic necessary to arrive at a just conclusion. Ultimately, the Mufti considers what ruling would benefit society while remaining within Islamic law. If an issue has not been previously addressed Muftis use interpretive skills to arrive at entirely new rulings.

Muftis must take whatever case (or question) is presented to them. Similar to American judicial practices, the Mufti may issue an entirely new ruling or simply allow a previous fatwa to stand.

If an individual is not satisfied with the opinion of a particular Mufti, that person may consult a different Muslim cleric for a ruling.

**How Does One
Become a
Mufti?**

According to Dar al-Ifta, Muftis endure a roughly three year training program. The institution sets three conditions for attaining the title of Mufti.

1. A person must be learned in the science and doctrines necessary to make sound judgments. This includes thorough knowledge of the Quran and the Hadith (sayings of the prophet Mohammed).
2. A person must be trained in the method of issuing a fatwa.
3. A person must be educated on how to be a Mufti including the duties and responsibilities of the position.

Training is also provided at respected universities such as Al Azhar in Cairo.
