IN DEFENSE OF TRADITION: MUḤAMMAD NĀṢIR AL-DĪN AL-ALBĀṆĪ
AND THE SALAFĪ METHOD

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the life and legacy of Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999), one of the towering leaders of the Salafī movement in the twentieth century, whose students today range from non-political to violent Islamic groups. As the first non-confessional intellectual biography of Albānī, this work chronicles the evolution of his ideas and career in the context of the seismic shifts that took place in the Middle East during his lifetime (1914-1999). In mapping out Albānī’s trajectory through his prolific teachings as well as through accounts told by him, his students and detractors, this project seeks to address two related themes. First, it tries to explain Albānī’s unexpected professional rise as an Islamic scholar in light of his autodidacticism and unremarkable beginnings. Second, like studies of world leaders, this dissertation seeks to understand the profound, and in Albānī’s case contradictory, influence he continues to wield over the course of Islamic practice and politics over fifteen years following his death. Whereas in the former he gained a reputation for being a firebrand, serving prison sentences and being expelled from countries because of his uncompromising legal literalism, in the context of the latter his views became regarded as sources of moderation and restraint.

In seeking to reconcile these paradoxical features of Albānī’s legacy, this dissertation argues that by framing his teachings as a “method” of the pious predecessors Albānī claimed an authentic religious authority distinct from both Islamic institutions and politics in the post-colonial Middle East. It is this concept, as well as its application to local needs and implications concerning authenticity, that continues to guide many of his followers as they navigate the region’s current tremors. By surveying Albānī’s personal
and intellectual arch against the backdrop of the momentous twentieth century during which he lived, this dissertation contributes to the growing scholarship that challenges the portrayal of Salafism as a mere export of Saudi Wahhābism, despite certain shared doctrines and sources. Moreover, as Albānī’s life demonstrated, it was often both personal circumstances and a commitment to the ideology’s truth claims that informed one’s adherence to the Salafi orientation.
Acknowledgments

When asked about how he feels, my grandfather, always armed with a witty aphorism, occasionally replies, “Just like in a fairy tale; the further you go the scarier it gets.”

This is true not only of the process of writing a dissertation, but especially of writing on a subject with such a direct connection to the momentous changes currently underway in the Middle East. I have a sense of what John Steinbeck meant when he wrote of his Grapes of Wrath, “I’m writing history while it is happening and I don’t want to be wrong.”

That my experiences with this dissertation and my graduate studies have been defined by fulfillment rather than by fear is due to the nurturing home I have found at the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, in particular working under the supervision of Bernard Haykel. His patience, precision and wisdom as an adviser and mentor come through in the following pages. He has skillfully guided me through the trees of Albâni’s multi-textured life and the ideas they inspired, and has consistently pushed me to express my conclusions about the forest they represent. Bernard and Navina have generously dispensed doting guidance on my work and my writing at critical junctures during the period in which I have come to know them. I feel blessed to consider them my Doktorvater and Doktormutter, and look forward to learning from them for many years to come.

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reminding me about my readership and what I sought to teach through the format of an intellectual biography. Professor Zaman’s feedback and his own scholarship have taught me to synthesize concepts and contexts from different time periods, to bridge connections where those might exist, and to present a story through them. I am fortunate to have learned under Professor Zaman and from his example.

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Note on Conventions

This work follows the Arabic transliteration standards set out by the International Journal of Middle East Studies, with the following exceptions. The definite article is dropped for Arabic proper names, including agnomens and cognomens, when they appear alone (so “Albānī” instead of “al-Albānī”). Where a more common popular usage exists, particularly for names of locations and world figures, the more common version is used (for example, “Medīna” not “al-Madīna” and “Gamal Abdel Nasser” instead of “Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir”). Only Gregorian dates are used, with the exception of particular instances in which both hijrī and Gregorian are mentioned to clarify a particular point, in which case the Gregorian will follow the hijrī date. In cases where only the hijrī date is mentioned, it is accompanied by “AH” (anno hijrī). For the sake of consistency, only death dates (rather than life spans) are used. In cases where an individual is still living, a birth date is given when it is known. With the exception of words that might be familiar to audiences outside of Islamic studies, such as Qur’ān and ḥadīth, Arabic terms appear in italics, and on first mention are accompanied by an English translation. For simplicity, plurals are rendered by adding an “s” to the Arabic singular form (isnāds, not asānīd). Translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted. Qur’ānic translations are based on those of Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, New York: New American Library, 1953) and ‘Abdullah Yūsuf ‘Alī (The Meaning of the Holy Qur’ān, Beltsville, Md: Amana Publications, 1997) as these appear on the Qur’ān search engine at IslamiCity.com (http://www.islamicity.com/QuranSearch/).
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Introduction

“The scholars say that Shaykh Nāṣir [al-Dīn al-Albānī] is Salafism and that Salafism is Shaykh Nāṣir [al-Dīn al-Albānī].”- Akram Ziyāda.¹

“You will not find it,” ‘Alī al-Ḥalabī assured me concerning the gravesite of his late teacher, Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999). “No one knows where it is but I will tell you – it's the one under the only tree in the old cemetery in Southern Mārkā.”²

Southern Mārkā, where Albānī spent the last twenty years of his life, is an hour-long taxi ride east of Amman and stands in the middle of an ocean of Palestinian refugee camps. Resembling a construction site – a small clearing encircled by a low, graffitied wall, with laundry-strewn residential buildings on one side and a grocery store on the other – the cemetery is easy to miss. Sure enough, amid the dust-colored tombstones there stands a solitary sapling, and underneath it stones arranged in a rectangular unmarked outline. The scene is certainly a disappointment for anyone expecting an ornate tomb, but its location and appearance is a testament to the principles Albānī advocated.

According to his will, Albānī requested that whoever first discovered his death

rush to bury me, not inform my relatives and brothers except the amount that the requirement of preparing me [for burial] demands... [I ask that they] choose a burial spot in the closest place...and that the grave be an old one that does not appear to have been [recently] dug... Those residing in the country of my death should not inform my children outside the country – not to mention others – [about my death] until after my burial so that emotions not overcome them...³

Albānī’s request for a nondescript burial spot is typical for Salafīs, who shun grave decoration and visitation – deemed bid‘a (reprehensible innovation) associated with popular religion and Ṣūfism. In fact, one of Albānī’s earliest writings was a pamphlet

¹ Interview with Akram Ziyāda, May 2012.
² Interview with ‘Alī al-Ḥalabī, May 2012.
condemning building mosques atop graves. Moreover, although no one had been buried in the cemetery for some time, his students managed to convince city officials to permit Albānī’s interment there.4

The contents of Albānī’s will and the expediency with which it was carried out serve as windows into Albānī’s priorities and his position. Besides one sentence concerning his personal library, the will’s four paragraphs consist of Albānī’s instructions for the handling of his body and preparations for his burial. It was this meticulous concern for defining and following the letter of the divine law to which Albānī dedicated his life and for which, ultimately, he is remembered most vividly by adherents and opponents.

As readers will see in the following account, Albānī stood out from traditional Islamic scholars in both the wide-ranging appeal he seemed to have had and the remarkable course his life took to reach that point. To begin with, he was not a traditional scholar. He lacked the required scholarly license (ijāza) for teaching texts, and claimed to have mastered his purported subject of expertise – ḥadīth science – by spending long hours poring over texts on his own. Not only was he an autodidact, but Albānī lacked any family name or pedigree, being the son of an Albanian watch repairman who arrived as a refugee in Damascus during the final years of the Ottoman Empire. Rather than embrace any kind of affiliation that might have given him personal comfort and legitimacy under these circumstances – family ties, promotion of legal institutions, membership in a political party – Albānī shunned these opportunities. Instead, with the kind of purist idealism reminiscent of an Ayn Rand character, he dedicated his life to one cause:

reviving what he considered the “correct” Islam as embodied in the Prophet’s sunna. He suggested as much when he wrote, “my entire purpose in this life, following obedience to God’s commands and laws, is familiarizing Muslims through lessons, lectures and books about the correct [understanding of] the life of the Prophet, from all perspectives and to the best of my abilities.”

More than fifteen years after his death, Albānī continues to wield vast influence on Salafī communities across the world. Outside of Jordan, nearly every country in the Middle East has his footprint. In Saudi Arabia, where he taught from 1961 to 1963, the Islamic University of Medina holds his personal library and many of his students and opponents still reside there; Albānī’s al-Fatāwā al-Imārātiyya testify to his travels and classes while visiting the United Arab Emirates; and in Syria, where he lived for the largest portion of his life (1923-1980) scholars continue to invoke his name, boasting about when they attended his classes or met him, and cite his position on topics ranging from whether women may wear gold to whether one may join a political party. In February 2015, as a justification for their campaigning tactics in advance of the country’s parliamentary elections, Egypt’s al-Nour Party posted a link on its official Facebook page of an audio lecture by Albānī about the conditions for nominating Christian candidates.

Albānī’s influence beyond the Middle East is evident in the Indonesian and French

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translations of his books and his ḥadīth assessments appearing on the website of the Islamic Community Center of Des Plaines, Illinois.7

The persistence of Albānī in the “real” world is less surreal than his posthumous ubiquity on a range of forums in the virtual world, a medium that did not even exist for most of his lifetime. An 8 July 2013 Google search for “Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī” in Arabic yielded 1,220,000 results and a YouTube search on the same date with the same terms in Arabic yielded 7,580 videos either about Albānī or including his audio lectures. A YouTube video of his statement requiring the trimming of the beard, an eleven minute audio file with his black-and-white photograph, has upwards of 270,000 “views.”8 Numerous Facebook “posts,” online web forums and “tweets” both by self-described Salafī users as well as by unaffiliated university students, physicians and mothers from around the world refer to ḥadīth reports that were “traced” by Albānī (kharrajahu al-Albānī). One wonders what Albānī would think if he were alive today of the Facebook page “Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani” with his profile picture and 57,231 “likes” – 2,789 more than those of the Facebook page of “Marlon Brando,” an American pop icon who lived roughly during his lifetime.

What accounts for Albānī’s lasting influence on modern Islamic thought and practice and, more specifically, on the development of Salafism? Modern modes of communication, of course, did their part to help mold Albānī into a kind of “global mufti,” much as they did for his contemporaries like Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī.9 Albānī’s

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appearance on these media, moreover, reveal an affable personality and an accessible rhetorical style. That he learned Syrian dialect before he learned Classical Arabic and used Syrian expressions in teachings gave him the familiarity of a lay Muslim rather than the gravitas of an established scholar. Laudatory biographies written by his admirers depict Albānī’s avuncular relationship with students, exemplified through anecdotes of him driving students to classes while teaching at the Islamic University of Medina and staying at their homes during his travels. Indeed some even refer to him as “the father” (al-wālid).

From audio recordings of his classes, one also hears Albānī’s sharp wit and humor, for example his maxim that “it is a policy to do away with politics” (min al-siyāsa tark al-siyāsa) and his clever turns of phrase in debates, such as his rhetorical question “is this a proof for or against you?” (hal hiya ḥujja lak wa ‘alayk). Students record his other personal qualities in sections of their biographies on him, such as “his humility” and “his generosity and kindness towards people.”

At the same time, both his admirers and leading Salafī scholars described Albānī with the sobriquets “ḥadīth scholar of the age” (muḥaddith al-‘aṣr) and “defender of the sunna” (nāṣir al-sunna), a variation on his first name, Nāṣir al-Dīn. Towards the end of his life, he seemed to have inspired an entire industry of biographies, theses and compendia of his teachings by his admirers, who would refer to him using the traditional sobriquets.

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10 This served Albānī well in his appeal to his followers even as it became the basis for attacks on him by his critics. See, for example, Muḥammad Sa’īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, al-Lā madhhabiyya: akhṭar bi’d’a tuhaddid al-sharī’ah al-Islāmiyya, third edition (Damascus: Dār al-Fārābī, 2005), 13.


Islamic scholarly epithets, “the great scholar” (al-ʿallāma) and even “the leader” (al-imām). Complementing their discussions of the nearly two-hundred publications that Albānī wrote, these biographers devote sections of their accounts to Albānī’s “refusal to speak without knowledge” and his “time management,” which include hagiographical anecdotes about how Albānī would answer questions from students without lifting his gaze from his books and that he would only interrupt his twelve hours in the library for prayers.

Of course the fact that Albānī lived fairly recently means that we are fortunate to have at our disposal not only these firsthand accounts about him, but also numerous videos that feature his students or family members recounting episodes from his life, and countless websites – including one carrying his name – with downloadable PDF copies of his works. A closer look at his writings and preoccupations during this period, however, suggests that this widespread admiration is located in a much deeper place than mere celebrity fanfare. He did certainly have the kind of charisma of a leader that engendered what Clifford Geertz describes as both “passions, often enough distorted ones,” as well as, more importantly, “symbolic forms…that mark the center as the center and give what goes on there its aura of being not merely important but in some odd fashion connected to the way the world is built.”

However, he also constructed a kind of dynamic association for his adherents that allowed his legacy and ideas to evolve well after his death and well beyond his

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15 Ṣadḥān, al-Imām al-Albānī, 76, 100.
personhood – a legacy that is especially relevant in the midst of the current unrest in the Middle East. Despite his lack of pedigree and scholarly credentials, Albānī devised a language for articulating a claim to exclusive authority in arbitrating the divine will within a context of unprecedented changes in the Islamic world. Rather than the traditional institution of the madhhab (legal school), Albānī turned to the well-charted reformist tradition of Salafism that called for a rejection of what its adepts called “blind emulation” (al-taqlīd al-a‘mā) of the madhhab and an embrace of the imagined golden age of “the pious predecessors” (al-salaf al-sālih). When Albānī adopted this position in the early 1930’s, however, the implications of adherence to a madhhab took a decidedly different form in the absence of the traditional institution of Islamic governance, the caliphate. Once the legitimizing voice of Islamic empires, the madhhab now shifted hands to the western-styled nation states that took their place and the modern institutions (universities, political parties) that took shape in their midst. For Albānī, therefore, the madhhab and what he and his students often referred to as “fervent partisanship” (al-ta’assub) to it, signified a broader and potentially more corrosive force in society beyond the realm of religious observances and beliefs.

Albānī took the Salafi anti-madhhab position in a radically different direction from political and social reform to doctrinal post-structuralism. Rather than counseling his followers to avoid emulation of the madhhab as his predecessors had done, Albānī called for the dissolution of the madhhab altogether. In its place, he focused on the ḥadīth compendia – the locus of the Prophet’s purported sayings – as the site of the religion’s true guidance. For the first two decades of his career Albānī spent those twelve hour-long days cataloguing “sound” ḥadīth reports and the correct teachings derived from them in
these works. Beginning in the 1960’s, Albānī began to crystallize his vision into a *manhaj* (method)\(^{17}\) of the pious predecessors – first for how to determine the soundness of ḥadīth reports and to derive laws from them, and soon afterwards as a general prescription for how to engage in all individual, communal and political matters. The result was not merely a new body of normative regulations but also, by emphasizing the unparalleled place of ḥadīth science for determining Islamic creed and law, a discipline for engaging with any unprecedented cases that might emerge. By adhering to the methodology of ḥadīth science, and the golden age of Islamic history during which it was first arranged, Albānī argued, Muslims could know with confidence that their thoughts and actions accorded with the divine will.

The concept of a *manhaj* became an especially powerful tool for detaching authority from both institutions and individuals. It suggested that not only were religious truths located in the teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad and his earliest followers, but that this was also the only valid epistemology for the entire sphere of human activity. The only way to claim truth, and thus to determine what was normatively required of

\(^{17}\) I translate *manhaj* as “method,” and when I discuss it in a scholarly context (chapter 7, for example), I use “methodology” (as in *manhaj* ‘ilmī, “a scholarly methodology”), which implies the dual textual and practical approach that the term invokes for Salafīs. Borrowing from Marxist terminology, Roel Meijer suggests “praxis” as a useful expression of what he describes as the “revolutionary praxis” of Salafi-Jihādīs. He writes that “The Leninist and Maoist logic of praxis, the eulogy of the revolutionary will and knowledge whose incontestable logic is based on the moral superiority of self-sacrifice as well as having a privileged access to truth during the struggle, lies at the core of Jihadi Salafis as Yūsuf al-‘Uyairī formulates it. By stating that only revolutionary praxis is the source of religious as well as scientific truth, all neutral objective criteria for its evaluation have been swept aside.” Roel Meijer, “Yūsuf al-‘Uyairī and the Making of a Revolutionary Salafi Praxis,” *Die Welt des Islams* 47, 3-4 (2007), pp. 422-459, at: 443-444. I thank Dr. Will McCants for pointing me to this source. The idea of *manhaj* as a model of practice can, however, become misleading if not explained properly, since Muslims in general, and Salafīs in particular, consider the Prophet to be the best example of practice, a view supported by references to his *ṣunna* as “the good model” (*al-*uswa al-ḥusna). Rendering *manhaj* as “method,” therefore, suggests the kind of wholistic textually-grounded approach that applies equally to hermeneutics, epistemology and engagement with everyday affairs. For a discussion of this term and Albānī’s connection to it, see Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London: Hurst & Co., 2009), pp.33-57, at: 47-50.
Muslims, Albānī believed, was to master ḥadīth science (ʿilm al-ḥadīth). This discipline became the larger framework within which Albānī introduced his method to his readership towards the end of his life in a campaign he called “purification and education.” (al-taṣfiya wa-l-tarbiya). In his last decade, he counseled:

It is incumbent upon Muslims – the rulers and the ruled, the preachers and those preached to – to join us in believing that there is no other way to realize the security and justice (al-amn wa-l-ʿadl) to which we call or to establish God’s rule on earth except by inviting others to follow the *sunna*, and educating Muslims according to it, and not according to earthly and man-made positive laws, personal views, or the methods of political parties.\(^\text{18}\)

By not only expanding the application of ḥadīth science but also endowing it with the exclusive ability to uncover the correct version of the religion, as well as of general conduct expected of Muslims, Albānī thus recasted the ḥadīth scholar (*muḥaddith*) into a kind of divinely-inspired arbiter of the faith (perhaps not too different from the Shīʿī conception of the *imām*). Through his explanation of the Salafī method of determining the soundness of ḥadīth reports and his own voluminous writings that catalogue his positions on various legal and creedal matters, he provided a way for others to attach themselves to this alternative framework.

After Albānī’s death, as we will see, there ironically emerged a kind of Albānī *madhhab*, with his adherents adopting the cognomen “al-Atharī” (“scripturalist” or “the one of [ḥadīth] reports”) and a mushrooming hagiographical literature surrounding his life and legacy, as well as compilations of his teachings and scholarly “efforts” (*juhūd*) in ḥadīth, creed, law, and missionizing (*da’wa*). The principles of Albānī’s legal and theological hermeneutic are being further defined and developed today by Salafī scholars.

such as al-Sharīf Ḥātim al-ʿAwnī. In his al-Manhaj al-muqtaraḥ li-fahm al-muṣṭalaḥ (The Recommended Method for Understanding the Technical Terminology [of Ḥadīth]), for example, ʿAwnī picks up from where Albānī intellectually left off by chronicling how the kalām-based jurisprudential tradition of the Sunnī madḥabs corroded the sunna by introducing into the study of ḥadīth concepts such as tawātur (concurrent reports).

Following Albānī, ʿAwnī argues that this concept was not a part of the original lexicon of ḥadīth science, and, as a remedy, recommends reviving ḥadīth study as Salafī reformers envisioned it in order to properly uncover the “pure” sunna.¹⁹

Beyond unpacking the unexpected success of the son of a poor Albanian watch repairman, to understand Albānī and his towering influence we must also understand the circumstances of his life – the events and environments in which he lived and the institutions (social circles, classrooms, journals, publishing houses, state structures) with which he engaged. Just as such modern institutions, as Anthony Giddens explains, represent “discontinuities” distinct in their rapid pace, their far-reaching, even global, scope, so too Albānī’s career marks a unique break with the culture of traditional Islamic scholarship in part because of his participation in them.²⁰ By ignoring these changes we run the risk of misunderstanding the factors that contributed to Albānī’s rise as a “great man” of Salafism. Here we can learn from Isaiah Berlin’s critique of the “great men” view of history that “Great men, we are told, are typical of the movements of their age:

hence study of their characters ‘explains’ such movements.”

What are great men?” Berlin asked in the context of Leo Tolstoy’s writings,

They are ordinary human beings, who are ignorant and vain enough to accept responsibility for the life of society, individuals who would rather take the blame for all the cruelties, injustice, disasters, justified in their name, than recognize their own insignificance and impotence in the cosmic flow which pursues its course irrespective of their wills and ideals. This is the central point of those passages (in which Tolstoy excelled) in which the actual course of events is described, side by side with the absurd, egocentric explanations which persons blown up with the sense of their own importance necessarily give to them.

The other extreme is viewing history as a completely deterministic process, one in which the course of events follows its own cosmologically-destined pattern, having what Berlin described as its own “causal chains,” a view equally untenable since the individuals in this process would lack any free will and would be entirely subject to the laws of this grand narrative. Moreover, the number of such causal chains and their exact relationships cannot be known with certainty, and in conjecturing about them the historian ultimately risks choosing arbitrarily.

In this intellectual biography, bearing in mind the balance between seeing Albānī as a “great man” of the Salafī movement and as a witness to (and product of) a series of cosmic-scale political and institutional changes in the Middle East during his lifetime, we will see that neither the ideology he set out nor the ways in which he did so were entirely predetermined. While, of course, many of the concepts on which Albānī drew were grounded in traditional sources (a core tenet of the Salafī mission in identifying the religion’s “original” expression), the contexts in which he did so (for example, to affirm his credentials with the Wahhābī establishment after his abrupt ouster from Saudi Arabia)

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22 Ibid., 27.
demonstrate the relevance and adaptability of these concepts. In other words, although there is no doubt that Albānī believed in the ideas he argued, there is also no reason to assume they did not serve other more personal and mundane purposes. In this way, understanding not only the actual positions he put forth but also the events and mechanisms that encouraged him to do so serve as opportunities to understand how Albānī’s character and behavior could help explain the recent posturing of his Salafi followers as they adjust to new political realities in the Middle East. By situating the ideas of one of Salafism’s towering luminaries within their personal, professional and political circumstances, this work thus hopes to help challenge the essentialist depiction of Salafism as a mere export of Saudi Wahhābism.23

23 The classic work that showcases how the local development of Salafism was often germane to that particular geographic setting and time period is David Commins, Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Recent scholarship that on this theme of separating the historical evolution of Salafism from Wahhābism includes: Laurent Bonnefoy, Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Robert G. Rabil, Salafism in Lebanon: From Apoliticism to Transnational Jihadism (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2014); Chanfi Ahmed, West African ‘ulamā’ and Salafism in Mecca and Medina: Jawāb al-Ifrīqī – The Response of the African (Leiden: Brill, 2015). In this work, I distinguish Wahhābī from Salafī. While both are based on the same Ḥanbalī theology and medieval scholarly authorities, the former refers to a specific Najdī scholarly tradition based around the teachings of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792), has explicit historical ties to the Saudi state and generally adheres to the Ḥanbālī madhhab in legal matters, while the latter spans a greater geographic scope and explicitly rejects authorities of both madhhab and state (despite patronage by Saudi Arabia). There are also a number of doctrinal differences. For example, in the nineteenth century a number of Damascene Salafīs distanced themselves from the Wahhābī practice of excommunication (takfīr), as Commins describes. When studying the pre-modern scholarly tradition, the difference is minimal and so emphasizing it is less critical. In studying the modern context, particularly in the case of Albānī’s life, the distinction is essential to understanding Saudi/non-Saudi Salafī dynamics, which were not always harmonious. Albānī, a case in point of this friction, described Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s relationship to Salafism as follows: “Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb was a Salafī in creed, and has great virtue after Ibn Taymiyya in spreading the call to divine unicity in the Islamic world in general, and in the Najdī and Ḥijāzī lands specifically… [His call to] the pure Islam differed from Ibn Taymiyya’s … [Ibn Taymiyya]…warned against weak ḥadīths and against basing Islamic laws upon them…By contrast, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb did not have this interest in ḥadīth or in Salafī jurisprudence (al-fiqh al-salafi), for he followed the Ḥanbali madhhab, and in ḥadīth he followed others.” For a similar distinction between Salafī and Wahhābī, see Daniel Lav, who distinguishes between Albānī’s Salafism and Saudi Wahhābīsm by noting that the latter’s “principal preoccupation…is creed” and tends to follow the Ḥanbālī madhhab, while the former “has roots… [in] reformers of fiqh (jurisprudence)” and, in the case of Albānī, “was a vocal opponent of loyalty to madhhab and supported direct reliance on ḥadīth.” Daniel Lav, Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 109-110. Albānī, “Ḥaqīqat al-da’wa al-Salafiyya,” in Albānī, al-
Literature Review

Aside from pious literature in Arabic (which includes laudatory biographies and university theses on aspects of Albānī’s scholarly work), no critical academic study to date has been devoted exclusively to Albānī’s life and legacy within their historical, scholarly and political contexts. Moreover, the current state of Western scholarship on


25 Emad Hamdeh wrote a dissertation at Exeter University entitled The Emergence of an Iconoclast: Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī and His Critics (Ph.D. Dissertation, Exeter University, 2014). I have not had access to this work during the research and writing of my dissertation, although I look forward to reading it as I prepare to turn this dissertation into a book. Based on my correspondences with Hamdeh, his work is focused largely on Albānī’s doctrinal differences with his critics.
Albānī has the effect of bipolarity, casting him in cameo roles as a contemporary pioneer of ḥadīth science within the field of classical Islamic studies and as a leader of the so-called “quietist” strain of Salafism in works dealing with Jihādism and Islamist groups.

As a result of minimal communication between these fields, discussions of Albānī’s legal hermeneutics within classical Islamic studies tend to be isolated entirely from his life and experiences – a shortcoming that, in light of so much information on an individual with such broad impact, leaves readers inevitably unsatisfied. More importantly, the separation of his ideas from his ideology creates an incomplete portrait of the man and his motivations. Beyond mischaracterizing why Albānī chose certain scholarly positions, ignoring his personal and political contexts also overlooks the intimate relationship between authenticity, epistemology and political authority that informs the Salafī orientation today.

One example is Kamruddin Amin’s article, “Nāṣiruddīn al-Albānī on Muslim’s Ṣaḥīḥ: A Critical Study of His Method” (2004), which provides an important case study of how Albānī departed in his ḥadīth methodology from Muslim. Amin conducts a rigorous comparative analysis of a single ḥadīth report in Muslim which Albānī deemed weak on the basis of the latter’s insistence that terms carry implications concerning a report’s soundness, whereas the former did not. The natural question here that Amin does not ask is why Albānī endowed terminology with meaning in the first place. Albānī’s work on Muslim’s Ṣaḥīḥ, and his broader project – “Bringing the Sunna before the Community,” (taqrīb al-sunna bayn yaday al-umma) in which he reassessed the canonical ḥadīth compendia – of which it is a part, appear in the context of great shifts in

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religious education in which universities staffed with pro-
madhhab professors gained a monopoly on the transmission of religious knowledge. With the termination of his
professorship at the Islamic University of Medina and his expulsion from Saudi Arabia,
Albānī, who lacked both traditional scholarly and academic pedigrees, found himself
isolated and without a legitimate scholarly base for introducing his ḥadīth methodology.
The objectives of reassessing these compendia and reintroducing the importance of the
technical terminology of ḥadīth, in other words, served as his challenge to the faculty at
these new universities, whom Albānī derided for lacking familiarity with the most
essential Islamic discipline.27

This broader context, albeit mentioned in passing in the relevant biographical
portions, is largely absent from Jonathan Brown’s brief discussion of Albānī’s
iconoclasm with respect to the Ṣaḥīḥayn in his The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and
Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunnī Ḥadīth Canon (2007).28 Of course,
Albānī is far from the main subject of Brown’s large project, and despite this Brown does
provide a valuable appraisal of how Albānī sought to undermine the iconic status of the
ḥadīth compendia of Muslim and Bukhārī, even as Albānī expressed veneration towards
them.29 However, because of the parameters of his project, Brown’s interest in Albānī
seems to be largely confined to the latter’s treatment of Bukhārī and Muslim. Like Amin,
Brown too does not integrate the personal and professional circumstances of Albānī’s
radical approach to the discipline of ḥadīth science which is offered here. Besides these
works, Albānī appears in contributions to other topics, albeit in an incidental way. An

27 This will be explored in chapter 7.
29 This will also be explored in chapter 7.
example is Shahab Ahmed’s article “Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses” (1998), which mentions the views of Albānī and his student ‘Alī al-Ḥalabī on the controversial Satanic Verses incident and demonstrates how they misunderstood the position of Ibn Taymiyya because of their commitment to maintaining an orthodoxy to which the latter’s views ironically did not conform.

These works may be contrasted with scholarship on contemporary Islamist and Salafī-Jihādī groups, whose focus on ideology rather than ideas leads to incomplete characterizations of Albānī and his legacy. The single study entirely dedicated to Albānī in this literature is Stéphane Lacroix’s chapter on Albānī in the edited volume *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (2009), which does a good job of situating Albānī within the larger context of Salafism and its connection to the revival of ḥadīth science. However, his discussion of Albānī seems to focus primarily on his influence on Saudi Arabia, where he lived for a short period (1961-1963) and includes minimal information on Albānī’s life in Syria and Jordan either beforehand or afterwards.

Indeed, the strength of Lacroix’s work on Albānī lies in his analysis of Albānī’s impact on radical trends in Saudi Arabia. His important article with Thomas Hegghammer, “Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-‘Utaybi Revisited,” sheds light on an essential and overlooked aspect of Albānī’s legacy in that country. Based on first-hand interviews, Lacroix and Hegghammer show how Albānī’s

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views on ḥadīth (and especially his Ṣifat ṣalāt al-nabī) influenced the messianic group of Juhaymān al-ʿUtaybī (d. 1979), which led a violent takeover of the Great Mosque in Mecca in November 1979.

An excellent survey of the medieval ideas that inform contemporary radical groups is Daniel Lav’s *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology* (2012), which includes a lengthy exposition of Albānī’s confrontation with Salafi-Jihādīs over the issue of belief (*imān*). Lav explores takfīr (excommunication) as a fault line between Albānī and a number of Islamic activists and Salafi-Jihādīs, especially as it first appeared in Safar al-Ḥaḍālī’s (b. 1950) attack on Albānī over the issue of one who neglects prayer. Lav then describes how belief factored into Albānī’s view of politics, particularly his slogan of “purification and education” (*al-taṣfiya wa-l-tarbiyya*), as well attacks he faced from the Jordanian Jihādī ideologue Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī (b. 1959). In a similar way, Joas Wagemakers, whose work focuses on Maqdisī and Jihādī ideology, mentions Albānī in the context of his influence on Salafism in Jordan. However, since Wagemakers’s interest in Albānī seems to be filtered through his interest in Maqdisī and the relationship between Jihādī and non-Jihādī Salafism in Jordan, he neglects the larger epistemological framework of which Albānī’s political views are a part.

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Quintan Wiktorowicz includes lengthy discussions on Albānī in *The Management of Islamic Activism: Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and State Power in Jordan*, as well as in various articles, although his interest also seems to be exclusively on his impact on Salafism in Jordan, where Albānī spent the last twenty years of his life. Wiktorowicz’s work, moreover, seems primarily concerned with the applications of social movement theory to understanding how Islamists and Salafīs organize in Jordan rather than unpacking the ideas and ideologies that ground them. This perspective, however vital for appreciating the maneuvers of these groups in the unique context of Jordan’s parliamentary monarchy, neglects Albānī’s important ideological and scholarly legacies.

As this overview indicates, the current scholarship on Albānī is highly erratic. While good works exist that address one or more aspects of Albānī’s vision through both philological and historical perspectives, no study fully addresses the evolution of Albānī’s ideas and his reception. Given this state of the field, and particularly in light of the rake’s progress of Islamist groups in the Middle East, a thorough treatment of Albānī’s life and legacy on their own terms makes for an especially timely contribution.

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The Sources

Much like the sources on other “great men” in the twentieth century, the material on Albānī consulted for this project is both vast and variegated – ranging from texts to audio recordings to personal interviews – from an equally tangled and tumultuous web of sources (his students, critics, colleagues and himself) as well as locations (Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Internet). Finding a yellow brick road to the “true” Albānī amid the often deliberately biased or the hazily recollected could prove a tall order to follow, but remains an ideal for a work that aims to be both faithful to its sources and subject and, at the same time, committed to the standards of historical scholarship in addressing issues of narrative, meaning, and resonance in those accounts.

Certain sources are, of course, more relevant than others and certain accounts contain their own unique insights. Choosing between these sources with an awareness of their perspectives and priorities is equally important. One can only do so by asking the right questions of them. Indeed, the first step to discovering a “true” biographical narrative depends on the kinds of questions that guide the search since, as the American historian Carl Becker reminds us, “the trouble with so many contributions to knowledge is that they are made by scholars who know all the right answers but none of the right questions.”


As an intellectual biography, it is ultimately Albānī’s intellectual legacy as left to us in his writings that forms the backbone of this project. However, as he has written upwards of two hundred pieces (not counting hundreds of audio sermons), it would be cumbersome, in the best of cases, to give equal weight to each of them and to analyze
each as closely as the next. Moreover, it could be argued that this, too, however important as a translation project, would not ultimately produce a faithful rendering of the currency of Albānī’s ideas and would result instead in the project being a kind of annotated bibliography. Not every work of his had the same broad appeal. Some, such as the Șifat șalāt al-nabī were published fourteen times, while others, such as his Khuṭbat al-ḫāja (The Sermon of Necessity),\textsuperscript{40} were published only twice. To the best of our abilities, therefore, we shall try to assess the significance of publication and re-publication, as well as what kinds of audience purchased and read these works to further elucidate the difficult issue of resonance or influence.

Besides records of Albānī’s ideas, his writings serve as important sources for understanding the circumstances that propelled his intellectual evolution. His marginalia and introductions are especially useful for such details, as are the appearances (and absences) of particular works and genres where one would expect them. An example of the latter is Albānī’s sudden edition of classical theological treatises in the 1960’s, often either without his comments on ḥadīth reports or with republications of the same work with only his comments on theological concepts. One interpretation of this bibliographic change is that he needed to somehow demonstrate his Wahhābī credentials after being ousted from the country in 1963 for his literalist legal positions – a theme that will be explored in chapter 6.

\textsuperscript{40} Albānī, Khuṭbat al-ḫāja allatī kāna rasūl Allāh yu’allimuhā aṣḥābahu, second edition (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1969), 32-33. In this pamphlet and elsewhere, Albānī counseled that it is an obligatory sunna to open all sermons, books and lessons with this sermon (rather than only opening the Friday sermon with it). He began to use this Sermon of Necessity in the opening of all of his classes and writings in the 1960’s and it became a kind of imprimatur for his adherents, who also open their works and lectures with it. ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda attacked Albānī for this with his pamphlet Khuṭbat al-ḫāja laysat sunna fi mustahall al-kutub wa-l-mu’allafāt (Beirut: Maktab al-Maṭbū‘at al-Islāmiyya, 1999).
The principal texts examined here were thus selected according to three considerations with respect to the theme of each chapter, as well as the subject of the dissertation: first, the popularity and circulation of that particular work; second, how explicitly Albānī makes a case for his distinct approach or circumstances for writing that work; and, third, whether that text invited any refutations from critics. In other words, in addition to reading these texts for Albānī’s conceptual evolution, they may equally be read as records of Albānī’s professional evolution as a scholar, in particular as arenas for defending his views. This was the case, for example, with his influential edition of Ibn Abī al-‘Izz’s (d. 1390) Sharḥ al-‘Aqīda al-Ṭahāwiyya. The lengthy introduction to the 1974 edition of this work proved almost as famous as the text itself because of Albānī’s attack on Abū Ghudda there. Albānī accused the latter for complaining to the Saudi authorities concerning Albānī’s ḥadīth methodology. Ultimately, through the editions of the Ṭahāwiyya, as well as other works, one gets a good sense of not only the concepts that informed Albānī’s scholarly intervention, but also, and in some cases more importantly, a rare insight into the very real personal factors that motivated him.

The chapters follow a chronological order and, in light of Albānī’s itinerant life, are arranged both geographically and thematically according to the stages of his intellectual development and the contexts in which they took shape. The eight chapters of the dissertation are thus divided into three sections. Part One, “The Early Years of Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (1914-1945),” examines Albānī’s beginnings, his family and his early intellectual influences. This section consists of two chapters. The first, “The Ḥanafī Watchmaker and His Son” explores Albānī’s turbulent relationship with his pro-madhhab father, his first critic, and situates it within the broader cultural
context of the authority of the madhhab in late-Ottoman Albania and Damascus. The next chapter, “A New Curriculum,” examines the intellectual tradition of Salafism that Albānī inherited after his father threw him out of the house. It serves as a conceptual overview of the major themes that might have inspired Albānī when, by his own admission, he was introduced to them through the copies of Rashīd Riḍā’s al-Manār.

Part Two, “The Production of ‘the Ḥadīth Scholar of the Levant’: Albānī in Syria (1945-1961)” examines Albānī’s early career in Damascus, and the factors that led followers to refer to him as muḥaddith al-Shām (the ḥadīth scholar of the Levant). This section is bookended by two dates: 1945, the year Albānī began teaching at the back of his watch shop, and 1961, the year Albānī was invited to develop ḥadīth instruction at the newly-opened Islamic University of Medina – the preeminent Wahhābī institution for training Muslim missionaries from around the world. 1961 is also one of the earliest documented instances of Albānī being referred to as muḥaddith al-Shām in an interview with Ṣawt al-‘Arab a year prior. Part Two is largely situated in Syria, with the exception of chapter 4, which highlights the important influence of the nascent Gulf states on the transregional spread of Salafism by examining Albānī’s career with the Qatari-backed publishing house, al-Maktab al-Islāmī. Part Two can be considered a technological analysis of Albānī’s rise and all three chapters deal with the three modern media innovations with which Albānī became involved as he sought to propagate his teachings: Islamic periodicals, the publishing house and small media pamphlets.

Part Three, “From Local Movement to Global Manhaj (1961-1999),” examines the new course Albānī’s life and career took when he began to teach at the Islamic University in 1961. Although his time living in Saudi Arabia was brief (two academic
years) and tense, his association with that institution exposed him to a uniquely international array of students and enemies, in part due to the its aforementioned importance. Albānī’s fame and controversy, coupled with the new life-long alliance with the university’s Vice Chancellor, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Bāz (d. 1999), opened him to new opportunities around the world as well as to new attacks as Salafism came to its own as a regional phenomenon and a perceived source of destabilization. The chapters are arranged geographically and thematically, arguing that his experiences in each country represented unique junctures in the evolution of his teachings. The first chapter, “Creed, Canon and Community: Ḥanbalī Theology and the Saudi Dimension” looks at the impact of Albānī’s ouster from Saudi Arabia on his teachings. It suggests that the embarrassment of Albānī’s sudden departure from the cradle of Salafism taught him that it was not enough to merely follow the Prophet’s sunna but rather that he needed to project himself as a defender of the Wahhābī cause. This was especially important as Saudi Arabia emerged as a serious regional player with the oil boom, and an opponent of Arab Nationalism. Albānī thus began to integrate Ḥanbalī theology into his teachings from this period onwards which, incidentally, also served as a useful weapon for him to attack Islamists – a group that at this time began to fall out of favor with local governments across the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia. The next chapter, “‘Bringing the Sunna Before the Community’ Between Authenticity and the Academy (Syria, 1963-1980),” examines Albānī’s most controversial and most dear project of reassessing the ḥadīth compendia and introducing the “pure” sunna to the masses in an accessible way. It argues that the appearance of these works in the late 1960’s coincided with Albānī’s professional and personal isolation in Ba‘thist Syria. Although he gained
international renown within the Salafī community, Albānī lacked both the traditional and modern institutional bases to establish himself as a religious scholar within his native Syria. He thus used his editions of ḥadīth compendia as spaces for introducing his ḥadīth principles. It was also during this period that he began to use the term manhaj – a scholarly methodology in ḥadīth meant to rival the training offered by university professors. The final chapter, “‘Purification and Education’: The Foundation of a Salafī Method (Jordan, 1981-1999),” is devoted to Albānī’s last twenty years, which he spent in Amman, Jordan. This period was unique for a number of reasons, among which was the fact that it was the first time in his life that he experienced a sense of home for himself and his ideas, with a loyal circle of students in Amman and admirers around the world. It was because of his unprecedented stability and stature, and the increasingly tenuous position of Salafism as Islamism began to overshadow Arab Nationalism in Middle Eastern politics from the 1980’s onwards, that Albānī began to speak out explicitly on political events. During this time his notion of manhaj expanded beyond a scholarly methodology into an all-encompassing orientation towards personal, communal, and political affairs – one based around the primacy of the views and statements of the pious predecessors. In this context, he presented his slogan of “purification and education” – of cleansing all aspects of society and religious instruction of foreign elements and re-educating Muslims concerning the correct version of their faith – as a guiding beacon not only for determining religious observances, but also for how to engage with Islamists and Salafī-Jihādīs, who began to organize in the nearby Jordanian city of Zarqa. His attacks on these groups for their extremism and lack of a manhaj contributed to the ironic legacy of casting Albānī as a voice of moderation within the political realm (epitomized by the
labels of ‘quietism’ and ‘apoliticism’ often ascribed to him and his followers) even as he remained a firebrand in the scholarly one.

As one of the pioneers of the Salafī movement in the twentieth century, Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī gave voice to a generation of Muslims marginalized by the new spaces and institutions of religious authority. His tumultuous rise to prominence in the shadow of some of the most significant socio-political shifts in Middle East history – including decolonization and the creation of nation-states, industrialization, the emergence of publishing houses, the discovery of oil and the appearance of Salafī-Jihādism and Islamist party politics – gives a sense of how great the stakes for defining Islamic faith and practice were during this period. The momentous political shifts currently underway in the Middle East, some of which are being led by groups claiming to draw inspiration either from Albānī or from those who opposed him, require us with ever more urgency to understand his life and ideas.
I
The Early Years of Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (1914-1945)
The Ḥanafī Watchmaker and His Son

“I have heard that the extent of [Albānī’s] knowledge is the Mukhtaṣar of Qudūrī and the extent of his skills is limited to fixing watches.” – Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-Aʿẓamī.

“A watchmaker: the name of one who has knowledge in fixing watches…his qualifications include experience and skills, acuity of vision, good advice, trustworthiness, temperance, and that he study this occupation with a skilled teacher, with proficiency and intelligence. If he lacks any of these qualifications, it is not permissible to leave a watch with him to be fixed and [to trust that] he will return it. We have encountered many who enter this profession lacking both teacher and experience, and fancy themselves among the teachers of this profession, opening a store, hanging watches, and neglecting many watches of people whom they have deceived. Like a doctor who learns medicine from books, then opens a clinic and professes himself to be one of the doctors by placing tins with medications and bottles of drinks and other signs of the people of medicine… a watchmaker is like a doctor, and it is incumbent upon anyone whose watch breaks and wants it fixed that he approach the people of opinion regarding a recommended watchmaker, of knowledge and acuity of vision, for fear that his watch should be scattered in all directions.” – Muḥammad Saʿīd al-Qāsimī and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, Qāmūs al-ṣināʿ āt al-Shāmiyya.

In Albānī’s retelling of his childhood, his father, Ḥājjī Nūḥ b. Ādam Najātī (d. 1952), played a noticeably towering role, and his involvement in his son’s upbringing and education seemed, according to Albānī’s narrative, to have been stifling and regressive. Indeed, we know nothing about Albānī’s other family members from his account. Albānī ascribed the two most positive aspects of his early life – his family’s departure from Albania and his proficiency in Arabic – to “God’s grace” (al-faḍl min allāh), while attributing the most seemingly negative one – his Ḥanafī upbringing – to his father and, as Albānī described it, the “partisan Ḥanafī environment” (jaww’ ḥanafī mutaʿṣṣib) in which he was raised. Indeed, the one consistent characteristic about Nūḥ we know from the scant material on him – both in Albānī’s narrative as well as his entry in Nizār Abāza’s biographical dictionary of Damascene scholars – is that Nūḥ followed the Ḥanafī

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legal school (madhhab) or, as Albānī puts it, he was “a partisan Ḥanafī” (Ḥanafī mutaʾaṣṣib). 44

A revealing trend among modern Islamic thinkers is their tendency to record and reflect at length on their childhoods, particularly in hagiographical terms about certain figures and events they experienced. 45 One could, of course, argue that this is merely a function of proximity, that we live much closer in time to Albānī than to other great religious thinkers of history, such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and Ibn Taymiyya, whose biographies – though rich thanks to abundant written sources – are often clouded by legend and hagiography. Indeed, legendary parables would be the most one could hope for in terms of information concerning the childhoods of these figures since, as Avner Gil’adi explains, medieval Islamic biographical works “viewed a person as a type rather than as an individual and were not aware of the development of a person’s character.” 46

By contrast, the rigorous effort of certain modern Islamic figures to highlight their upbringing as a formative period for their future life and thought suggests the important power that the theme of childhood – particularly a childhood colored with important figures, places or moments – carries in demonstrating their distinctive ideas, characteristics or behavior and, implicitly, behavior they expect of their followers. In his

44 The word taʾaṣṣub could be translated variously as “partisanship,” “fervent adherence,” or “excessive loyalty,” as Jonathan Brown renders it. It is interesting that Rashīd Riḍā renders it as “fanatic” (transliterating it as fānātīk) in his al-Manār, which was likely where Albānī first encountered the term. See Brown, The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, 311; Rashīd Riḍā, “al-Taʾaṣṣub,” al-Manār, 3:5 (1897), pp. 4-15, at: 5.
45 I am grateful to Dr. Alan Verskin for both bringing my attention to this literary theme and for recommending the works of Mawdūdī and Qutb as examples.
46 Avner Gil’adi, Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood in Medieval Muslim Society (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 3. Gil’adi goes on to explain that while this genre is lacking in details concerning childhood, such information could be located in “religious writings as well as belles-lettres and poetry…[and] whole chapters, whole treatises indeed, devoted to one aspect or another of childhood.” Ibid., 4.
memoirs, Abū al-‘lā Mawdūdī emphasized the positive influence his father had on his early upbringing – through his piety and adherence to the Ṣūfī Chishtī order, as well as his interest in his son’s traditional religious education – even though Mawdūdī later took a different course in turning to journalism and politics.⁴⁷ Similarly, Sayyid Qutb’s memoir *A Child from the Village*, written shortly before his turn to radical Islam, recounts how the village of his youth struggled to retain its identity and its traditions in the face of the central government’s introduction of modernizing policies and institutions. While, as the book’s translators aptly describe, “no trace of that [radical] ideology appears [in the book]…it does reveal some of Qutb’s strong concern for social justice – concern he was presently to express in Islamic terms.”⁴⁸

In Albānī’s case, the salient theme from his childhood was his tense relationship with his father and his breaking away – first linguistically, then intellectually, and, finally, physically – from him. Although Albānī’s students rarely celebrate the fact that he broke with his father, and in some cases even claim that the two reconciled years later,⁴⁹ the inclusion of this aspect of his childhood in biographies about Albānī is clearly meant to drive home a theme central to the Salafī orientation. Notwithstanding the legal and ethical importance of respecting one’s parents and elders in traditional Islamic teaching, Salafis view breaking with the customs of one’s elders as a sign of one’s commitment to following the Prophet. Specifically, citing Qur’ānic verses such as Q. 9:31 (“[The Jews and Christians] took their rabbis and monks for lords instead of God”),

⁴⁹ See, for example, Hādī, Ḥayāt al-‘allāma al-Albānī, 10.
Salafis argue that the prohibition of *taqlīd* extends not only to the *madhhab*, but to individuals as well, including “fathers and grandfathers.”

The theme of breaking with one’s parents, especially in a more physical sense, is equally central to the Salafi-Jihādī concept of *al-walā’ wa-l-barā’* (“loyalty and disavowal”) concerning those with whom their followers may associate. Despite the centrality of this theme to the Salafi orientation, it is perhaps out of a sense of deference to his father and the embarrassment that he claimed to have caused him because of his disagreement over the *madhhab* that Albānī did not make this connection between his break with the Ḥanafi *madhhab* and his turn to Salafism.

Although he did not connect this aspect of his childhood directly to his ideological views, Albānī did characterize his moments of “breaking away” from his father with the phrase “*wa-kāna dhālika faḍl min Allāh*” (“That was a grace from God”).

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51 Salafi-Jihādīs base this idea on a number of Qur’ānic verses, including S. 9:23, “O you who believe! Do not take your fathers and your brothers as allies if they love unbelief above faith: If any of you take them as allies, you are of the transgressors” and S. 58:22 “You will not find a people who believe in God and in the Day of Judgment loving those who resist God and His Messenger, and even if they are their fathers or sons or brothers or relatives. For those He has written faith onto their hearts and has strengthened them with a spirit from Him. And He will enter them into gardens under which rivers flow to dwell there for all time, God will be pleased with them and they will be pleased with Him. Those are the party of God. It is they who are of the party of God who are the successful ones” and the hadīth “None of you believes until I become more beloved to him than his father, child and all mankind.” See for example Abū ‘Iyāḍ al-Salafī, “A Brief Introduction to the Salafī Da’wah,” Islamic Network, http://www.islaam.net/main/display.php?id=72&category=73 Accessed 19 June 2013. For more on *al-walā’ wa-l-barā’* see Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihādī*, 147-164; idem, “The Enduring Legacy of the Second Saudi State.” For examples of this concept see the writings of the Jordanian Jihādī ideologue Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, in whose tract *Millat Ibrāhīm* he argues that Muslims must look toward the example of Abraham in smashing his father’s idols and abandoning his father’s ways to pursue the true faith. Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, *Millat Ibrāhīm wa-da’wat al-anbiyā’ wa-l-mursafīna wa-asālib al-ṭughāt fi tamyī’ihā wa-sarf al-du’āt’ anhā [Millat Ibrahim And the Calling of the Prophets and Messengers and the Methods of the Transgressing Rulers in Dissolving it and Turning the Callers Away from It]*, second edition. English. (n.l.: al-Tibyan Publications, n.d.). Likewise in describing the turn to Jihādism of American al-Shabab fighter Omar al-Hammami, a friend recalled that “above all it was an excuse to disobey his father.” Andrea Elliot, “The Jihadist Next Door” *The New York Times*, 27 January 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/magazine/31Jihadist-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 Accessed 19 June 2013.
Examples of these occasions included his professed excellence in Arabic and his visits to the booksellers near the Umayyad Mosque, one of whom would carry the edition of Rashīd Riḍā’s (d. 1935) *al-Manār* that would prove to be the most decisive reversal of fortune for the young Nāṣir al-Dīn in his turn from adherence to a *madhhab* to the Salafī orientation. His break with his father even became a *topos* of his followers’ hagiographical accounts, with Albānī’s son ‘Abd Allāh paraphrasing Nūh’s condemnation of Albānī’s abandonment of his *madhhab*, “*immā al-muwāfaqa wa-*immā al-muṭālaqa*” (“either agree or leave”), as “*immā al-mīthāq wa-*immā al-firāq.”

This chapter will demonstrate the symbolic cachet Albānī’s volatile and ultimately failed relationship with his father carried for his articulation of his anti-*madhhab* legal hermeneutic. Specifically, Albānī’s anecdotes about separating from him – influenced as they were by personal trauma he likely caused in Nāṣir al-Dīn’s life – also celebrate the most important change in Albānī’s early days; his move away from traditional *madhhab*-based Islam to a Salafī Traditionalist Islam defined by proof-texts located in reliable ḥadīth reports.

**In ‘the Land of the Eagles’**

Albānī had little to say about his namesake country, Albania, possibly because of the young age at which he left. This is especially intriguing, given the strong sense of ethnic identity among Albanians – one that Albānī likely experienced growing up in an

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Albanian diaspora community in Damascus.\textsuperscript{53} We do know that he spoke Albanian and occasionally taught groups of Albanians. However, aside from his cognomen, in no way does his ethnicity and place of birth factor into his self-identification – a kind of rejection of nationalist and ethnic affiliations consistent with the way in which Salafīs today shun such aspects of one’s background.

Albānī’s pithy comments on the country had to do with two subjects that became central to his teachings – the ability to practice religious obligations and the monopoly of the madhhab. The first concerned the circumstances of his family’s departure in 1923, namely the policies of Aḥmad Zoghū (1895-1961) in suppressing religious practice by “imposing secular positive laws, pressuring women to remove their headscarves, and requiring that the police and military wear caps.”\textsuperscript{54} The second had to do with religious identity among Albanian Muslims – one that was dominated by an adherence to the Ḥanafī madhhab. Significantly, it is in the latter context that Albānī described his father as “the most learned among the Albanians [in Damascus.]”\textsuperscript{55} Towards the end of his life, Albānī explained to his students his connection to his Albanian heritage, writing:

I, for example, am a Ḥanafī,\textsuperscript{56} and in my country [i.e. Albania] nothing else except the Ḥanafī madhhab was known, and the madhhab of all of Islam there was Ḥanafī.


\textsuperscript{54} ‘Awda, Qaṭf al-thimār, 19.

\textsuperscript{55} Albānī, “Tarjama,” “Nashī‘at al-shaykh fī Dimashq.” This was likely not the case, given that there were other Albanians in Damascus at the time, who were arguably more prominent and established. For example, Sulaymān al-Ghāwijī (d. 1958), the father of Wahbī Sulaymān al-Ghāwijī, was an Albanian émigré who also taught Albanian students in his neighborhood (incidentally he, unlike Nūḥ, lived in the Albanian quarter – Ḥayy al-Dīwāniyya), was appointed the imām of the ‘Umariyya mosque and was deputy to the muftī, Muhammad Shukrī al-Ustāwānī. See Nizār Abāzu, Tārīkh ‘ulamā‘ Dimashq fī al-qarn al-rābi‘ ‘ashar al-hijrī, 2 volumes (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1982), 2: 700.

\textsuperscript{56} The editor placed a footnote at this term, explaining that by calling himself a Ḥanafī here, Albānī referred to his having studied Ḥanafī jurisprudence during his childhood, but not that he followed the Ḥanafī
Our Lord Almighty graced us and He clarified [the way] for us, and made us migrate so that we study the Arabic language, and learn Islam from its pure sources, the Book and the sunna... 

In an effort to gain insight into Albānī’s upbringing, in this section we will examine the experience of Albanian Muslims during the last years of the Ottoman Empire, with reference to the transregional shifts in religious authority and the institutional significance of the Ḥanafī madhhab for Albanian Muslims.

Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī was born in 1914 in Işkodra (Shkodër or Scutari), the former capital of Albania, just two years after the country’s independence was announced, to one Ḥājjī Nūḥ b. Ādam Najātī, a watchmaker who studied briefly at a shari‘a institute in Istanbul and who was considered a kind of local religious authority figure in his community, first in Işkodra and then among Albanians in Damascus. Nūḥ seems to have been especially remembered both by Albānī and by others for his strict adherence to the Ḥanafī madhhab. He was, according to Albānī’s account, “merely an imām of a mosque and not a scholar,” and it was because of this that Albānī said of him that he “had no concern for teaching us Arabic.” Therefore, when Nūḥ took his family to Damascus in 1923, Nāṣir al-Dīn, who was nine years old at the time, recalled that he knew nothing of the language.

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57 Ibid.  
58 Abāzā, Tārīkh ‘ulamā’ Dimashq, 2: 653.  
59 Albānī, “Tarjama,” “Nashī’at al-shaykh fī Dimashq.”  
60 Albānī explained this with the Syrian expression, “[I did not know] the difference between a khamsa and a ṭamasa.” ibid; See also Sadhān, al-Imām al-Albānī, 15. The idea in this Syrian expression is that the individual cannot differentiate the shape of the number five (khamsa) from the middle ‘ayn when the circle in the letter is filled in (a ṭamasa), since both look similar. In other words, Albānī knew nothing at all about the subject. I thank Dr. Issam Eido for clarifying this idiom.
Religious affiliation, historically complex in Albania, became further complicated during this period due primarily to the fate of the Ottoman Empire and the assertiveness of European powers within Albania during the interwar period. In describing how Albania came to be the only Muslim majority country in Europe, Muḥammad Mūfākū emphasizes that Albania lacked a strong national church, while the neighboring Ottoman Empire, which ruled Albanian territories at various points since the fourteenth century, presented professional and social opportunities for Muslims. Despite this fortunate relationship with the Ottoman government, Albanian Muslims did not historically identify themselves with it. As Isa Blumi explains, “linguistic and as a consequence, cultural boundaries solidified among Albanians” and, in turn, “Albanian-speaking populations evolved distinctive historical linkages with the outside world.” Moreover, as Mūfākū explains, in contrast to neighboring Bulgaria and Croatia, Albania never had a central government that combined religion with government, giving its citizens a further sense of localized authority.

In 1912, when Albanian statehood was announced, seventy percent of the Albanian population was Muslim, many of them adherents of Şūfī orders (mostly

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61 Muhammad Mūfākū, al-Islām fī Urūbā al-mutaghayyira: tajrubat Albāniyā fī al-qarn al-ʿashrīn (Beirut: al-Dār al-ʿArabiyya li-l-ʿUlūm, 2007), 37-40. The issue of conversion to Islam among Albanians during Ottoman rule is a widely disputed one, and the reasons remain far from clear and consistent across time periods. However, it is true that a number of high government offices in the Ottoman Empire were filled by Albanians.


64 Ibid., 37.
Baktāshī, which in 1912 included 80 percent of Albanian Śūfīs). 65 Given the previously-described condition of Albanian Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire, there was also a strong attachment to the Ḥanafī madhhāb. Scholars tend to speak of these two traditions – the Ḥanafī madhhāb and Baktāshī Śūfī – as distinct, a view supported by the Albanian National Congress which, in 1920, declared that it would have representatives from four groups: “Islam, Baktashism, Catholicism, Orthodoxy.” 66 The Ḥanafī madhhāb was strong in a number of cities, including Işkodra, where Albānī’s family lived, and from 1912 until 1920 followed guidance from the şeyhülislam in Istanbul. Baktāshī Śūfism, on the other hand, in the early twentieth century became closely identified with Albanian political separatism vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire and even influenced the leaders of the Albanian nationalist movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. 67 Catholicism, with its influential clergy and increasingly strong institutions, was dominant in the north, particularly in Işkodra and among the Mirditë tribe, while Orthodoxy was largely confined to the south, and Muslims were scattered throughout. Despite these different religious categories, as mentioned previously, Albanians were known for the

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66 Muḥammad Murād, *al-Thaqāfa al-Albāniyya fī al-abjadiyya al-‘Arabiyya* (Kuwait: Ḩālam al-Ma’rif, Vol. 68, August, 1983), 35; Rajab Yashār Būyā, *al-Albāniyyūn al-Arnā’ūṭ wa-l-Īslām* (Cairo: Dār al-Islām, 2004), 71. It is also interesting to observe that the distinction is more commonly described as “Sunni” versus “Baktāshī,” perhaps implying the Shī‘ī sympathies with which that Albanian Baktashī Sufism came to be associated. See N. Clayer, “Albania,” *EI*.

67 Alexandre Popovic, *L’Islam Balkanique: les musulmans du sud-est européen dans la période post-ottomane* (Berlin: Otto Harrassowitz, 1986), 15; Selçuk Akşı Somel, *The Modernization of Public Education in the Ottoman Empire, 1839-1908: Islamization, Autocracy, and Discipline* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 208; Clayer, *L’Albanie*, 15-16. Clayer goes on to explain that the Baktāshīs effectively “played a role of catalyst of the fight against the Ottoman authorities, but that this occurred almost exclusively in the south of the country. The population of this region rallied itself behind the Bektashi [order] to associate with a nationalist movement, and this order reflected a period of very great expansion, the dawn of a new era where it acquired the dimension of a religious community at the expense of its purely fraternal (i.e. with regards to the Sufi brotherhoods) character.”
cohesiveness of their regional ethnic identities and common historical roots. One aspect of this was the ethnic division between country’s northerners, known as Ghegs, and the southerners, known as Tosks, as well as the mountain tribes who followed their own legal code known as *Lek Kanun* ("Lek’s Law").

These affiliations and ethnic bonds between Albanians became somewhat complicated with the major regional political changes during the early-twentieth century, which saw a dramatic disenfranchisement of the Albanian Muslim population, as compared to their Christian counterparts. Particularly important in this regard was the declining hold of the Ottoman Empire on its Muslim hinterlands (evidenced especially by the failure of the Tanzimat reforms to effectively centralize Islamic authority), while the Eastern Orthodox Church continued to retain its hold on the Albanian Orthodox community. A new factor was the increasing involvement of Italy and Austria-Hungary in the affairs of local Albanian Catholic communities following the 1855 concordat signed between the Vatican and Austria granting the latter mandatory powers over the Catholic community.

Edith Durham, who traveled to Işkodra in the early decades of the twentieth century, recounted in dramatic detail that “North Albania is a hotbed of Austrian intrigue…Scutari [Shkodër] swarms with foreign consuls…One must live in Scutari to realize the amount of spying and wire-pulling carried on by the Powers under the pretense of spreading sweetness and light.”

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68 The *Lek Kanun* was named after the legendary fifteenth-century Albanian hero Lek Dukagjini, although it is likely that this legal system developed gradually through successive generations. For more on the Albanian tribal system, see Margaret Hasluck, *The Unwritten Law in Albania* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954) and Edith Durham, *Some Tribal Origins, Laws, and Customs of the Balkans* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928).


The waning fortunes of the Ottoman Empire proved especially destructive for Albanian Muslims in their infrastructure and opportunities. Ottoman financial and political weakness meant it was incapable of sufficiently supporting Albanian Muslim institutions, as compared to its more proactive European counterparts in supporting Christian institutions in the country. Moreover, Ottoman fears of the widespread rising national consciousness of its subjects propelled it to deliberately prohibit the teaching of the Albanian language and alphabet.\footnote{Bernd Jürgen Fischer, \textit{King Zog and the Struggle for Stability in Albania} (Boulder: East European Monographs, Columbia University Press, 1984), 43. This policy of suppressing the study of the Albanian language affected both Muslim and Orthodox populations of Albania, which Isa Blumi describes as the “shared Rum Church and Ottoman policy.” For both the Ottoman Empire and the Rum Church, as Blumi argues, the fear was the growing Russian intervention in Albania, which threatened to curtail their influence among the local communities. For more see Isa Blumi, “Defying the State and Defining the State: Local Politics in Educational Reform in the Vilayets of Manastir and Yanya, 1878-1912,” in idem, \textit{Rethinking}, pp. 103-22, at: 105-110.}

Ottoman political weakness in Albania in the early twentieth century may be contrasted with successful Italian and Austrian investment in the Catholic communities of the country apparent in the growing numbers of religious schools, seminaries and hospitals.\footnote{Gawrych, \textit{The Crescent and the Eagle}, 29ff.} Durham described Albanian education as follows: “the only possible schools were those founded by Austria and Italy, ostensibly to give religious instruction”\footnote{Durham, \textit{High Albania}, 9-10.} and that “the teaching of all these rival schools had one thing in common: all inspired a hatred of Turkish rule. By the time the Turk realized that he, too, must educate his people, he was already hopelessly outpaced.”\footnote{Idem, \textit{The Struggle for Scutari (Turk, Slav and Albanian)} (London: Edward Arnold, 1914), 6.} Of course, this was not entirely true as schools with Islamic religious instruction did exist, but Durham’s observation is correct insofar as educational opportunities disproportionally favored the Catholic population and that this was due in large part to the efforts of the Austrian and Italian Catholic missions. As
Selçuk Somel put it, the Hamidian education program during these years “was clearly not designed with adaptability to local conditions and needs of a vast empire.”\footnote{Somel, The Modernization of Public Education, 275.}

Education is one example among many that reflect a striking turn of events compared to the Albanian Muslims’ experience in previous centuries, during which Muslims were protected by the Ottoman Empire from foreign encroachments and were granted opportunities for advancement not enjoyed by their Christian neighbors.\footnote{Miranda Vickers, The Albanians: A Modern History (London: I.B. Taurus, 1999), 14.} To make matters worse, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries Albanian Muslims were classified as “Turks” within Albania because of their faith and so were deprived of access to the local institutions established by Austro-Hungary and Italy.\footnote{Ibid., 27.}

Meanwhile, the Ottoman authorities too, refusing to acquiesce in changing circumstances, regarded Albanians as “Turks” and, as mentioned previously, actively stalled any promotion or teaching of the Albanian language. As Miranda Vickers put it, “the very nature of Ottoman rule delayed the rise of an Albanian national consciousness and a subsequent national movement, and ensured that the Albanians became the last Balkan nation to achieve their independence from the Ottoman Empire.”\footnote{Ibid., 31; Fischer, King Zog, 44.}

Appropriately, therefore, whereas the Ottoman Empire had served in the role of a protector in previous centuries for Albanian Muslims, Vickers describes its performance in the early twentieth century vis-à-vis Albanian Muslims as “stifling.”\footnote{Vickers, The Albanians, 14.}

Albanian independence was finally announced on November 28, 1912, on the heels of the first Balkan Wars. It was recognized by the Great Powers in 1913, but it was
not until 1920 – due primarily to the First World War, European competition for influence in Albania, and local power struggles – that a fully functioning government emerged and began operating, first under Sulaymān Bek Delvina as prime minister from 1920-1922, and then under Āḥmad Zoghū, or King Zog, as he would call himself in 1928 when he declared the country a monarchy. One biographer described Zoghū as a figure who “could probably be found near the bottom of a list beginning with Hitler and Stalin.”\(^{80}\) A Muslim chieftain from the mountain city of Mati who was trained for years in Istanbul, Zoghū\(^{81}\) took a proactive role in promoting a secular nationalist program when he took a leadership role in the “clique” in 1920. While its exact membership and criteria for selection are not fully clear, this group, which scholars compare to the nascent Turkish Committee for Union and Progress, initially sought to curtail the influence of certain Christian organizations and Albania’s mountain tribal system.\(^{82}\) In describing the activities of the “clique” Bernd Fischer reminds readers that the group’s “goals, like its membership, however, were extremely flexible” and that, in the final analysis, “this nebulous group was basically opposed to those in power, whoever they happened to be, and its primary aim was the acquisition of power and wealth for its members by any means available.”\(^{83}\)

For Zoghū personally, the aim lay in consolidating his own power within this group and, eventually, quelling any possible competition to his rule. The moment came for him and his followers on December 12, 1921, when he marched on Tirana without

\(^{80}\) Jason Hunter Tomes, *King Zog of Albania: Europe’s Self-Made Muslim King* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 120.

\(^{81}\) His family’s last name for generations was Zogolli, but Ahmad dropped the Turkish “oğlı” [son of] when he became prime minister, ostensibly as a concession to Westernization. Fischer, *King Zog*, 39.

\(^{82}\) Ibid., 28.

\(^{83}\) Ibid.
protest and essentially governed there for several days as a dictator, replacing local
government officials with his own supporters and issuing his own decrees.\textsuperscript{84} From there,
he worked to consolidate his power, using the military court to sentence his opponents
and to silence any remaining opposition. Although much of his attention increasingly
turned to stabilizing the country’s worsening economic situation, he nonetheless
continued to repress potential Christian and even Muslim political opponents as he
defined them.\textsuperscript{85} Zoghū’s political paranoia, while perhaps justified, was coupled with his
increasing dedication to Westernization, in whose name he used the police and military to
abolish the sharī’a courts in 1928 and to close all \textit{madrasas} in 1929.

These turbulent political and social changes, along with desperate economic
conditions,\textsuperscript{86} frustrated attempts to form a stable life and likely led families such as
Albānī’s to seek any opportunity to migrate. In discussing the dynamics between both
European and Albanian administrators and the northern mountain tribes in the period just
prior to Albanian statehood, Isa Blumi describes a “distinct divide between a moral world
defined by imperial interests that exclude local concerns and a local reality in which
home, livelihood, and family are of primary concern.”\textsuperscript{87} While in their relations with
foreign powers local communities continued to use religious and ethnic identities where it
served them (for example, Muslims petitioning the Ottoman Empire for assistance), at

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 33.
  \item \textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 52-53.
  \item \textsuperscript{86} Fischer notes that in 1922, “over 90 percent of the population was engaged either in agriculture or animal
husbandry. Given the makeup of the countryside, with 67 percent scrub, woodland and eroded mountain
slope, 24 percent forest and only 9 percent usable for agriculture, the average Albanian lived in a state of
extreme poverty.” Fischer also notes the antiquated techniques for crop rotation and irrigation and that most
items needed for families were produced in the home. Ibid., 44-45.
  \item \textsuperscript{87} Isa Blumi, “Contesting the Edges of the Ottoman Empire: Rethinking Ethnic and Sectarian Boundaries in
\end{itemize}
home there remained the same inter-religious amicable collaboration which Blumi terms “economies of boundaries…the residual economic niches in any society that adapt to the shifting channels, networks, and markets that develop once new realities emerge.”

**Hijra and the Possibilities of Identity**

In Blumi’s assessment of imperial-local relations in the case of the Malësore, the introduction of modern institutions and relationships actually offered what he terms “possibilities of identity.” This potential for further development of identity, as Blumi uses the phrase, often coincided with a particular community’s desire to address their particular interests. By choosing to migrate rather than to remain in Albania because of the government’s increasing hostility towards religion, Albānī’s family underwent a transformation along with many others in identity and orientation. Kemal Karpat argues that the most significant social change that occurred in the late Ottoman Empire was precisely these waves of migration from the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries in Russia and the Balkans which, in his analysis, transformed the migrating communities’ identity from a “relatively passive communal Muslim” one that defined religion through ritual observance and social relations to a “more dynamic political consciousness by enlarging its geographic and ideological scope.” Furthermore, Karpat argues, this transformation of identity was not limited to the migrating communities but also “helped to politicize the identity of Muslims in the areas to which they went.”

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88 Ibid., 249.
90 Karpat, “The hijra from Russia and the Balkans,” 131.
91 Ibid., 131.
Various reasons have been offered for why Balkan communities moved eastward, and sometimes these moves were not by choice (such as the exchange of populations between Turkey and Greece that began during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913). Some argue that the breakdown of the Ottoman agrarian system forced Balkan communities, particularly males, to migrate in search for employment, or that the tumultuous political situation (which included raiding of cities) threatened the safety and stability of work conditions. In Albānī’s recollection, he describes his father’s decision to leave Albania for Damascus as a *hijra* (emigration), saying of him that he “decided upon *hijra*, fleeing with his religion” (*qarrara al-hijra firāran bi-dīnīhi*).

Their destination, Damascus, was not a novel one for Albanians who sought religious knowledge, and Albānī’s family was among the earlier families to do so. Others included that of Shu'ayb al-Arnā’ūṭ, which arrived in 1916. In fact, Albanians often

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93 Petko Hristov, “Transborder Migration: The Example of Western Macedonia” in *Migrations From and To Southeastern Europe*, ed. Anna Krasteva, Anelia Kasabova, Diana Karabinova (Ravenna: Longo Editore Ravenna, 2010), pp. 141-150, at: 142. Hristov argues further that Balkan communities moved because of “the decline of well-developed sheep breeding that was formerly organized and encouraged by the Ottoman state in order to meet the needs of the army.” Ibid., 142.

94 See for example Albānī, “Tarjama,” “Nashi’at al-shaykh fi Dimashq”; Yashār Būyā, *Albāniyyūn, al-Arnā’ūṭ wa-l-Islām*, 114. This exodus of Albanians to Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey seems to have been primarily due to the disappearance of Ottoman control over Albania. Many years prior there are records of Muslim migrations to Damascus and Cairo, whence the notable Damascus Arnā’ūṭ family. In the 1930s, King Zog banned religious education altogether and forced religious communities to sever their ties with other countries. I am grateful to Dr. Robert Elsie for this information and for the references concerning Albanian history during this period. See also Qaryūtī, *Tarjama mūjaza*, 3. Expressing a similar sentiment, Shu'ayb al-Arnā’ūṭ described his father’s decision to leave Albania for Damascus as being due to his realization that “Albania was surrounded by unbelief.” “Ḥadīth al-dhikrayāt ma’a al-shaykh Shu’ayb al-Arnā’ūṭ,” YouTube, posted by “Qanāt d. Jāsim al-Muṭū’ al-Iliktrūniyya,” 30 June 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDGYLDXtHs8&feature=relmfuAccessed 14 November, 2012.

95 Ibrāhīm al-Kūfaḥī, *-Muhaddith Shu’ayb al-Arnā’ūṭ: Jawānib min sīratīhi...wa-juhūduhu fi tahlīq al-turāth* (Amman: Dār al-Bashīr, 2002), 11; “Ḥadīth al-dhikrayāt ma’a al-shaykh Shu’ayb al-Arnā’ūṭ.” There are conflicting accounts of when Shu’ayb al-Arnā’ūṭ’s family arrived in Damascus. Arnā’ūṭ himself explains that his father arrived in Damascus in 1916 and that he was born in 1918. However, in Kūfaḥī’s account his family’s arrival is dated to 1926 and that Shu’ayb was born in 1928.
invoke an apocryphal (and likely erroneous) etymology of their name “Arnāʿūṭ”\(^{96}\) as a corruption of the Arabic phrase “ʿār an naʿūd” (“it is shameful that we should return”), allegedly uttered during a dispute in Syria between Jabala b. al-Ayham and the caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, after which the former uttered this phrase and took his tribe northwards.\(^{97}\) For Albānī and likely for other immigrants, Damascus represented a divine gift, particularly with the ḥadīth reports describing the “virtues of Syria.” In his book on this subject, Albānī explained that his hope in publishing the book was “that those who move to Syria recognize the grace that God gave them through it, and that they give thanks through good deeds and purity of worship to God Almighty.”\(^{98}\)

On a practical level, according to articles in the Syrian daily \textit{al-Muqtabas} from 1911 onwards, Muslim communities in Syria and Istanbul began taking an increasingly active interest in the affairs of the Albanians. Members of the Arab Party in Istanbul lobbied for Albanian-language instruction in Albanian territories, and during the first Balkan Wars in 1912 Albanians petitioned their Syrian brothers for help.\(^{99}\) In turn, during the interwar period, Syria and other countries in the Middle East saw an influx of refugees from Albania and elsewhere, and by 1949 the number of refugees in Syria numbered 75,000, a two percent addition to the country’s original population.\(^{100}\)

\(^{96}\) “Arnāʿūṭ” is an alternative term for “Albanian.” Without citing any references, Albānī explained that “Arnāʿūṭ” is a broader term, like “Arab,” whereas “Albanian” is more specific, such that “Arnāʿūṭ” refers to all Balkan groups (Albanians, Serbs, Croats, etc.) while Albanian refers to those from the country of Albania. See Albānī, “Tarjama” “Nashiʿat al-shaykh fī Dimashq.”

\(^{97}\) Mūfākū, \textit{al-Thaqāfa al-Albāniyya}, 11. After listing this and another theory, Mūfākū emphasizes that “these views contradict reality, and there is nothing until this day that supports them,” and provides the accepted origins of the Albanians as descendant from the Illyrians of the fifth century BCE.


A Childhood in Damascus: Between “Partisan Ḥanafi Environment” and the Public School

In 1923 Nūḥ moved his family from Albania to Damascus, and, after briefly living with his family in a room for poor refugees in one of the local mosques, settled in the district of Ḥakr al-Na‘na‘ in the al-ʿAmāra neighborhood of the old city of Damascus.101 Nūḥ opened his watch repair shop in the adjacent neighborhood of ‘Uqayba, which at the time was known for its metalwork.102 The neighborhood was also more famously known for being home to the city’s second-largest mosque after the Umayyad Mosque, the Tawba Mosque, where Nūḥ attended the classes of his teacher and the local Ḥanafi imām, Sa‘īd al-Burhānī.103 Aside from being the second-largest mosque, Thomas Pierret explains that the Tawba Mosque had an important political legacy as a major center of Ḥanafism in Damascus due to the Ottoman administrative influence in the city.104 After Ottoman rule, and the subsequent reassertion of the Shāfi‘ī school in Damascus, the Tawba remained one of two bastions of Ḥanafism there.105

In addition to earning his income through repairing watches, Nūḥ took it upon himself to teach the younger generation of Albanians in Damascus, including his two sons, Nāṣir-Dīn and Munīr, as well as Shu‘ayb al-Arnā‘ūṭ, who later gained prominence as a scholar of ḥadīth and an editor. In an entry about Nūḥ written by the scholar ‘Abd al-

105 Ibid. The other, Pierret notes, is the al-Faṭḥ Institute.
Qādir al-Arnā’ūṭ (d. 2004), the latter described Nūḥ as “adhering to the Ḥanafi madhhab…and would speak the truth and would not fear rebuke.” He would spend the rest of his life in this neighborhood until his death in 1952.

Albānī’s account of his childhood, told from his perspective as an internationally-renown Salafi leader during his last years, is equally valuable for its vivid detail as it is for what it says about how he perceived himself. Indeed, in the absence of corroboratory sources with comparably intimate knowledge of his upbringing, the events of his childhood told from his point of view serve as a rare window into appreciating what his recollections said about how he wished to be remembered.

Albānī identified his enrollment in the public school, Jam‘iyyat al-Is‘āf al-Khayrī (The Charitable Relief Society), as the true beginning of his education because it was there that he became proficient in Arabic. We know something about this school system, “most of whose students were either poor or foreign,” from the journal *al-Manār* published by Rashīd Riḍā – who later became another towering figure in Albānī’s life. In an article on the Jam‘īyya Khayriyya in Egypt, which Riḍā’s teacher, Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), helped found, the school’s purpose is described as,

educating the children of the poor, and if we are able to keep them off the streets and please their guardians (*awliyā‘ umum*) we shall do so... [The school’s] most important aim is to do away with the notion that education has no purpose other than for use in government [work]...Thank God that many people have paid attention to the erroneousness of this idea, and the society (*jam‘iyya*) prepares students in its schools to work skillfully in the professions of their fathers and to live among people in safety and uprightness, so that the son of a carpenter becomes a carpenter and the son of a metal worker becomes a metal worker and the son of a servant becomes a servant...Whoever is ready for something beyond what his father does and [his skill

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107 Albānī, “Tarjama,” “Nashi‘at al-shaykh fī Dimashq.”
in it] becomes apparent, then it should come from his own initiative, and the organization will help him. This has occurred to some of the students.109

Albānī proudly described how his knowledge of Arabic exceeded that of his father, and in turn unlocked new paths of inquiry. This new ability was also presumably what eventually allowed him to realize the fallacy of following a madhhab and to access the religion’s proof-texts directly. According to his account, he began with modern translated literature such as Maurice Leblanc’s crime fiction featuring Arsène Lupin,110 and then, as his Arabic improved, proceeded to classical Arabic works such as *Alf layla wa-layla* and stories about the pre-Islamic poet and hero ‘Antara b. Shaddād (d. 608).111 In class, according to his dramatized retelling, his Syrian dialect and command of the language surpassed that of his peers, allowing him to finish elementary school in four years with excellent marks.112 He told one anecdote of how his teacher wrote a verse of poetry on the board and asked the students to read it with full vocalization. When Albānī turned out to be the last student who was called and the only one to answer correctly, he claimed that the teacher scolded other students by saying, “What do you say? Are you not ashamed? This is an Albanian!”113

Despite his exemplary performance in elementary school, Albānī’s father took him out of the public school system because of his distrust of its religious bona fides, opting instead to design his own course of study for Nāsir al-Dīn.114 Indeed, Albānī defended his father’s decision here, saying, “I would have completed all of these studies [in school], I would

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110 I am grateful here to Dr. Alan Verskin for clarifying this reference.

111 Albānī, “Tarjama,” “Nashi’at al-shaykh fī Dimashq.”


113 Albānī, “Tarjama,” “Nashi’at al-shaykh fī Dimashq.”

114 Ibid.
not have been able to truly complete my studies in the fullest sense.”

Nūḥ instead designed Albānī’s curriculum, the foundation of which was Qur’ānic recitation (tajwīd). He took the younger Albānī to local shaykhs who taught him works of Ḥanafī jurisprudence, notably the aforementioned Sa‘īd al-Burhānī, with whom Albānī studied Ḥanafī texts such as Marāqī al-falāḥ sharḥ Nūr al-idāḥ, the Mukhtaṣar of Qudūrī, as well as the grammar work Shudhūr al-dhahab. Albānī recalled that he discovered Burhānī “was a Ṣūfī,” although he remained in contact with him, even consulting him on a draft of one of his first books—Taḥdīr al-sājid min ittikhādh al-qubūr masājid (A Warning to the One Who Prostrates Concerning Taking Graves for Mosques).

It was also during this period that Albānī began training in various professions — first, for a period of four years, carpentry and, eventually, finding a lack of work opportunities, turned to his father’s trade, repairing watches. After some time at his father’s shop, Albānī later opened his own shop by the Umayyad Mosque with his brother, Munīr, when their father had no work for him. Although likely a turbulent change, opening his own shop proved timely since it was there that Albānī eventually began to teach his classes.

“Either Agree or Leave”

Albānī’s independent streak had just as much to do with his own linguistic independence, and the sources he was able to access through them, as it did with his

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115 Ibid.
116 Qaryūṭī, Tarjama mūjaza, 20; See also ‘Alī, Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, 12-13.
118 Ibid., 17-18.
119 Ibid., 17-18.
120 “Al-Albānī kamā ’araftuhu Ḥāy al-Ḥāy wa-‘Abd Allāh al-Albānī.”
“partisan Ḥanafi environment” and his father being “the Ḥanafi scholar among the Albanians [in Damascus].” His advancement in Arabic — first through the public school system and later through the religious texts he would read on his own — signified the first rupture with his father, and ultimately his ability to access the Islamic sources in their original. “God Almighty endowed me with a love for Arabic…and it was this among other factors that made me more advanced than my peers,” he explained.\(^\text{121}\) It was by accessing the original sources that, in Albānī’s recollection, he was able to move away from what he considered a blind adherence to the \textit{madhab} to truly understanding and following the \textit{sunna}.\(^\text{122}\)

His time working with his father in his shop provided much opportunity for an exchange of ideas. According to Albānī’s account, it seems that the main topics of their conversation revolved around the merits of studying ḥadīth, which just began to pique Albānī’s interest. His father would have none of it, dismissing his son’s pursuits with the phrase “ḥadīth study is the workmanship of the bankrupt.”\(^\text{123}\)

When time permitted, Albānī recalled that his father would allow him to leave the store, and the young Nāsir al-Dīn found his way to the book vendors outside the Umayyad Mosque and the famed Ẓāhiriyya Library, the latter perhaps more frequently since his father could not afford to purchase books for him. When Albānī eventually broke from his father and turned to a new curriculum steeped in ḥadīth study, it was the Ẓāhiriyya Library that served as a kind of intellectual incubator and personal haven to explore his sources of study.

\(^{121}\) Albānī, “Tarjama,” “Nashi’at al-shaykh fī Dimashq.”
\(^{122}\) See, for example, Albānī, \textit{As'ila ḥawla al-da’wa}, 97-103.
\(^{123}\) Qaryūṭī, \textit{Tarjama mujaza}, 5; Albānī, “Tarjama,” “Nashi’at al-shaykh fī Dimashq.”
Albānī’s break with his father occurred just before he turned twenty. His dramatic description of that moment and the events leading up to it suggest not only his attempt to project himself as a precocious scholar-to-be, but, more importantly, one who, because of his independent abilities of discernment, found his own way to an established scholarly tradition. That fateful day “that God set a stratagem” for him was marked by Albānī’s visit to an Egyptian bookseller by the Umayyad Mosque who showed him editions of Rashīd Riḍā’s journal al-Manār. “I remember well what I read there,” Albānī recalled. “[It was] the writings of Rashīd Riḍā on the Iḥyā’ of Ghazālī, and [Riḍā] critiqued him from several angles; his Ṣūfism, for example, and his weak ḥadīths.” Evidently, Riḍā’s critique of the Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn of Ghazālī (d. 1111) made such an impression on Nāṣir al-Dīn that later in life he credited Riḍā with his turn to Salafism, saying,

Whatever I have concerning my orientation towards Salafism first, and to the discernment of weak ḥadīth reports second, the credit for this goes to the sayyid Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā through the volumes of the journal al-Manār upon which I stumbled during my first preoccupation with the search for hadīth [science].

According to Albānī’s account, it was this article by Rashīd Riḍā and the latter’s interest in ḥadīth and his “scholarly critique” that refocused Nāṣir al-Dīn’s attention on the revival of the true sunna and sources of the religion as documented in the sound ḥadīth reports. From there, as he recounted, Albānī “followed up on the subject of revival within the Iḥyā’” in an edition of the work by Zayn al-Dīn al-‘Irāqī (d. 1403) in

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124 *Albānī, “Tarjama,” “Nashi’at al-shaykh fī Dimashq.”*
125 Ibid. Although Albānī does not give the title of the article, it is possible that he is referring to the series of longer essays on Ghazālī’s approach to the disciplines of knowledge in volume 10 of al-Manār (1907-1908), specifically pp. 502-522, 595-615, 694-705, 922-928.
127 Ibid., 15. This was Irāqī’s al-Mughnī ‘an ḥaml al-asfār fī al-asfār fī takhrīj mā fī al-Iḥyā’ min al-akhbār.
which the latter traced the ḥadīth reports of the *Ihya*.128 Ultimately, Albānī’s edition of ‘Irāqī’s work became his first study of ḥadīth and served as a source for many of the reports he scrutinized in his early writings.

Who was this anonymous bookseller and did he also point Albānī to Riḍā’s article on the *Ihya*? Did Albānī consult the original *Ihya*’ by Ghazālī before arriving at ‘Irāqī’s commentary and how (and under whose influence), moreover, did he stumble upon the ḥadīth-oriented commentary? These details are left unknown. Albānī’s account, particularly in light of these omissions, gives the impression that he embraced the Salafī approach of Rashīd Riḍā on the basis of his own personal initiative – one shaped by his ability to distance himself from what he saw as the errant practices of his father.

Besides its impact on his scholarship, Albānī’s turn away from his father’s *madhhab* had real implications in Albānī’s personal life, the immediate result of which was Albānī’s expulsion from his father’s home. Perhaps foreshadowing Albānī’s early career in Damascus and the tremors he caused in society, his break with his father was connected to Albānī’s dedication to following sound ḥadīth reports and his criticisms of the conduct of prayer in the mosque. The Ḥanafī character of the mosque in question – the Tawba Mosque – seemed to have served not only as an important symbol of the Ottoman influence over his father’s religious practice in Albania, but also of its legacy in Damascus as a criterion for professional and political advancement.129 Thus it was perhaps coincidental that Albānī’s break with his father’s Ḥanafism would be expressed

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128 While Albānī’s edition of this work remains unpublished, he references it several times in his monthly articles in *al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī* which are later collected and published in book form as *Silsilat al-ahādīth al-daʾī wa-l-mawdūʿa wa-atharuhā al-sayyiʿī fī al-umma*. These will be addressed in chapter 3.
129 David Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8. Commins tells how in 1850 “nearly all ulama holding court posts belonged to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence” and that “Hanafi ulama obtained court posts more easily than ulama of other schools.”
in physical terms as a loss of financial and personal stability – a trajectory that further aligned him with the priorities of Damascene Salafī reformers.

As Albānī told the story, one morning he arrived at the usual prayer time to the mosque, which had two mihrābs – a Ḥanafi and a Shāfi‘ī one. With the self-appointment of Tāj al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī (d. 1943), the son of the famous Shāfi‘ī ḥadīth scholar Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī (d. 1935) as president of Syria in 1932, the order of prayers switched and henceforth, the Shāfi‘ī imām led his prayers first, and the Ḥanafi imām followed. Finding himself in the mosque during the Shāfi‘ī prayers, Albānī proceeded to pray behind the Shāfi‘ī imām. His father, who at the time was the substitute Ḥanafi imām, arrived at the close of the Shāfi‘ī prayers and saw his son completing prayers with the rival group. After the first prayers ended, Nūḥ insisted that Nāṣir al-Dīn pray behind him during the Ḥanafi prayers since that was the family’s madhhab. Nāṣir al-Dīn, having just completed his prayers, refused to do so. Later that evening over dinner, Nūḥ expressed his disappointment with his son. Albānī dramatically recalled that “my father said to me in clear Arabic: ‘either agree or leave.’” With that phrase, Albānī somberly described how he left his father’s home with some pocket change and that he would not see his father again, except when the latter would pass Albānī’s store, never entering. Thus, one could say, Nūḥ became the first of many critics Albānī would acquire throughout his life. Perhaps as a way of marking the occasion and reminding himself of his independence, Albānī dropped his family’s last name, “al-Najātī,” and instead began to use the cognomen “al-Albānī” (“The Albanian”), by which he would gain fame.

130 Albānī, “Tarjama,” “al-Sharīṭ al-thānī.”
131 Ibid.
A New Curriculum: Rashīd Riḍā and Traditionalist Salafism

If Albānī’s father represented everything that was wrong with how Islam was understood and practiced during his time, then it was Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), by Albānī’s account, who stood for how things should change. It would not be hyperbolic here to say that Albānī adopted Riḍā as his intellectual father around the time when he separated from his biological one. In fact, as we shall see in later chapters, not only did Riḍā introduce Albānī to core ideas of Salafism, but quite possibly it was also Riḍā who inspired Albānī’s decision to write on a regular basis for an Islamic journal.

In their recent work on Rashīd Riḍā’s reformist ideas, Ahmad Dallal and Dyala Hamzah demonstrate how Riḍā welded classical legal concepts with the views of other Islamic reformers to fit his aims – in Dallal’s case Riḍā’s deceptive description of Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Shawkānī’s (d. 1839) praise of qiyās (when the latter, in fact, rejected it) and in Hamzah’s study Riḍā’s revival of the obscure legal concept of maṣlaḥa (interest) as a societal principle of maṣlaḥa ʿāmma (public interest) to legitimize his role as a “reformer” (muṣliḥ).132 Hamzah goes further in arguing that this new deployment of the term maṣlaḥa was a direct consequence of the concept’s being “journalized” and that

Riḍā, in turn, was motivated not by “the necessities of ‘ilm but by the avenues of ṣiḥāfa (journalism).”\(^ {133}\)

Following these and other studies on Rashīd Riḍā’s “Salafī turn,” we will examine here Albānī’s reception of key Traditionalist Salafī ideas through Riḍā’s writings in \textit{al-Manār} since, as we saw in the last chapter, it was Albānī’s encounter with that journal that allegedly influenced his early turn to Salafism. Not only will this discussion provide a blueprint for understanding the ideas that guided Albānī’s intellectual development, but it will also showcase the unique kind of religious knowledge Albānī acquired through the medium of a journal, as well as how he departed from it. Specifically, by writing as a journalist on religious themes, Riḍā liberally extended the Salafī critiques of the \textit{madḥhab} and \textit{taqlīd} well beyond their traditional scholarly contexts. Although, of course, the terms do have non-technical connotations in Arabic, Riḍā often discussed them in his journal with respect to both Islamic law and theology as well as to social and political developments. Indeed, his fluid transition between these two fields not only reflected his concerns with the new loci and structures of religious authority during his day, but also foreshadowed Albānī’s critique of \textit{madḥhab}-adherence in the latter’s attacks on political and institutional affiliations decades later.\(^ {134}\)

However, when Riḍā and his contemporaries wrote on these subjects, they had in mind specific social and political changes, and their aims with respect to these developments differed from what Albānī experienced during his lifetime. Moreover these critiques were very much contingent on the social and cultural capital, as Thomas Pierret

\(^{133}\) Hamzah.”From ‘ilm to Šiḥāfa,” at: 99, 103.

\(^{134}\) For a discussion of Albānī’s critique of political parties, for example, see chapter 6.
calls it, of Riḍā’s circle and their disciples within the setting of late-Ottoman and independence-era Damascus.\textsuperscript{135} Specifically, as David Commins explains, “Salafism [in late-Ottoman Syria] represented a response of middle-status ulama to secularist tendencies in Ottoman educational and legal institutions on the one hand, and to the projection of European power in the Middle East on the other.”\textsuperscript{136} From the perspective of the leaders of this circle, the Tanzimat reforms of 1839-1876 and the introduction of modern media of communication, ideas and institutions, as well as the promotion of lay bureaucrats and non-Muslims to positions of influence, threatened to marginalize the relevance and competency of the ‘ulamā’. Thus, as Commins chronicles, beginning with Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and Jamal al-Dīn al-Afghanī (d. 1897) transregional networks of independent-thinking reformists condemned taqlīd (emulation) of the legal schools as a sign of intellectual stagnation, and promoted instead ijtihād (independent reasoning) as an exemplar of both the Muslim capacity for progress as well as Arab superiority over foreign influences.

As these ideas spread throughout the Islamic world through Afghanī and ‘Abduh’s brief-lived journal, al-‘Urwa al-Wūthqā, and, later, in al-Manār, which ‘Abduh began with his protégé Rashīd Riḍā, in Damascus they took on a distinct local character in relation to the concerns and backgrounds of the thinkers who elaborated on them. This circle was comprised of two distinct groups: the first, represented by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1914) and ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bīṭār (d. 1917) – the doyens of Damascene Salafism\textsuperscript{137} – came from recently-established scholarly families in Damascus and sought

\textsuperscript{135} Pierret, Religion and State, 103.
\textsuperscript{136} Commins, Islamic Reform, 5.
\textsuperscript{137} Riḍā referred to Bīṭār as “reviver of the Salafī tradition of Damascus,” and called Qāsimī “renewer of the fourteenth century.” Ibid., 38.; Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, Qawā’id al-taḥdīth min funūn maṣṭalāḥ al-
to reassert the status and financial security of their scholarly professions in the face of the aforementioned processes of modernization and secularization. The second group consisted of what Commins calls “newcomers” – individuals with means and regional networks, who arrived in Damascus a generation earlier and sought to display the progressiveness and breadth of the Islamic intellectual tradition, particularly its importance to the newly-established Ottoman administrative institutions. The chief figure of this latter group was Ṭāhir al-Jazā’irī (d. 1920), the son of an Algerian émigré who gained renown for his eclectic knowledge base and for helping develop the Ottoman educational system as a teacher in one of its schools. A “walking card catalog,” as Commins dubs him, Jazā’irī became an especially formative figure in the Damascene Salafi intellectual tradition because of his collection of manuscripts and books, especially those of Ibn Taymiyya, with which he significantly expanded the Zāhirīyya Library – the same institution where Albānī spent most of his time when he broke with his father. The first group, as Pierret explains, was principally concerned with religious ideas while the second with social and political criticism.

These two currents of reform converged, both physically and intellectually, and together posed a threat to the Ottoman government of Abdūlhamīd II (r. 1876-1909), whose circumstances and consequences we will have opportunities to examine in later

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138 For more on Jazā’irī and his influence, see Joseph H. Escovitz, “‘He was the Muḥammad ‘Abduh of Syria’: A Study of Ṭāhir al-Jazā’irī and His Influence,” International Journal of Middle East Studies, 18 (1986), pp. 293-310; Commins, Islamic Reform, 41-42, 91.

139 It is in large part due to Jazā’irī’s efforts that the Zāhirīyya Library became, in Itzchak Weismann’s words, “an important center for the renewed study of [Ibn Taymiyya’s] legacy” during the Ḥamidian period. Itzchak Weismann, Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 273.

140 Pierret, Religion and State, 103.
chapters insofar as they served as backdrops for Albānī’s critiques.\textsuperscript{141} For the purposes of tracing Albānī’s intellectual genealogy here, it is important to emphasize that despite the revival of Ibn Taymiyya’s legacy, as well as the neo-Ḥanbalī tradition he represented, the Salaﬁ reformist tradition in Damascus in the early-to-mid twentieth century was doctrinally distinct from the Wahhābī tradition of Arabia. The arrival of the Baghdadi Khayr al-Dīn al-Ālūsī (d. 1899) in Damascus was especially influential in this regard. Although interested in reviving Ibn Taymiyya’s legacy and in purifying Muslim society of innovative practices, Alūsī took issue with the Wahhābī doctrine of excommunication.\textsuperscript{142} In fact, even though Albānī condemned manifestations of \textit{bid‘a} and \textit{shirk}, as we will see, he also remained consistently wary of the practice of excommunication throughout his life.\textsuperscript{143}

Moreover, at the political level, as Commins describes, the Ottomans were ever-cautious about the Saudi-Wahhābī advances in Arabia throughout the nineteenth century – concerns that escalated at the turn of the next when the Saudīs, opponents of Ottoman influence in Arabia, began to seize territory from 1902 onwards. These and other political and doctrinal differences contributed to the negative connotations of the “Wahhābī” label in the Syrian context,\textsuperscript{144} and might likewise have accounted for the minimal references to Wahhābī authors and themes in Albānī’s early writings.\textsuperscript{145}

\textsuperscript{141} In particular, in chapter 5 we will examine in greater depth the relationship between Abdulḥamīd II and Ṣūfism that informed Albānī’s attack on the latter in his efforts to reform mosques.
\textsuperscript{142} Commins, \textit{Islamic Reform}, 32; See also Brown, \textit{Canonization}, 310.
\textsuperscript{143} He became especially vocal on the subject during the last two decades of his life, when he criticized Salaﬁ-Jihādīs for what he considered to be their excessiveness (\textit{ghulūw}) in excommunication. See chapter 8.
\textsuperscript{144} Brown, \textit{The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim}, 310.
\textsuperscript{145} He did, however, incorporate the theological themes of Wahhābism more explicitly into his teachings after his brief residence in Saudi Arabia – a reflection of both the changing political environment, as well as his personal and professional situation. This will be examined in chapter 6.
Although this ideological and historical backdrop of social-political reform was very much the environment in which Albānī socialized when he broke with his father around 1934, his own teachings did not reflect the reformists’ campaign to demonstrate the competency and progressiveness of the ‘ulamā’. Of course, he had no scholarly roots of his own about which to boast. More significantly, by the time he broke with his father the efforts of his predecessors to reassert the place of the ‘ulamā’ and to counter foreign influence had not only failed, but those very foreign influences became further institutionalized within the post-empire and colonial periods under French control. Thus, when Albānī began teaching in 1945, his main focus lay principally in reasserting the discipline of ḥadīth science, and to counter the new structures of religious authority and their agents – a goal that remained fairly constant throughout his career, as we will explore in the coming chapters.

Given Albānī’s exclusive interest in the revival of ḥadīth science, it is thus only with this aspect of his predecessors’ intellectual legacy that this chapter will be concerned. Specifically, our aim will be to understand how Albānī might have recognized, through the wide-ranging articles of Riḍā, the socially and politically-relevant potential of ḥadīth science. As a discipline that claimed to represent the religion’s authentic message with its focus on the Prophet’s statements, the revival of ḥadīth was a part of the Salafī reformist project in Damascus. The interest of these figures in this genre is exemplified by works such as Qāsimī’s Qawā’id al-ḥadīth min funūn muṣṭalaḥ al-ḥadīth (The Principles of Renewal Derived from the Discipline of the Technical Terminology of Ḥadīth) and his epistemological promotion of the madhhab al-

146 For a thorough study of Damascene Salafism at the turn of the century and profiles of its leading scholars, see the classic study on the subject, Commins, Islamic Reform.
salaf (the way of the pious predecessors) as a counterweight to the influential Islamic legal schools.\(^{147}\) It is this same madhhab al-salaf that appeared for the first time in the pages of Riḍā’s al-Manār in 1905, incidentally the year of ‘Abduh’s death and two years after his alleged first meeting with Qāsimī.\(^{148}\) Riḍā’s discussion of this idea within the increasingly popular medium of the journal, in turn, formed a precedent for the ways in which Salafīs of Albānī’s generation and onwards broadened the scholarly domain, seeking, in Hamzah’s words, to reconfigure “the coordinates of truth, authority and reality.”\(^{149}\)

Before discussing Riḍā’s ideas, this chapter will begin with a brief overview of the Traditionalist Salafism\(^{150}\) he preached, in contrast to the Modernist Salafism of his mentor ‘Abduh.\(^{151}\) It will then investigate Riḍā’s critique of madhhab-jurisprudence.

\(^{147}\) See, for example, Ibid., 54.

\(^{148}\) Ibid., 61.

\(^{149}\) Hamzah, “From ‘ilm to Şihāfa,” 99.

\(^{150}\) Here it should be noted that although Salafīs share certain general theological and legal positions, particularly the insistence on affirming tawḥīd (divine unicity) and, in the legal sphere, rejecting adherence to the madhhab, Salafīs often differ in their particulars based on the specific geographic regions and intellectual influences on which they draw. An example of this is the explicit rejection of the concept of tawātur (to be discussed shortly) which was so central to Albānī and his immediate predecessors in the Syria, but which did not seem to have been on the radar of more theologically-inclined Salafīs such as Muḥammad b. Ṣāliḥ al-‘Uthaymīn (d. 2001). An example of this is the latter’s edition of Ibn Ḥajar’s Nuzhat al-nāẓar which opens with the concept of tawātur – just as it appears in the original text – without any comment or caveat from Ibn al-‘Uthaymīn.

\(^{151}\) This view stands in contrast to how Riḍā is often depicted as a modernist Muslim in the mold of his teacher, Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905). Hamzah, “Muhammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865-1935) or: The Importance of Being (a) Journalist,” 46-47, where she dismisses Riḍā’s views as “an ideological posture rather than an epistemological commitment”; See also Brown, The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, 305, 307. Brown, who calls Riḍā a “modernist Salafī,” explains that “the apologetic thought of the Modernist Salafīs has yielded no systematic approach to classical methods of authenticating hadiths.” This claim is perhaps more appropriate for Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (the other two thinkers he describes as Modernist Salafīs) but becomes harder to apply to Rashīd Riḍā, particularly after ‘Abduh’s death. Both by Albānī’s account and by the textual evidence in al-Manār, Riḍā exemplified the standard of how to look to hadith for reviving the Muslim community. The stark difference between the emphases of ‘Abduh and Riḍā may be seen in the eighth edition of al-Manār (1905), the year of ‘Abduh’s death, when we first encounter discussion of a madhhab al-salaf, and discussions in other installments, such as the section titled “Speculative Theology is a bid‘a According to the Pious Predecessors.” Another related ontological shift is in the title of the “debate with the muqallid” section in earlier editions of al-Manār. Whereas the section first appears as muḥawarat bayn al-muṣlīḫ wa-l-muqallid (al-Manār, 4 (1901), pp. 51-60), later it changes to munāzara bayn muqallid wa-ṣāḥīb ḥujja (al-Manār, 6 (1903), pp. 606-610).
within its new contemporary political context and the consequent marginalization of ḥadīth science. Following this discussion, we will then examine how Riḍā and his circle sought to reassert the uniqueness of this discipline through the rejection of the principle of *tawātur* (concurrent ḥadīth reports) as a guarantor of a report’s reliability. The second part of this chapter will turn to the spaces and circles within which Albānī learned and later taught these ideas.

**Traditionalist Salafism: An Overview**

“Traditionalist Salafīs,” as Jonathan Brown explains, aimed at “rejuvenating the Muslim community by reviving the primordial greatness of Islam, yet they have sought to recreate the Prophet’s *sunna* by making the classical study of ḥadīth and the ways of the early community paramount.”¹⁵² As Brown and others describe, what distinguished Traditionalist Salafīs from other ḥadīth-oriented groups, such as the Deobandi Madhhab-Traditionalists of South Asia, was the former’s insistence on the exclusive study and application of ḥadīth science to determine normative Islamic practice and belief, whereas the latter counseled obedience to the *madhhab* tradition.¹⁵³

Since the eighteenth century Traditionalist Salafīs argued that their society began to experience “social and moral decay” and, as Daniel Brown explains, assessed that “Muslims had strayed from the pure, unadulterated sunna of the Prophet and were being poisoned by dangerous innovation (*bidʿa*) and blind adherence (*taqlīd*) to the teachings of

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¹⁵³ For a discussion of the Madhhab-Traditionalist attack on Albānī, see chapter 7.
the classical law books and commentaries.” Bernard Haykel lists these sources of decay as follows: “most forms of human reasoning (’aql) in dogmatic theology (kalām) as well as the use of personal opinion (ra’y) in law (fiqh).” These deplorable practices shared one quality: they all depend on reason which, in the Salafī worldview, is a bid’a (reprehensible innovation) imported from outside the faith and one that was not practiced or condoned by the “pious predecessors” (al-salaf al-ṣālih), the first three generations after the Prophet.

Anything not practiced or explicitly recommended by the earliest generation of Muslims was, according to Salafīs, not of the original “pure” sunna (al-sunna al-muṭahharah) and therefore had to be purged. According to Salafī accounts, Muslim societies everywhere had institutionalized these foreign elements over time in the form of the madhhab. Discrediting the authority of the madhhab, as Haykel explains, these scholars “emphasized the literal word of the Qur’ān and its interpretation through the Prophetic Traditions which they equated fully with the Sunna.” While the sources of bid’a were common to all Salafīs, the practices and madhhab they attacked typically embodied localized grievances. For example, Şūfism was seen as a target of condemnation in Syria, Zaydī-Hādawīsm in Yemen, and Murji’ism in Jordan that, to Jihādīs, symbolizes the hypocrisy of non-Jihādī Salafīs. Thus, far from Brinkley

156 The understanding of the salaf al-ṣālih referring to the first three generations of Sunnī Muslims is based on the ḥadīth “The best of my community is my generation, then those who follow them, then those who follow them.”
158 The “Murji’ ‘a” or “those who postpone [judgment]” were an early Islamic sect that held the view that what is most important in judging a Muslim to be a believer is faith and not actions, and that judgment of actions is “postponed” to God until the End of Days. The use of this label in condemning non-Jihādī Salafīs
Messick’s diagnosis of the dissolution of the madhhab in the general modern Sunnī experience, we see that his description of “madhhab identities [being] restricted… to a referenced past” speaks precisely to the institution’s rhetorical value for Salafīs; as a scapegoat for religious deviance, the madhhab carried self-evident symbolism based in historically-established associations.\(^{159}\)

In their narrative of Islamic history, Traditionalist Salafīs identified the “pious predecessors” as “the early ones” (al-mutaqaqaddimūn) or as “the early traditionalists” (al-mutaqaqaddimūn min ahl al-ḥadīth). It was this early generation, because of both their chronological proximity to the Prophet and their commitment to following his sunna, who were cast as the custodians of the original faith as enshrined in the sound ḥadīth reports. Successive generations of ḥadīth scholars (with whom the Traditionalist Salafīs associate themselves), in turn, carried on the efforts of these “early ones.” By contrast, in this account the jurists (fuqahā’) and speculative theologians (mutakallimūn) appeared as enemies of this tradition because of their propensity for using reason – considered by Salafīs to be a foreign import. The generations of scholars who followed them, labeled “later ones” (muta’akhkhirūn)\(^{160}\) both because of their distance in both time and priorities from the Prophet’s early followers, were similarly recast as blind followers perpetuating


\(^{160}\) To be distinguished from al-muta’akhkhirūn min ahl al-ḥadīth (“the later generations of traditionalists”) which refers to the aforementioned ḥadīth scholars who are, of course, painted in a positive light because of their perpetuation of the methods of the early ḥadīth scholars.
the erroneous methods of the juridical and theological schools. It was this reading of
time and the change in scholarly framework — namely, of elevating the study of
ḥadīth and “reviving” (or reimagining) the methods of the early ḥadīth scholars instead of
the study of law and theology, along with their madhabs — that represented the key
epistemological intervention of Traditionalist Salafism.

Rashīd Riḍā presented these core ideas of Traditionalist Salafism, especially the
purported interest in ḥadīth of the early generations of Muslims, as a remedy for
correcting Islamic practice and belief during his time. In situating Riḍā’s critique within
its socio-political circumstances, it will become immediately evident how he gave these
religious concepts a new resonance by simultaneously addressing both legal hermeneutics
and perceived social malaises. Moreover, the combination of these two registers had the
effect of popularizing the Traditionalist Salafi approach beyond scholarly circles at a time
and place in which these circles radically changed. To use Gregory Starrett’s term, in
order for Islam to have been useful in this new setting it had to become “functionalized,”
a process he describes as a “translation in which intellectual objects from one discourse
come to serve the strategic or utilitarian ends of another discourse.”161 Indeed, as will be
shown in subsequent chapters, it is through the articulation of these concepts by figures
like Albānī – not a traditional scholar – in novel institutional spaces that they took on new
relevance in the contestation for religious authority.

161 Gregory Starrett, Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt
The Problem: The Madhhab and Its Discontents

For Albānī and his predecessors the madhhab blinded rather than elucidated the understanding of the religion. As early as 1947, for example, Albānī lamented what he viewed as widespread confusion concerning prayer, which he attributed to uncritical adherence to the madhhab.\textsuperscript{162} He wrote:

The detailed knowledge [of prayer] became burdensome for most people – even many scholars – because of their being bound to a particular madhhab. Anyone working in the service of the pure sunna, collecting and studying it, knows that each madhhab has its own sunna which does not exist in the other madhhabs, and all of them contain statements and actions that are not attributable to the Prophet. This is especially the case in the books of later scholars (muta’akhkhirūn), whom we often find insisting on tracing [a report] back to the Prophet! Therefore the scholars of ḥadīth – may God strengthen them with goodness – have produced what have become known as books on ‘ḥadīth tracing’ (takhrīj) which have clarified the condition of every ḥadīth found in [those books].\textsuperscript{163}

Albānī ridiculed this attachment to the madhhab through a series of absurdist anecdotes such as one concerning individuals in Central Asia belonging to different legal schools being married as if one were a Muslim and the other a member of the “People of the Book,”\textsuperscript{164} and another story about a group of Japanese converts instructed by Indian Muslims to follow the Ḥanafī madhhab and by Indonesian Muslims to follow the Shāfi‘ī one. All these cases led Albānī to conclude that “the issue of the madhhab became an obstruction on their path to Islam!”\textsuperscript{165} Like Albānī, Riḍā recognized the ways in which social and political associations influenced madhhab affiliations during his day, writing at one point, “Surely, we find one moving from one madhhab to another because of a

\textsuperscript{162} For more discussion on Albānī’s attempts to redefine the practices and spaces of prayer, as well as the larger social significance of these efforts, see Chapter 5.


\textsuperscript{164} Idem, Ṣifat ṣalāt al-nabī, 3 volumes (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma’ārif, 2006), 1:45.

\textsuperscript{165} Idem, Ṣifa (1996), 68-69.
teacher, a state or other worldly reasons and natural solidarities (al-'aṣabiyya al-ṭabī‘iyya).”

Like Albānī, Riḍā used the term “madhhab” in political contexts, no doubt exercising the license of a journalist writing on a broad range of themes. One example was his discussion of “those who imitate Europeans” (al-mutafarnijūn). In language similar to Salafī attacks on non-Salafī Muslims, he described these mutafarnijūn as “emulat[ing] their leaders among the Europeans” (a’immatahum al-ifranj) and “not follow[ing] them in respecting their predecessors (salfahum) among the legislators and government leaders.” In 1911, Riḍā explained how those who emulated Europeans led Muslims astray by introducing foreign bases of association, much as the partisans of the madhhab had done. He wrote:

But as for divisions based on different languages, nationalities and countries, today these have propagandists (du‘āt) among those who imitate Europeans (min al-mutafarnijūn) who create more damage than those who call to the divisions of madhhabs. [The former] are influenced by [administrative] positions and are employees of the government and its interests (maṣālihihā)… [For example,] in Egypt there are those who take pride in the Pharaohs despite the fact that God has cursed them…and among Persians those who take pride in their Zoroastrian predecessors…

Indeed, Riḍā expressed his amazement at the British and the Americans, whom he commended for “preserving the statements of their predecessors and their rulers,” and cited their commitment to upholding the Monroe doctrine.

Like his Salafī predecessors, Riḍā distinguished between emulating the madhhab and following the Prophet by using the commendable term “following” (ittiḥād) for the

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The distinction between taqlīd (emulation of a madhhab) and ittibā’ (following the Prophet’s sunna through proof-texts) became an increasingly common theme among Salafīs in arguing that there is an acceptable way to follow teachers without veering into the murky terrain of taqlīd. They argued that the idea is rooted in the very practice of the pious predecessors and those who followed in their footsteps. According to Salafī scholars, these early adepts preserved the sunna by looking exclusively to the Prophet’s example rather than the madhhab and its jurists. Based on this reasoning, Riḍā explained that the “saved ones” (al-nājīn) in the apocryphal ḥadīth concerning the “saved sect” (al-firqa al-nājiya) that Salafīs invoke are the people of following [proof-texts] (ahl al-ittibā’) who fear innovation, and [the group that promotes innovation] includes those who associate with a particular madhhab…

It is worthwhile to note here the limited discussion of ijtihād among contemporary Salafīs, particularly as compared with how it was invoked by Riḍā and Qāsimī. This is particularly the case for Albānī, who viewed ittibā’ and not ijtihād as the opposite of taqlīd, and really only began to use the term with its technical connotations in writings that were published in the 1960’s.

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171 The idea of “the saved sect” (al-firqa al-nājiya) is based on the ḥadīth in which the Prophet foretold that “my community will divide into seventy (or seventy three in variants) sects, and all of them will perish in Hellfire except for one” and when asked which one will not perish (i.e. which will be saved) his response, depending on the variant of the ḥadīth, was either “the community” (al-jamā’a) or “what I and my Companions follow” or “the people of the sunna and the community” (ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā’a). In light of the latter, Salafīs read this ḥadīth to imply that those who follow the sunna will be saved, whereas all others will perish. For Albānī’s discussion of the People of Ḥadīth as representative of the “saved sect,” see chapter 6.


173 See chapter 7.
was usually in a negative light – for example, Albānī’s cautionary remarks about not following the *ijtihād* of later jurists. Here again the historical context of Syria may be helpful in understanding Albānī’s choice of emphasis. Namely, it was likely because of the connection between the so-called Mujtahidūn Incident of 1896 and Salafism, which scholars cite as the first appearance of the Salafis as a distinct group in the Syrian context,\(^{174}\) as well as derogatory accusations that establishment scholars leveled at Albānī and his cohort of performing *ijtihād* in the 1950’s,\(^{175}\) that informed Albānī’s reticence about *ijtihād* in the 1950’s. Likewise, it was his distance from these contexts, and the new academic context of Islamic law being taught by pro-*madhhab* professors that inspired Albānī to revisit the concept in the 1960’s and 1970’s, and to reassign it to the field of ḥadīth science rather than its traditional setting of jurisprudence.\(^{176}\)

Rather than the reformists’ promotion of *ijtihād*, it was their use of the term *taqlīd* as a critique of social and political contexts that likely resonated with Albānī when those same foreign influences became institutionalized during his time. In his articles that appeared in 1926 to 1926, just after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Riḍā blamed *taqlīd* not only for distorting the religion’s original message, but also for confounding how Muslims conceived their identities within the newly-established nation states that took shape. In his analyses of political developments in Turkey, Egypt and Syria, for example, he assigned the theological labels *mulhid* (heretic) and *murtadd* (apostate) to those who associated with these new national identities, and explained that,


\(^{175}\) See chapter 5.

\(^{176}\) This will be examined in chapter 7.
Those who destroy the foundation of their community and religion (ummatuhum wa-millatuhum) have multiplied, with contempt for those distinguishing features of the community, such as religion, law, traits and languages... Nationalist adherence...is the destruction of the foundation of their community. They think that through it they build a new foundation better than that which history built for them [i.e. via Islam]...177

Riḍā showed no mercy for his Egyptian and Syrian compatriots, whom he described as emulating the Turks. He wrote:

We have learned with great surprise and despair...that some Syrians and Egyptians who continue to despise themselves and prefer the Turks over their own people, choose to follow them (taqliduhum) in this, since they are like [the Turks] in their unbelief (kufr) and ‘negation [of divine attributes]’ (ta’til) and the lack of feeling for religious connections...178

By seeking to discredit the institution of the madhhab under these unprecedented political circumstances, Riḍā sought to divorce religious authority from its apparently un-Islamic political associations. In this respect, his aim was in fact not very different from that of his Salafī predecessors. For example, Bernard Haykel shows how Shawkānī’s challenge to the the Zaydī-Hādawī madhhab was in part meant to dismantle the school’s “cultural and juridical dominance” in Yemen.179

Because of this political backdrop to Shawkānī’s scholarly intervention, as Haykel writes elsewhere, his self-conception as a mujaddid (renewer) “fits with the theoretical acceptance of a de facto separation between truth and power” where the Qāsimī imāmate became “a source of temporal order identical with mulk or kingship” and “righteousness...is the concern of a separate or distinct group of ulama, whose opinions must defer to the most learned among them.”180 Like his

179 Haykel, Revival and Reform, 11, 14.
forebears, Riḍā saw a return to the proof-texts and a mastery of the discipline for studying them –ḥadīth science – as the sole remedy for not only reviving this original divine message, but also of undoing the ossification of the new socio-political affiliations of his day.

**Locating Religious Authority: Ḥadīth Science and the Scholarly Profession**

It is was in the context of this madhhab-based monopoly, one influenced by the national and political associations of western-styled nation states, that Albānī followed his predecessor Riḍā in “prioritizing ḥadīth above the hermeneutic traditions of the madhhabs,” as Brown describes.¹⁸¹ Not only was Albānī disturbed by the confusion caused by what he regarded as excessive attachment to the madhhab, but he was equally dismayed by the popular dismissal of ḥadīth science as a field with little relevance for everyday Islamic practice – a view, as we saw earlier, that his father epitomized in his discouragement of Albānī’s ḥadīth studies. The marginalization of this discipline, moreover, and its true custodians (i.e. ḥadīth specialists, and not the ‘ulamā’) convinced Albānī that true knowledge of the reliability of ḥadīth reports – the locus of the Prophet’s purported statements and actions – became increasingly rare. Beyond merely corrupting Islamic creed and practice, the increasing dependency of Muslims on a school or a scholar rather than on the proof-texts of the ḥadīths further obscured the methods for determining which ḥadīths were in fact sound. As perhaps the strongest evidence for the connection between the dependence on the madhhab and the loss of ḥadīth knowledge,

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Albānī cited the appearance of what he deemed to be unreliable ḥadīth reports in legal manuals and the minimal references in those works to ḥadīth compendia.\(^{182}\)

In order to revive the Prophet’s *sunna*, Albānī argued, one needed to know how to use the main textual source of his *sunna* – the ḥadīth – and, therefore, one had to become familiar with the discipline’s technical terminology as established by the generations of ḥadīth scholars.

There is no other way to know what the Prophet did and said except to turn to the discipline that was known among of the scholars collectively as ‘ḥadīth science’ (*ʿilm al-ḥadīth*) ‘the science of the technical terminology of ḥadīth’ (*ʿilm musṭalaḥ al-ḥadīth*) and ‘the science of criticizing narrators of reports’ (*ʿilm al-jarḥ wa-l-taʿdīl*, lit. ‘injuring and deeming upright’), which has its own principles and terms and through them the scholars know what is sound and what is not sound from the Prophet.\(^{183}\)

It was because of their perceived laxity in ḥadīth study that Albānī castigated scholars of his time for lacking proper scholarly credentials. For example, in his 1968 work critiquing *Nuṣūṣ ḥadīthiyya fī al-thaqāfa al-ʿāmma*, a textbook prepared for students of the shariʿa faculty at Damascus University, Albānī expressed disappointment that in perusing the book he “missed a scholarly method…that follows the principles of the study of technical terminology (*ʿilm al-muṣṭalaḥ*).”\(^{184}\)

Like Albānī, for Riḍā the call to revive ḥadīth science and its technical terminology was also a response to the centralization of religious authority within the Azhar and the perceived marginalization of ḥadīth science there during his time. For him

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\(^{182}\) Albānī, *Ṣīfa*, 37-38. Although Brown accurately identifies Albānī as one of the iconoclastic critics of the Ṣahīḥayn, this did not occur until at least the 1960’s, as we will see in chapter 7. In early works such as the *Ṣīfa* and in articles for *al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī* he seems to have been most concerned with redefining Islamic creed and practice on the basis of what he determined to be sound reports and for identifying weak reports.


and his colleagues, the main source of concern was the institution’s perceived laxity with respect to ḥadīth science. Indeed, as Muhammad Qasim Zaman describes, Riḍā consistently emphasized the rigor of the Deobandi ḥadīth training, “not so much to compliment the Indian scholars as to castigate the Azhar for its lack of attention to hadith, with the result, he said, that preachers at the Azhar mosque and elsewhere were quite incapable of adequately distinguishing between reliable and unreliable hadith reports.”

In his critique, Riḍā used the translation of foreign words into Arabic (what he called al-taʿrīb), which accompanied the emergence of new professions within the nascent Egyptian state, as a foil for pointing out how the new institutions of religious instruction sidelined the lexicon and methods of their own tradition. In response to two speeches given at the Dār al-ʿUlūm by one Aḥmad al-İskandārī in 1908 in which the latter called for not translating foreign words into Arabic, Riḍā wrote a rebuttal in which he argued for rendering such words into Arabic “only when it is necessary.”

His discussion is a fascinating one, drawing on ontological differences between what makes words properly “Arabic,” and the broader imperialist implications of rendering foreign words into Arabic. Dissecting al-İskandārī’s argument, Riḍā explained,

Iskandārī has spread fears about so many Arabized [foreign] terms entering the [Arabic] language…but the matter is not as grave as he describes. [The basis of] his speech is that if the translated terms multiply…they will ruin the language’s style (uslūb al-lugha). Ibn Khaldūn has shown that at the birth of jurisprudence, [knowledge of] Arabic had not been strong and there was no one eloquent in it. [This is because] disciplines have their own pronunciations specific to them derived not from literary Arabic but rather from the acquisition of skill [in that particular field.]

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185 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 89-90.
187 Ibid., at: 911.
As one proof allowing for the qualified translation of foreign words into Arabic, Riḍā emphasized that the Arabic language could help Muslims remind themselves of their Islamic heritage at a time in which their language was being used to define nationalist allegiances. Further in the same rebuttal, he advised his readers to preserve the understanding of the Qur’ān and the books of the sunna, for…however much our circle of disciplines has widened we make the Qur’ān and the ḥadīth foundations for our eloquence… It is feared that we are being cut off from the Qur’ān and the sunna by [both] blind emulation and the Western onslaught on us. [Moreover, we] render the forbidden permissible and break the bonds of the religious community, all under the pretexts of nationalism and patriotism and the influence of politics…If we Arabize some words [we should know that] rendering into Arabic does not weaken the language but rather improves it.\textsuperscript{188}

In 1905, shortly before this exchange, Riḍā wrote for the first time on the epistemological importance of following the salaf in their promotion of ḥadīth science – a position that he promoted consistently during the ensuing years.\textsuperscript{189} Not only did he identify the pious predecessors with ḥadīth science but, in a significant departure from ‘Abduh, explained that they “agreed concerning the innovations [of the Mu’tazilīs and the Jahmīs] … [and] condemned accepting the evidence of reason, which has no basis in reports.”\textsuperscript{190} In articles from 1915 and 1922, Riḍā repeatedly returned to the idea that the ḥadīth specialists were the ones who preserved the true sunna by resisting threats of heretical innovation, the most heinous of which, in his view, took the form of taqlīd. In a 1915 article on “The Renewer Helpers of the sunna,” for example, he wrote:

When the statements influenced by personal opinion (ra’y) multiplied, the people of reports (ahl al-athar) rose up to respond to the people of unbridled reasoning and

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 912. I am grateful to Simon Fuchs for discussing this passage with me.
\textsuperscript{189} Incidentally, this stood in contrast to his fluctuating opinion of the nascent Saudi state, the bastion of the Salafī tradition that had been gaining territory during these same years. See Zaman, Modern Islamic Thought, 15. Specifically, as Zaman describes, while Riḍā expressed enthusiasm for the Saudi state and even accepted their financial support, he was far less impressed with the Wahhābī ‘ulamā’, whom, Zaman writes, Riḍā “found embarrassingly innocent of modern sensibilities.”
warned the masses about them. The legal scholars (‘ulamā’ al-ḥakīm) were of two
types: the people of reports and the people of personal opinion, and the imāms of the
two groups were [all] pure of faith who forbade the following (taqlīd)...but then the
madhhab emerged and the bid‘a of fervent adherence (ta‘ṣṣub) of a large group to
some of them, and taqlīd spread among the people. Knowledge was lost for most
people, alongside the lack of the liberty of following proof-texts, and this was the
origin of all the misfortune and tribulations that have occurred to this community in
its faith and in its worldly affairs.¹⁹¹

Elsewhere, depicting these ḥadīth scholars as “independent” (mustaqillūn) and thus
closer to the founders of the legal schools, Riḍā wrote almost a decade later:

the sunna and the reports of the Companions were transmitted through more reliable
methods than those transmitted by the madhhab, from the perspective of their
isnāds...Why [then] does following these books [on ḥadīth] not take precedence
over the books of jurisprudence, which include multitudes of proofs derived from
analogical and independent reasoning that go against the early scholars (‘ulamā’ al-
salaf).¹⁹²

As the ḥadīth specialists represented the custodians of the sunna, according to the
Traditionalists’ narrative, their methods of scrutinizing and using ḥadīth reports in law
and creed had to be followed and reaffirmed within society. In short, this meant
redefining the epistemology of Islamic law and theology such that everything performed
and said in the name of the religion was done with absolute certainty. After undoing the
infrastructure of the madhhab, Traditionalist Salafīs had next to assemble the scaffolding
for their new epistemological edifice.

Dispelling the Tawātur Myth: Sound Āḥād Reports and the Case for Certainty

For Traditionalist Salafīs, the foundation of this new vision for normative Islamic
guidance lay in the rejection of the principle of tawātur (concurrent reports) as a criterion
of acceptance. Instead, they insisted on the fact that any ḥadīth report, including āḥād

(unit reports), determined to be sound must be followed in all matters pertaining to creed and legal rulings. Refuting the assertion that it is not obligatory to follow a sound āḥād report because it is not mutawātir, Rashīd Riḍā, for example, argued that, at the end of the day, all that tawātur signifies is that someone or some group has heard some bit of knowledge.

Riḍā explained that the concept of tawātur does not carry with it any legal ramifications concerning what must be followed. In 1908 he wrote:

the truth is that tawātur is not a condition for deeming a report obligatory, just as one who rejects tawātur is not an unbeliever …This is because something could be transmitted as mutawātir from one person and not from another person, when [in fact] the meaning of tawātur and its conditions vary from one group of people to another. For some people [the mutawātir report] does not give knowledge (lā yufīd al-‘ilm) and others [it gives knowledge] only in some cases. According to the view of the majority, it is possible to find tawātur in any given matter, and it is easy for some people to know it and to verify its existence in that matter…But the truth of the matter is that whoever rejects what he knows to be a required [part] of the Islamic religion and this [required matter] becomes known to him, even if through an āḥād report, has committed unbelief…We do not reject the fact that various forms of tawātur may give knowledge but we reject restricting report-based knowledge (al-‘ilm al-khabarī) to it or to what a person claims to have heard, just as we do not accept that what is considered tawātur among certain people must be considered tawātur among others.\footnote{Rashīd Riḍā, “Bāb al-munāẓara wa-l-murāšala 4: baḥṭh al-‘amal bi-l-ḥadīth wa-baḥṭh al-tawātur,” \textit{al-Manār} 11:5 (1908), pp. 371-373, at: 372-373.}

In a fatwā almost a decade later, Rashīd Riḍā revisited the kinds of knowledge guaranteed by āḥād and mutawātir reports, this time with respect to creeds (‘aqā‘id). He opened by introducing the view of speculative theologians (al-mutakallimūn) that “creeds are not established through āḥād reports because [creeds] require certainty…Rather, [according to the mutakallimūn] they are established by mutawātir ḥadīths since [they believe that mutawātir reports] lead to certainty, which [for them] is a requirement for
What this statement falsely implies, Riḍā argued, is that “it is not obligatory to follow sound āḥād reports related by trustworthy and upright transmitters concerning the divine attributes and matters of the Hereafter...since āḥād reports only provide probable knowledge.”

“It is this thinking,” Riḍā continued, “which is understood from the statement of the speculative theologians which has nothing of truth to it.” After describing the categories of knowledge and the debates concerning the conditions of tawātur, Riḍā concluded:

After all of this I say that it is only Muslims, more than any other human society, who are interested in scrutinizing Prophetic reports and thoroughly examining them, and arranging their content and memorizing their paths of transmission... [Muslims] have been meticulous in scrutinizing ḥadīth scholars more than in any other matter. Therefore, if the ḥadīth they deemed to be sound in its content and paths of transmission is not decisive[ly true], then what kind of human report can we trust? And if a Muslim among us deems it reliable then how can its guarantee with respect to the religion's creeds be refuted based on the position of the theologians?

Following this affirmation of the methods of ḥadīth scholars, Riḍā prescribed what one should look for in determining the soundness of ḥadīth. He wrote:

According to ḥadīth scholars, the sound report is one that has been verified through the transmissions of completely upright [individuals], with a continuous path (muttasil al-sanad), and is not deficient (mu'allal) or irregular (shādhdh) ...this is also the case with respect to bid'a, for whoever innovated something pertaining to religion which the people of the first generation did not follow, his report is not deemed sound.

To understand what drove Riḍā, and subsequently Albānī, to spend so much time on this seemingly obscure subject and to appreciate how high the stakes were, something must be said about the issue of certainty in the context of ḥadīth reports. The issue is
based on the classical debate concerning the status of the āḥād report. The problem with such a report, from the perspective of traditional Islamic theology and jurisprudence, is precisely the fact that it lacks multiple distinct chains of transmission, the criterion of tawātur. Tawātur came to serve as an important factor in establishing the truth of any statement because of the assumption that an indefinitely large number of distinct narrations would not overlap in their transmissions and thus would guarantee a measure (although not complete) certainty.198 Long after the disappearance of the Muʿtazilī school, as Aron Zysow explains, tawātur continued to influence Islamic legal theory such that the mutawātir report “figures as a source of certain knowledge throughout Islamic thought…”199 In his seminal work, Zysow outlines how, informed by the categories of certainty established by Muʿtazilī theology, the legal schools divided over using mutawātir and āḥād reports. On one end stood the Ḥanafīs, whom Zysow terms “formalists,” who rejected āḥād reports because of their lack of certainty and, instead, insisted on that mutawātir reports yield probable knowledge. On the other were the more literalist and ḥadīth-oriented schools (whom Zysow terms “materialists”), who did not admit probability and, instead, insisted that all of law must be based in certain knowledge; for them, as Zysow writes, “the line between legal theory and law is erased.”200

Hüseyin Hansu notes that the term tawātur had distinct connotations in law and theology from ḥadīth criticism, in the former two “refer[ring] to the epistemological

198 For a discussion on the relationship between Muʿtazilī theology and Islamic legal theory, and in particular concerning the mutawātir report, see Aron Zysow, The Economy of Certainty: An Introduction to the Typology of Islamic Legal Theory (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2013), especially pp. 8-46.
199 Ibid., 9.
200 Ibid., 3.
value and certainty of a report, but in ḥadīth criticism it refers to a report that is well-known or widespread, but which does not necessarily yield certain knowledge.”

Within ḥadīth criticism, medieval scholars scrutinized both the method of transmission (riwāya) and the content and applicability (dirāya) of ḥadīth reports. Concerning the method of transmission (judged, as we have seen, by whether or not it is mutawātir), scholars asked whether the report is qaṭ‘ī al-thubūt (“definitively established”) or zannī al-thubūt (“probably established”). However, while tawātur is the precondition for a report being qaṭ‘ī al-thubūt, there is a wide range of possibilities for the certainty and acceptability of an āḥād report being “probably established,” including, for example, its appearance in one of the Ṣaḥīḥayn. The next level of inquiry concerns the content of the report, namely is it qaṭ‘ī al-dalāla (of certain evidence) – i.e. its language is plain and clear, not to be interpreted and to be followed as written – or zannī al-dalāla (of probable evidence) – its language has room for interpretation. Once these two sets of questions have been answered, the report is finally judged on whether it is actionable (yufīd al-‘amal), i.e. must be followed, or merely yufīd al-‘ilm (gives knowledge only, and therefore not necessarily binding).

To simplify this rubric with an example: a report that is qaṭ‘ī al-thubūt (definitively established [through having multiple independent transmissions]) and whose content is qaṭ‘ī al-dalāla (i.e. its language is plain such that it requires no interpretation)

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202 The following discussion of the certainty of āḥādī reports has been drawn largely from sessions with Dr. Issam Eido as well as the works of his mentor and professor of ḥadīth Dr. Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itr, particularly Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itr, *al-Sunna al-muṭahhara wa-l-tahaddiyāt*, second edition (Damascus: Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itr, 1986); idem, *Manhaj al-naqd fī ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth*, third edition (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1981); also the “Lone-Narrator Reports” chapter of Ibn Khaṭṭīf (d. 981), Muḥy‘ī al-Dīn Ibn Ṭabarī (d. 1232), *Correct Islamic Doctrine (al-‘Aqīda al-Saḥīha)*, Islamic Doctrine, trans. Gibril Fouad Haddad, Islamic Doctrines & Beliefs, Vol. 2 (Fenton, MI: As-Sunna Foundation of America, 1999), pp. 33-37.
would surely be classified as *yufīd al-`amal* (actionable) and binding. Based on examinations of its transmissions and its content, it may be judged to have a very high probability of certainty and would therefore be binding upon Muslims in both actions and faith. By contrast, as another example, a report deemed *ẓannī al-thubūt* (probable establishment) and whose content makes it *ẓannī al-dalāla* (probable evidence) subject to further scrutiny and deliberation, may be relegated to *yufīd al-`ilm* (gives only knowledge) because of the high degree of uncertainty surrounding its transmission and content. It should also be noted here that this debate only relates to ḥadīth reports, whereas Qur’ānic verses are universally accepted as *qaṭī al-thubūt* and *qaṭī al-dalāla*, and thus all of the Qur’ān is, of course, binding in actions and faith.

Premising their position on the fact that *tawātur* and the debate on certainty which it inspired is derived from the rationalist assumptions of Mu’tazilī theology which, they claim, are derived from Greek philosophy, Traditionalist Salafīs deemed the entire *tawātur* paradigm *bid‘a*. Moreover, they argued that by debating the certainty of reports based on the principle of *tawātur* Muslims drew themselves into the murky terrain of rejecting potentially correct creedal positions and practices, thus bringing them closer to sin. Rather, in the Traditionalist Salafī view, all reports from the Prophet must be considered *qaṭī al-dalāla* (certain evidence) and that the methods for determining the truth of the report are to be found *exclusively* in ḥadīth science; viz. looking at the individuals who transmitted that report, in which ḥadīth compendia that report may be found, and the various “witnesses,” or newly-discovered transmissions, that could further elucidate a report’s soundness.\(^{203}\)

\(^{203}\) For Albānī’s exposition of these principles, which he does in his *Taqrīb al-sunna bayn yaday al-umma* series, see chapter 7. Among contemporary Salafīs, al-Shārīf Ḥātim al-‘Awnī provides perhaps the most
The rejection of the concept of *tawātur*, or rather the insistence on the obligation to follow the *āḥād* report if it is demonstrated to be sound, symbolized for Traditionalist Salafis yet another blow to the fallacies of *taqlīd*. Specifically, these scholars attacked the uncritical acceptance of the *mutawātir* label as used by a particular scholar or *madhhab* to condone certain actions or beliefs as falling into the larger chasm of wayward *taqlīd*-influenced teachings (in this case, even possibly leading the masses to sin). In arguing against this form of *taqlīd*, and in line with their insistence on the individual responsibility of Muslims to follow proof-texts and evidence, these scholars insisted on accepting the *āḥād* report through what they deemed to be sound methods of ḥadīth scrutiny.

Assuming the twofold function of pointing out the dire consequences of *taqlīd* and, at the same time, demonstrating a commitment to a certainty-bound legal epistemology, the resurrection of *āḥād* reports reflected perhaps the most conceptually convincing argument for the Traditionalist Salafī call to reassess the standards of legal hermeneutics. By repeatedly pointing to the dangers of ignoring reports with potentially coherent version of the Traditionalist Salafī narrative of how the *sunna* was preserved by ḥadīth scholars. Arguing that the entire discipline of *usūl al-fiqh* (legal theory) should be considered *bid’a* since, according to him, it was influenced by the assumptions of rationalist theology, ‘Awnī instead marks the beginning of this preservation of *sunna* with Shāfiʿī (who, although an eponymous founder of a *madhhab*, was considered the first to systematize the use of ḥadīth), and then Bayhaqī (d. 1066), considered “the door to [understanding] Shāfiʿī,” and then proceeding to al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 1071), Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ al-Shahrazūrī (d. 1245) and culminating with Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 1348) and Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 1448). ‘Awnī then singles out the generation of Khaṭīb and Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ as the “apogee of [the establishment] of ḥadīth science and its terminology,” after which “the study of the *sunna* became influenced by rational sciences,” and thus proper knowledge of ḥadīth began to wane. Despite their best efforts to preserve proper ḥadīth terminology, scholars such as Ibn Ḥajar could not help but be affected by the destructive influence of their scholarly environment, as evidenced by his highly influential ḥadīth manual *Nuzhat al-nazar* opening with a definition of *tawātur*. This term, as ‘Awnī demonstrates, did not exist in prior ḥadīth works and its appearance in this key work by one of the greatest ḥadīth scholars of his time indicates that the true meaning and method of the ḥadīth science had begun its decline, only to be reestablished in its true form by the Traditionalist reformers of the modern period. See ‘Awnī, *al-Manḥaj al-muqtarāḥ*, 55, 66, 85.
core beliefs and prescriptions, these scholars were able to prove effectively that
generations of Muslims might have lost the correct knowledge of their religion. It was
ultimately this charge that, increasingly difficult to refute, set the scene for scholars such
as Albānī to advocate for a new way to revive the understanding of the sunna.

Albānī’s New Education: From Teachers to Texts

It is with this tradition of ḥadīth-oriented Salafism that Albānī associated himself
and his work. Indeed, Albānī’s students and colleagues invoked the cosmological
coincidence of Albānī’s birth in the year of Qāsimī’s death, with ‘Alī al-Ḥalabī
describing it as “the setting of one star announced the rise of another star…in the skies of
Syria.”

Despite this convenient historical fact, Albānī did not depict himself as the
Qāsimī’s disciple, and was not shy in citing where he felt Qāsimī erred, as we will see.
Rather, aside from Riḍā, Albānī considered his work the continuation of that of his
Damascene predecessor, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), and his student Ibn Qayyim al-
Jawziyya (d. 1350), as well as more recently the approach of Traditionalist Salafī
luminaries such as Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Shawkānī. One certainly finds parallels in the

Albānī kamā ‘arafahu Ḥāy al-Ḥāy wa-‘Abd Allāh al-Albānī.”

205 For example, on the subject of bidʿa, as we will see in chapter 5.

206 In his attack on the Saudi Ḥamūd al-Tuwayjīrī for the latter’s adherence to the Ḥanbalī madhhāb, Albānī wrote “it is necessary that the shaykh [Tuwayjīrī] read [Shawkānī’s Nayl al-awfār] but he has not yet turned
to it since it is not from his madhhāb!” and, elsewhere, in the colophon of Albānī’s 1953 edition of Sayyid Sābiq’s Fiqh al-
sunna (which, as Bernard Haykel points out, is an abridgment of Shawkānī’s Nayl al-
awfār) he wrote “And I ask that God make this [work] a tool for students, and a method (manhaj) for them
to follow in thinking about the religion…” See Albānī, Ṣīfāt ṣalāt al-nabī min al-takbīr ilā al-taslīm ka-
bibliographies of Albānī and Shawkānī, with each having produced a serialized commentary on weak (ḍaʿīf) and forged (mawdūʿ) ḥadīth reports.

Indeed, Albānī’s departure from Qāsimī’s circle is corroborated by information we have concerning his reformist education after breaking with his father. Initially, he began his studies as others of his generation had by frequenting the classes taught by leading Salafī reformist thinkers in homes across Damascus. Among these were the classes of Muḥammad Bahjat al-Bīṭār (d. 1976), Qāsimī’s leading disciple, and ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Imām (d. 1964), a founder of al-Shubbān al-Muslimūn – the forerunner to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood – and, along with Bīṭār, its Salafī counterpart, al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī. However, one does not get the sense that Albānī was a regular attendee at these classes, much less that he was a protégé of these individuals. Moreover we know little about what he actually studied with these individuals aside from grammar and prose with Bīṭār – subjects that could hardly be said to have influenced Albānī’s scholarly priorities.

Rather, it was the Ţāhiriyah Library that Albānī attended with any regularity, and it was likely there, rather than among reformist circles, that he continued his studies of Riḍā’s teachings. Indeed, the amount of time and energy Albānī spent poring over manuscripts at the Ţāhiriyah Library became the subject of hagiographic lore among his

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208 For a list and discussion of those with whom Albānī studied, see Abāza, ‘Ulamā’ Dimashq wa-a’yūnūhā fī al-qarn al-khāmis ‘ashr al-hijrī (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2007), 393-403.

209 The only iḥāza Albānī is said to have received was from the Aleppian historian, Muḥammad Rāḥib al-Tabbākh (d. 1951), a journalist and former member of the Committee of Union and Progress. For more on him see Pierret, Religion and State, 35.
students, the most famous example of which was the so-called “Story of the Missing Folio.” According to Albānī’s account, his strenuous reading habits caused him near-blindness at one point, allegedly leading an ophthalmologist to insist that he refrain from reading and writing for six months. After two weeks of following the doctor’s advice, as Albānī described, he “had the idea to do something during this boring vacation.” He thus hired someone to transcribe a treatise by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 894) on musical instruments. At one point, his assistant informed Albānī that a page was missing from the manuscript they were reading, which resulted in a quest for this page through 152 manuscripts in the library’s “compendia” (majāmi’) section, many of which included uncatalogued works by well-known authors. Although he never found the missing folio, Albānī claimed that during the search he “had forgotten the state of health [he] was in” and because of this had managed to go through all ten thousand of the library’s manuscripts.

It was not merely a love of reading and cataloguing that he acquired from his long days at the Žāhiriyya, but also his commitment to editing and popularizing these works – standing, as he did, between the manuscript and printed book traditions. In other words, to Albānī reviving ḥadīth science did not mean marrying it with social and political causes as his Islamist counterparts did, but rather exposing the lay masses to the authoritative texts of that knowledge, many of which were still in manuscript form. While the book tradition had been well-established in Syria by this time, and Islamists took an

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210 Albānī, Fihris makhtūtāt Dār al-Kutub al-Žāhiriyya: al-muntakhab min makhtūtāt al-ḥadīth, ed. Mashhūr Hasan Āl Salmān (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma’ārif, 2001), 8-15. His students continue to invoke Albānī’s reading habits, with admiring descriptions of how he would fall asleep while reading a text and, when answering a student, would rarely take his eyes off the text, or occasionally would glance through his glasses. Interview with Mashhūr b. Hasan Āl Salmān, May 2012.

211 This was allegedly the origin of Albānī’s catalogue of the Žāhiriyya Library’s holdings, see ibid.

212 This is the subject of chapter 4.
active role in publishing manuscripts, for Albānī the pioneers of takhrīj and editing – in particular the ḥadīth scholar Aḥmad Shākir (d. 1954) and his brother Maḥmūd (d. 1997) – were the true scions of the reformist legacy. It is owing to this view that, for Albānī, the mukharrij (“ḥadīth tracer”) represented the pinnacle of religious scholarship and thus the authoritative interpreter of the divine will. Indeed, as we will have opportunity to see, Shākir’s interest in reviving ḥadīth science informed Albānī’s later efforts of introducing ḥadīth science as the province of religious reform to such a degree that he continually annotated and taught Shākir’s edition of Ibn Kathīr’s Ikhtiṣār ‘Ulūm al-ḥadīth throughout his career.

Thus, Albānī seemed to have gained recognition among Syrian reformers not so much because of his intellectual genealogy or for his reformism per se, but rather because of his interests in editing (taḥqīq) and “ḥadīth-tracing” (takhrīj). In particular, Syrian and Gulf-based scholars saw in Albānī’s dedication to ḥadīth science an ability to integrate the ḥadīth-orientation of Riḍā and other reformists into their own nascent programs of defining an Islamic identity suitable for the modern sensibilities of the educated middle-class youth. It was also this absence of the kind of overt political agenda that the Islamists had that made Albānī such an eligible candidate for Gulf-based patrons, who became increasingly averse to these ideologies from the mid-twentieth century onwards. For example, in the late 1940’s, the leading reformist scholars of Damascus, including the aforementioned Bīṭār and Muṣṭafā al-Sibā’ī (d. 1964) – the leader of the Syrian Muslim

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213 A famous example was Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh (d. 2013), a leading figure of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, who opened al-Maktab al-Islāmī which employed Albānī for several decades. See chapter 4.
Brotherhood – as well as the Najdī Ḥanbalī scholar Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Māni‘ (d. 1965) and the Qatārī Director of Religious Education Qāsim Darwīsh Fakhrū (d. 1992), approached Albānī to “trace” the ḥadīth reports of the Ḥanbalī legal text, Manār al-sabīl.215 Likewise, in 1954 the faculty of sharī’a at Damascus University commissioned Albānī to trace the ḥadīth reports pertaining to sales for their Encyclopedia of Islamic Law, and to occasionally lecture at the university.216 These and other publications and activities with which Albānī engaged during the early years of his career, culminated in his appointment to the United Arab Republic’s official ḥadīth delegation to Egypt.217

**Shaykh al-Albānī: Teacher of Salafism**

The curricula of Albānī’s classes, which he began in 1945 at the back of his watch shop and then in homes around Damascus, attest to dedication to reviving ḥadīth science as a relevant discipline within the new legal and educational contexts of his students. One list of the works he taught showcases the diversity of Albānī’s pedagogical interests:


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215 This commission, like many future ones, was orchestrated by Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh (d. 2013), later Albānī’s main publisher, who gathered the aforementioned Syrian scholars in his home to discuss the matter. For this account, see Albānī, *Irwā’ al-ghalīl fī takhrīj aḥādīth Manār al-sabīl*, 9 volumes (Beirut: al-Maktab al-İslāmî, 1979), 1:3-5. For more on Ibn Māni’ and Fakhrū, see chapter 4, which details their involvement with the establishment of Shāwīsh’s publishing house, al-Maktab al-İslāmî.

216 For more on the faculty of sharī’a at Damascus University, see Pierret, *Religion and State*, 36, 104.

217 For a description of his time on this committee, as well as its purpose, see Albānī’s 28 September 1960 interview with *Ṣawt al-‘Arab*, which in December 1960 was published as a stand-alone pamphlet: *Ṣawt al-‘Arab tas’al wa-muḥaddith al-Shām Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī yujīb* (N.l: n.pub., 1960).
Several aspects of this syllabus stand out, chief of which is the appearance of only one work from the Najdī tradition, the commentary on Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb’s *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*. This might have had to do with both the aforementioned rejection by certain late-nineteenth century Syrian reformists of aspects of Wahhābī doctrine as well as the stigma the “Wahhābī” label continued to carry in Syria during Albānī’s time. This list also shows how he sought to integrate ḥadīth science into the books that his students likely read at the newly-established universities, particularly modern textbooks on Islamic law (Khallāf’s *Uṣūl al-fiqh*) and history (Rustam’s *Muṣṭalāḥ al-Tārīkh*), as well as popular and newly-released best-sellers encountered by the average Syrian (*Fiqh al-sunna*, *Minhāj al-Islām fī al-ḥukm*, *al-Ḥalāl wa-l-Ḥarām*).

It is perhaps in part because of his broad-ranging focus that Albānī’s classes were so successful. The Saudi writer ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Khamīs (d. 2011), who spent a month in Damascus in 1955 and attended some of Albānī’s classes at Damascus University and at

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homes throughout the city, estimated that one class Albānī held at the home of fellow Syrian Salafī scholar 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Bānī (d. 2011) attracted some forty to sixty individuals.\textsuperscript{219} As these classes grew in size and popularity, Albānī was invited to teach in different cities and soon began a monthly routine of traveling three days each week to Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia, Salamiyya, Homs, Hama, Raqqa, and then, during his second stay in Syria, to Jordan.\textsuperscript{220} In a chapter of his travel journal titled “Salafism in the Classroom and Scholarly Circles,” Ibn Khamīs vividly captured the scene at one of Albānī’s lectures as follows:

This is how I discovered Salafism in Damascus in the university classrooms and in the circles (ḥalaqāt) of the scholars, which educated and enlightened youth (shabāb mutahaqqaf mustanīr) studying medicine, law and literature would attend… One of these students\textsuperscript{221} asked me: ‘Will you attend our class today?’ and I replied ‘It would be my honor’ and I went with the student to find the virtuous shaykh Nāṣir al-Albānī, the great ḥadīth scholar of Damascus (muḥaddith Dimashq al-kabīr). Around him were over forty educated students of Damascus, and the class dealt with the chapter “Ḥimāyat al-muṣṭafā jānīt al-tawḥīd wa-ṣaddiḥi ṭuruq al-shirk”…from the Kitāb al-tawḥīd and its commentary Fath al-majīd by the renewer Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and his grandson, and I was greatly amazed by this odd encounter.

I listened to the classes of the shaykh [Albānī] and all of a sudden I heard verification (taḥqīq) precision (tadqīq) and elaboration (ifāḍa) of the study of divine unicity (tawḥīd) and the strength of his attachment to it. Suddenly I heard the calm and serious discussions of the students and their deep inquiries until the end of the class on tawḥīd and they began the class on ḥadīth with al-Rawḍa al-nadiyya, and here I heard much knowledge and understanding and principles and verification. And it went this way until the end of class.\textsuperscript{222}

While Albānī borrowed ideas from his Salafī predecessors in Damascus, and credited them appropriately, he departed from them in his objectives – namely, of reviving ḥadīth science rather than the pedigree and relevance of the scholars. It was this difference in objectives, alongside the dramatically different political settings and personal

\textsuperscript{220} Qaryūṭī, \textit{Tarjama mūjaza}, 11.
\textsuperscript{221} Ibn Khamīs later identified this student as Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh.
\textsuperscript{222} Ibn Khamīs, \textit{Shahr}, 75-76.
circumstances that informed Albānī’s departure from their agenda. Namely, whereas for his Damascene predecessors the call for a return to the way of the salaf was, as Commins describes, informed by a “patronizing attitude and their belief that they formed an elite by virtue of intellectual and moral superiority,” for Albānī, who lacked both their scholarly pedigree and their opportunities for professional and social advancement, it was driven by a rejection of the very foundations of these elite circles. It was this difference in perspective, for example, that underlay the divergence between Albānī and Qāsimī on the question of Śūfīsm – a tradition with a particularly privileged position in Syrian society. Whereas Qāsimī did not target Śūfī practices of elite circles, Albānī forbade all Śūfī practices as un-Islamic. With this indifference to social acceptance, as well as his categorical rejection of anything not practiced by the early Muslims, Albānī eventually isolated himself and his group from mainstream Syrian society, even the reformist circle of Bīṭār, as we will see in part two. It is to this message and spaces within which Albānī articulated it that we now turn as we seek to understand his rise as “the ḥadīth scholar of the Levant” (muḥaddith al-shām) and “servant of the sunna” (khādim al-sunna).

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223 Commins, Islamic Reform, 141-142.
224 Ibid., 81. This will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5.
II
The Production of ‘the Ḥadīth Scholar of the Levant’: Albānī in Damascus (1945-1961)
All the Sunna That’s Fit to Print: Albānī and Islamic Periodicals

“...It is the function of the journal to set in order the means for spreading the truth, and [the means for] avoiding whatever is beyond it and whatever is the subject of useless discussion and refutation...Our principle is that the truth will become clear to the one who searches for it, and God is behind the aim and He guides the way.” – Editors of the journal al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī in introducing the serialized debate between Albānī and ‘Abd Allāh al-Harārī al-Ḥabashī, 1956.

To Albānī, following Riḍā’s turn to Salafism meant following his example on how to promote its teachings. From 1952 until 1977, Albānī contributed on a regular basis to the Salafī journal al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī (Islamic Civilization), in which first iterations of his most famous works appeared, as well as to the Muslim Brotherhood’s al-Muslimūn (Muslims). The following excerpt from a former student gives a sense of the role journalism played in popularizing the Salafī orientation:

This young journal [al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī] became accepted widely among those helpers of the Salafī method in Damascus, amid the fierce battle waged by the Ḥashwiyya, the helpers of bid‘a and corruption. With every passing year of the journal’s publication, its writers multiplied until its nineteenth year (1372[1952])

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226 In discussing Albānī’s writings for the journals al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī and al-Muslimūn, I consider him to be working more as an essayist rather than a journalist. In this discussion I will use the word “journalism” (ṣiḥāfa) in the inclusive sense in which it appears in the Arabic literature, connoting the genus of “the press.” See Jūzīf Ilyās, Taṭawwur al-ṣiḥāfa al-Sūrīya fī mi’at ‘ām (1865-1965) where, for example, religious journals are the subject of a section titled “al-ṣiḥāfa al-dīniyya.” Jūzīf Ilyās, Taṭawwur al-ṣiḥāfa al-Sūrīya fī mi’at ‘ām (1865-1965) 2 volumes (Beirut: Dār al-Niḍāl li-l-tibā‘a wa-l-nashr wa-l-tawzī‘, 1983), 2:422. For studies on journalism and new media in the Middle East and in the Islamic world, see: Ami Ayalon, The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Dale F. Eickelman, John W. Anderson, eds., New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999); Göran Larsson, Muslims and the New Media: Historical and Contemporary Debates (Farnham, UK, Burlington, VT; Ashgate, 2011) and; in the context of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Aaron Rock-Singer, Writing and Reading a Revival: Islamic Magazines in Egypt, 1976-1981, (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2016).


228 A student, Nūr al-Dīn Ṭālīb, wrote that “[Albānī] published his scholarly method through journals and newspapers before books and treatises.” Among the most famous of these were his two serialized critiques of weak and sound hadiths, as well as sections of his Ṣifat ṣalāt al-nabī and articles on the “sermon of necessity” (khutbat al-ḥāja). Aside from Nūr al-Dīn Ṭālīb’s efforts at publishing miscellaneous articles, including a number that Albānī wrote for the journal al-Muslimūn, and his useful introduction, this chapter will be the first systematic treatment of Albānī’s writings for al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī. See Nūr al-Dīn Ṭālīb, ed. Maqālat al-Albānī: tunshar majmū‘atān li-awwal marra (Riyadh: Dār Atlas, 2000), 17.

229 For Qāsimi’s use of this term to refer to the incompetence of the ‘ulamā‘ during his time, see Commins, Islamic Reform, 76-77.
when the journal chanced upon the teacher *shaykh* Muḥammad Niṣr al-Dīn al-Albānī... 230

The space of the journal, in other words, served as a weapon in Albānī’s for engaging with the hostility he and his community faced from more traditional religious circles who sought, through their well-established channels, to curb the progress of Salafism during their time. Much like media outlets of our day, journals and newspapers of mid-twentieth century Damascus had certain obvious advantages over the more traditional genres of scholarship. As compared to the hefty size as well as costly publication and distribution of books, religious journals, which would rarely exceed one hundred twenty pages per issue, were often published on a monthly basis and were distributed at affordable rates or even free of charge. 231 Moreover, the frequency of distribution, as compared to the months or years it could take to publish a book, allowed journal writers to address current events and subjects of recent memory, making them more relevant for the common reader. Finally, the word limitations and the opportunities for digressions meant that articles would not infrequently take the shape of heated debates and even *ad hominem* attacks. Albānī availed himself of these thematic and stylistic opportunities, and retained these stylistic idiosyncratic when he republished some of his articles in book form.

This chapter presents a twofold argument. First, it seeks to show how journalistic writing was integral to Albānī’s success as a ḥadīth scholar because of the unique opportunities it gave him to explain his views and adapt them to different subjects. Publishing his views in a journal, moreover, gave Albānī broader reach to both lay audiences and established religious scholars on a leveled playing field. Second, far from

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simply regurgitating the ideas of pre-modern scholars, Albānī cited these views in his articles with a discursive style that resonated with the standards of modern educated society and responded to specific social issues of his day. Despite his explicit disparagement of Western influences, he – like other writers in religious journals, as Jūzīf Ilyās points out – could not avoid them entirely in his literary style and arguments. Examples of these included his references to “educated” (muthaqqaf) readers, praise from his students for his “critical study” (dirāsa naqdiyya), and his citation of contemporary science textbooks in his columns evaluating ḥadīth reports. Journal writing, particularly the fluidity of format and subject matter, thus serves as a window into the struggle of middle-class professionals like Albānī to assert their credentials as not only intimately familiar with their scholarly tradition but also with the needs of a Muslim society in the midst of change. After a brief introduction to religious journals in Syria, this chapter will examine Albānī’s writings for al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī and al-Muslimūn, and will attempt to show how he skillfully used his writings for these journals as opportunities for reintroducing ḥadīth science as a relevant arbiter of contemporary social and political issues. In the topics he addressed and the sources he consulted, it is evident that Albānī sought to redefine what it meant to be a master of ḥadīth science by expanding the range of subjects with which, in his estimation, a true muḥaddith was expected to engage.

**Religious Journals in Damascus**

Periodicals appeared in Syria alongside the emergence of a growing literate educated class, and it was literary periodicals that were most prominent prior to the end

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232 Ibid., 2:425.
of the Second World War.\textsuperscript{233} This was no coincidence since, as Albert Hourani explains, the birth of Arabic periodicals in the late nineteenth century coincided with new approaches by Syrian writers to Arabic literature and poetry.\textsuperscript{234} Though in the early twentieth century the press in Syria developed more slowly than its Egyptian counterpart, owing to more frequent political disturbances and changing social conditions, it remained the primary forum in which ideas were shaped among the new intelligentsia.\textsuperscript{235} Religious ideas were likewise negotiated on the pages of these journals, as Ilyās writes, adding that in Syria “it was rare for there to be a religious perspective without its own journal carrying the name [of that group].”\textsuperscript{236} Riḍā’s \textit{al-Manār}, of course, left a lasting legacy in both Egypt and Syria regarding the medium’s potential for religious critique, and, as Ami Ayalon informs us, in 1931 even the Azhar, once the center of opposition to technological change, released the first issue of its periodical, \textit{Nūr al-Islām} (The Light of Islam).\textsuperscript{237} Examining the rise of religious periodicals in Syria, as well as the beginnings of \textit{al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī} and \textit{al-Muslimūn} will demonstrate that, far from an isolated phenomenon of insular religious communities, religious journalism for the Salafī and Muslim Brotherhood communities expressed the intellectual ambitions of an assimilated and educated class. Moreover, a survey of the individuals who wrote for these two periodicals – a number of whom wrote for both simultaneously – will help appreciate the great degree of overlap between the Salafīs and the Muslim Brotherhood during the

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\textsuperscript{234} Albert Hourani, \textit{Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 95-98.
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\textsuperscript{235} Ayalon, 152-153.
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\textsuperscript{236} Ilyās, \textit{Taṭawwur al-ṣiḥāfa al-Sūrīya}, 2: 423.
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\textsuperscript{237} Ayalon, 171.
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1950’s and and the extent to which these two communities had not yet developed into
distinct socio-political groups.

Jūzīf Ilyās’s two-volume history of journalism in Syria from the years 1865 until
1965 remains the most exhaustive treatment of the subject on Syria to date.\textsuperscript{238} He defines
a journal as “a publication whose circulation is no less than weekly and no more than
monthly, except in certain rare cases in which it is a quarterly (\textit{faṣliyya})” and marks its
beginning in Syria in conjunction with an intellectual and literary revival following the
First World War.\textsuperscript{239} While during the “arid” Ottoman period there were only ten journals
in Syria, between 1918 and 1965 there were 338 journals, 212 of which were based in
Damascus.\textsuperscript{240} Moreover, Ilyās points out that the growth of journals, which he estimates
at about seven new journals per year, corresponded to the growth of politically-oriented
newspapers, which reached 325 during this period.\textsuperscript{241} Of these 338 journals, 191 of them
were specialized, with 24 of them religiously-oriented, and eleven of those Islamic.\textsuperscript{242}

Although, as Ilyās states, no precise data exists on the distribution of Syrian
journals in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman periods, the most successful journals would
publish 800 copies per issue and the Aleppo-based journal \textit{al-Ḥadīth}, with 1300 copies
released annually, was the most widely distributed journal until 1946.\textsuperscript{243} The journal of

\textsuperscript{238} Ilyās, \textit{Ṭāṭawwur al-ṣiḥāfa al-Ṣūrīya}.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid., 2: 383.
\textsuperscript{240} The numbers Ilyās provides for other cities during this period are as follows: 73 journals in Aleppo,
twelve in Homs, nineteen in Latakia, nine in Hama, five in Qamishli, two in Al-Hasaka, and one in all of
Safita, Antakya, Dayr al-Zawr, al-Salamiyya and al-Qadmus.
\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 2: 389. For more on the vocal political positions of these papers, especially vis-à-vis the French,
see Ayalon, 82-91.
\textsuperscript{242} Ilyās, \textit{Ṭāṭawwur al-ṣiḥāfa al-Ṣūrīya}, 2: 392, 423. The breakdown of figures concerning subject-specific
journals are as follows: 31 school-related (madrasiyya), 24 religious (dīniyya), 16 literary (adabiyya), 13
agricultural (\textit{zirā'iyya}), 11 economic and trade-related, 10 women’s journals, 11 artistic, 10 satire, 8 social,
8 official government, 8 military, 7 medical and health-related, 6 legal, 6 educational for teachers, 3
education-related, 4 labor-related, 3 scholarly, 3 mathematical, 3 athletic, 2 philosophical, 2 historical, 1
magic and astrology, 1 linguistic, 1 containing announcements, 1 engineering, 1 children’s literature.
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 2: 390.
the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance (wizārat al-thaqāfa wa-l-irṣād al-qawmī), al-Maʾrifā, was the most widely-distributed journal in 1962, and Ilyās estimates that it published thousands of copies in its first year.\textsuperscript{244}

Only two religious journals existed during the Ottoman period,\textsuperscript{245} and it was not until the mandate period that religious journals arose in conjunction with the establishment of national religious institutions.\textsuperscript{246} These religious journals, Ilyās mentions, were independent of foreign involvements and were overseen by the national religious institutions – the waqfs for the Islamic ones, and local parishes for the Christian ones.\textsuperscript{247} Following this period, religious journals multiplied, with the first, the Catholic \textit{al-Qurbān}, published in 1926 in Aleppo, then journals in Hama, and then elsewhere.\textsuperscript{248}

Both \textit{al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī} and \textit{al-Muslimūn} originate in the same class that Thomas Pierret calls “Salafī effendis,” which included, besides a few trained scholars, “many supporters among the new intellectual elites – lawyers, writers, academics, and senior civil servants.”\textsuperscript{249} This group, as Pierret describes, established two societies: in 1932 \textit{al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī} and, in 1937 \textit{al-Shubbān al-Muslimūn} (after 1946 formally

\textsuperscript{244} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{245} Ibid., 2: 422. The Greek Orthodox Church put out \textit{al-Niʿma} in Antakya. The main Islamic journal in this period, \textit{al-Haqāʾiq}, was especially important in that it was founded in 1910 by Asʿad al-Ṣāḥib (d. 1926), the grandson of Shaykh Khālid al-Naqshbandī, in order to oppose the Salafīs and to redefine the Ṣūfī orientation to be more in line with the CUP. The reward for this, as Leila Hudson writes, was the government’s restoration of the Sulaymaniyya mosque where he was able to perpetuate this “nonreformist and ritualistic” interpretation of the Naqshbandiyya-Khālidīyya order. Hudson, \textit{Transforming Damascus}, 122. On \textit{al-Haqāʾiq}’s position as the mouthpiece of anti-salafism in Damascus, see chapter 8 of Commins, \textit{Islamic Reform}, as well as pp. 118-123.
\textsuperscript{246} Ilyās, \textit{Taṣawwur al-sīḥāfa al-Sūrīya}, 2: 422.
\textsuperscript{247} Ibid., 2: 422-423.
\textsuperscript{248} Ibid., 2: 423.
called the Muslim Brotherhood). The former was founded by Aḥmad Maẓhar al-ʿAzma (d. 1982) and Muḥammad Bahjat al-Bīṭār.

The journal *al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī* was founded in 1935 by ʿAẓma, who oversaw it until his death, and other members of the society, notably Muḥammad b. Kamāl al-Khaṭīb (d. 2000), who served as its director. Incidentally, Khaṭīb, a Syrian mosque preacher who studied law at Damascus University, received the protection of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Āl Saʿūd in 1935, the same year of the journal’s founding, and spent a number of years thereafter establishing charity societies and schools in the Najd. The journal was published by the reformist Damascus-based publishing house Maṭbaʿat al-Taraqqī, founded by Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī (d. 1953), and in its earliest editions, the journal described itself as a “Monthly Islamic social literary health journal published by the *al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī* society of Damascus.” In 1955, when Albānī was writing for the journal, its description changed to: “An Islamic scholarly social literary and educational journal” and then later dropped the “social” and “educational” in the 1970’s. In his opening letter, ʿAzma addressed his readers by stating that “God Almighty has entrusted you with the reform of the communities, through the law that He sent down to the world’s Arab Messenger…” and the journal’s sections – which range from Qur’ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*), *sunna* and *fatāwā* to “news of (religious) learning” and “in society” –
indicate the scope of where the editors saw this religious reform taking place.\textsuperscript{255}

Significantly, as Pierret informs us, \textit{al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī} was one of the two Islamic monthlies that survived past 1963, and published its last number in 1981.\textsuperscript{256}

\textit{Al-Muslimūn} did not enjoy as long a life, a reflection of the fate of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria.\textsuperscript{257} As the organization’s mouthpiece, \textit{al-Muslimūn} began printing in Egypt in 1952 and published its first Damascus edition in 1955 under Muṣṭafā al-Sibā‘ī, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood’s superintendent general until 1961. Its contributors included major Islamists and intellectuals, such as Mawdūdī and Muḥammad Abū Zahra (d. 1974), as well as Damascene Brotherhood leaders Muḥammad al-Mubārak (d. 1982), Ma‘rūf al-Dawālibī (d. 2004) and Muṣṭafā al-Zarqā (d. 1999).\textsuperscript{258} Following the formation of the United Arab Republic in 1958, and Nasser’s subsequent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, the journal was shut down in 1960. In 1961, a journal of the same name appeared in Geneva, Switzerland under the directorship of the group’s famous European member Sa‘īd Ramaḍān (d. 1995).\textsuperscript{259}

Indeed, the roster of the journals’ contributors points to the close collaboration between the Salafīs and the Muslim Brothers. In addition to Albānī, the prominent Salafī ‘Alī al-Ṭanţāwī (d. 1999) wrote for \textit{al-Muslimūn}. Likewise, ‘Azma was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the three aforementioned leaders of the Damascene Brotherhood also contributed to the journal.\textsuperscript{260} This culture of cooperation would change

\begin{footnotes}
\item[255] Ilyās, \textit{Taṭawwur al-sīhāfa al-Sūriyya}, 2: 429.
\item[258] Ilyās, \textit{Taṭawwur al-sīhāfa al-Sūriyya}, 2: 431.
\item[259] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
drastically during Albānī’s second period in Damascus (1963-1980), when the Aleppo and Damascus branches of the Brotherhood split. It was during this later period that Albānī began his campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood, most notably ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (d. 1997), the leader of the organization’s Aleppo branch and noted Ḥanafī ḥadīth scholar.261

As might be expected, the active participation of the leaders of the societies in both journals reflected the high degree to which journals were valued as forums to perpetuate their ideas. Moreover, that established academics such as Zahra and historian ‘Umar Riḍā Kahṭāla wrote for these journals demonstrates the fact that these were universally recognized as spaces for both pedagogy and for creating learned communities. In the remaining sections here, we will examine how Albānī used the journal to further his own program of displaying his wide literacy and ability to apply ḥadīth science.

**The Silsilatayn**262

From 1954 until 1968 Albānī wrote a series of articles titled *Silsilat al-ahādīth al-ḍa‘īfa wa-l-mawḍū‘a wa-atharuhā al-sayyi‘ fī al-ummā* (The Series of Weak and Forged Ḥadīth Reports and Their Bad Influence on the Community) 263 and, from 1959 to 1966, a parallel series titled *Silsilat al-ahādīth al-ṣaḥīha* (The Series of Sound Ḥadīth

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261 These attacks will be examined more closely in chapters 6 and 7. For more see Pierret, *Religion and State*, 107.
262 *Silsilatayn* will be used as shorthand for Albānī’s two serialized critiques of ḥadīth, *Silsilat al-ahādīth al-ḍa‘īfa wa-l-mawḍū‘a wa-atharuhā al-sayyi‘ fī al-ummā* and *Silsilat al-ahādīth al-ṣaḥīha wa-shay‘ min fiqhihā wa-fawā‘idhā*.
263 Hereafter Ḥadīth will be used as shorthand.
Reports). The two works, sometimes referred to as *al-Silsilatayn* (The Two Serieses) were also published in book form. In the 1970’s Albānī boasted that he collected some four thousand weak or forged reports, many of which he was not able to include in his published *Da‘īfa*, presumably because of spatial limitations. Although in setting out to trace unreliable ḥadīth reports Albānī followed the precedents of Shawkānī and Ibn al-Jawzī, whose compendia he also cited in his ḥadīth studies, his treatment of such reports was decidedly different, with his extension of their discussions to contemporary social, political and even personal critiques. To this end, he once described the *Da‘īfa* as “an explanation of the disease” and the *Ṣaḥīḥa* as “providing the treatment.” In praising the *Silsilatayn* project, Albānī’s students credit not only the subject matter but also Albānī’s literary style, highlighting its resonance with “educated persons” (*al-muthaqqaṭūn*). Ṭālib writes:

Thus the ḥadīth scholar Albānī attracted the attention of a large group of educated persons, particularly those influenced by western methods and western civilization. [These individuals] were amazed by this new method of presenting the Prophetic ḥadīth reports, and were astonished by the critical study (*al-dirāṣa al-naqdiyya*) of the chains of transmission and reports, which they had not encountered previously. This inspired discussions about ḥadīth outside of the journal, which demanded responses from the ḥadīth scholar Albānī.

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264 Hereafter *Ṣaḥīḥa* will be used as shorthand. The *Ṣaḥīḥa* has a longer title in its book form, *Silsilat al-ahādīth al-saḥīḥa wa-shayʾ min fiqhihā wa-ṣawwā‘iḍihā* (The Series of Sound Ḥadīth Reports and Something of their Legality and Benefits), although these additional elements are certainly to be found in the article version.


It is clear that Albānī’s writing in the medium of a journal not only made his ideas relevant for a broad readership but also, by invoking the central Islamic discipline of ḥadīth science in a broad array of contexts, helped extend the parameters of what constituted religious commentary.

In addition to describing a weak report’s “bad influence on the community,” these articles also provided Albānī with an opportunity to demonstrate a method of how to identify them. Namely, as Albānī claimed, performing takhrīj (tracing ḥadīth reports) by looking at the reputations of their transmitters rather than at the quantity of their chains of transmission was, in his view, the sole basis for determining the status of the report. The ability to do so was, moreover, what he believed to be the primary qualification for mastery of ḥadīth science since the determination of a report’s authenticity – the product of a takhrīj effort – constitutes the only credible evidence that a particular statement or practice was originally a part of the faith. It was this mastery of takhrīj that he claimed to have demonstrated in his writings, particularly his Silsilatayn, and one that earned him unique fame among Salafīs as their chief muhaddith.271 In the opening of his first article, which he wrote in 1954, Albānī connected this scholarly method of takhrīj to social mores in society, effectively making it a kind of tool for public policy. He wrote:

Among the greatest tribulations that have befallen Muslims since the earliest centuries is the spread of weak and forged ḥadīth reports. [Even ḥadīth] scholars have not been spared [this fate], with the exception those among them whom God has willed...such as Bukhārī, Aḥmad [Ibn Ḥanbal], Ibn Ma‘īn, Ibn Ḥātim al-Rāzī [sic] and others. The spread [of such reports] has led to great ruin in hidden creedal matters and in legal matters, and the good reader will see many examples of what we describe in this article and in future articles, God-willing...272

271 The most famous of these was Albānī’s invitation to shepherd ḥadīth instruction at the newly-opened Islamic University of Medina in 1961 (see chapter 6).
In these introductory comments, Albānī addressed the root of social ills – the spread of unreliable ḥadīth reports – which, in his narrative as well as in that of his Salafī predecessors, stemmed from a marginalization of ḥadīth science. In turn, much as Riḍā had argued, only the ḥadīth specialists were endowed with the proper tools and knowledge to revive the original sunna. It was by framing the discipline as a social cure rather than a scholarly preoccupation that Albānī made his ḥadīth criticisms relevant for a range of issues, and projected himself as its authoritative interpreter. By the same token, it was by insisting that in his writings on ḥadīth he was “uncovering” the original sunna – a vision of sunna applicable to a broad scope of human activity– that Albānī tried to undermine not only well-established Islamic traditions popular in Damascus and elsewhere at the time, such as Ṣūfism, but also the new ideology of Arab nationalism that had become the mainstay of Arab politics during the 1950’s when Albānī began writing for these journals. In what follows, we will examine several examples of how Albānī used his mastery of ḥadīth science as a foil to attack what he viewed as errant Islamic practices as well as political ideologies.

The most prominent Islamic groups that Albānī targeted were the Aḥmadīs and Ṣūfīs, both for allegedly taking as their source for normative practice individuals other than the Prophet. Concerning the Aḥmadīs, whom Albānī and other Salafīs vilified for allowing for prophecy after the Prophet Muḥammad, Albānī first demonstrated that the ḥadīth report “there is no messiah except for Jesus” is unreliable because of its weak chain of transmission. He then explained:

The Ahmadi sect (al-ṭāʿīfa al-Qādiyānīyya) exploits this ḥadīth in their call to their alleged prophet Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad al-Qādiyānī, who claimed [first] to have

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received a prophecy, and then that he was Jesus the son of Mary whose arrival at the end of days was foretold. ‘There is no messiah except for Jesus’ is founded on this unacceptable ḥadīth. Many books have been written refuting these deviants, among the best of them is the treatise of the virtuous teacher and fighter (al-mujāhid) Abū al-A'ālā al-Mawdūdī refuting them, as well as his last book which was recently written with the title al-Bayānāt. He explains there with undisputed proof-texts the truth concerning the Ahmadīs [is] that they have deviated from the religion of the Muslims.  

Albānī was more verbose when it came to Ṣūfī practices, presumably because Ṣūfism was much more widespread in his native Damascus and, as we will have opportunity to examine later, wielded considerable influence among both laity and political officials. One such practice Albānī attacked in articles and lectures was the Ṣūfī practice of tawassul (intercession), whereby individuals seek divine intervention through either deceased or living holy persons. Rather than using the technique of takhrīj to demonstrate the weakness of the report “Seek intercession for my dignity, since before God my dignity is great,” Albānī went further and used Ibn Taymiyya’s writings to demonstrate the deviancy of tawassul – a strategy aimed more at discrediting the practice, and potentially the tradition of which it is a part, rather than determining the particular report’s authenticity. Albānī took the same approach with the more popular practice of grave visitation, which he described as “an innovated expression without a source in the law” and a “cultic practice” whose unacceptability is “known to anyone who smells the scent of pure

275 This will be examined in chapter 5 on Albānī’s pamphlets defining what he deemed to be “correct” ways of performing religious obligations, many of which were in response to the influence of Ṣūfism at the time.
276 Albānī, “Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-da’īfa: 3,” al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī 21: 29-30 (1954), pp. 657-664. Albānī did not at all examine the isnād of this report, and instead paraphrased Ibn Taymiyya’s al-Qā’ida al-Jalīla, in explaining that although Moses is described in the Qur’ān (S. 33:69) as wajīh (full of dignity) and that “Muhammad’s dignity is greater,” that tawassul is only permissible through the Prophet’s supplications (du’ā’) and not through his dignity or through his essence (dhātihi). Since, Albānī explained, performance of tawassul through the Prophet’s supplications was no longer possible after his death, so too tawassul in general is both “impossible and not permitted” after his death.
divine unicity.” Indeed, Albānī evidently considered grave visitation to be so obviously un-Islamic that he did not even feel the need to cite a text in support of his view, mentioning only “the books of Ibn Taymiyya.”

Beyond disputing the reliability of the reports on which these practices were based, Albānī’s central concern was defining for his readership what constituted un-Islamic practices and pointing out their manifestations in society. One aspect of the latter were the accusations Albānī leveled at his adversaries in positions of institutional authority, describing them as defenders of errant practices. In other cases, Albānī retroactively endowed the Şūfī label with negative connotations, presumably hoping to popularize a new way of discussing it and similar religious associations he deemed unacceptable. On one occasion, for example, when he described the unreliability of a report, Albānī wrote, “As I see it, the individual who fabricated this report is an ignorant Şūfī who wished to spread among the Muslims some of the false Şūfī creeds.”

Albānī also used his column on ḥadīth criticism as a forum to delegitimize the new the ideology of Arab nationalism, which by the 1950’s had made inroads into the political establishment. On one occasion, he discussed Arab identity

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279 Notable among these was his attack on Muhammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (d. 1951) for citing a report in which Shāfiʿī allegedly performed tawassul at the grave of Abū Ḥanīfa when he arrived in Baghdad. Kawtharī, a staunch Ḥanafī, an Ottoman official, and a Māturīdī theologian, wielded his considerable influence on the curriculum at the Azhar to marginalize Ḥanafī theological works and the views of his Salafī contemporaries (see chapter 6). See idem, “Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ḍaʿīfa: 3,” al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī 21: 29-30 (1954), pp. 657-664, at: 662.
281 This paragraph until the end of p. 102 are reproduced verbatim from Olidort, “the Politics of ‘Quietist’ Salafism,” 10-11.
through the ḥadīth “If the Arabs become lowly Islam will become lowly,” concerning which he explained that “the strength of Islam is not connected only to Arabs but rather God strengthens it through other believers, as was the case during the period of the Ottoman Empire, especially during its beginning.” For Albānī, “an Arab has no virtue over a foreigner except through piety,” and, by extension, it was only when the Ottoman Empire issued European laws that “their rule shrank . . . until they withdrew from their own lands.”

Acknowledging the threat Arab nationalism posed to what he considered the exclusive normative authority of the Prophet’s sunna, Albānī devoted a long excursus to explaining that it is only because of its Islamic heritage that Arabness achieved any distinction. In the ḥadīth section of the journal’s 1956 issue, departing well beyond the realm of ḥadīth science, he wrote:

This does not deny the fact that Arabness is better than other nations, and this is what I believe – despite my being Albanian, but I am Muslim, thank God . . . But it is important that an Arab not take pride in his Arabness since that is the stuff of Jāhiliyya which our Arab prophet nullified . . . Likewise, [an Arab] should not forget the reason for an Arab’s entitlement to virtue . . . namely . . . that they are carriers of the Islamic call to the other nations. [Only] when an Arab knows and preserves this will he be able to be an upright participant in carrying the Islamic call. But if he gives this up, he has no trace of virtue. [Indeed,] without doubt the foreigner who acts with Islamic qualities is better than [that Arab,] since true virtue is following the faith and knowledge that the Prophet brought. Whoever is more capable [of following this] is more virtuous, for virtue is located in the terms defined in the Qur’ān and sunna, [terms] such as ‘Islam’ (al-Islām), ‘belief’ (al-īmān), ‘reverence’ (al-bīr), ‘piety’ (al-taqwā), ‘knowledge’ (al-ʿilm), ‘righteous deeds’ (al-ʿamal al-ṣāliḥ), ‘benevolence’ (al-iḥsān) and the like, and not [in the determination that] someone is an Arab or a foreigner.

In these lengthy comments that clearly went beyond both the content of the original ḥadīth in question, to say nothing of isnād analysis, Albānī demonstrated the great

flexibility that the medium of the journal allowed him in promoting his vision and steering public opinion about practices and ideas he deemed unacceptable for Muslims. By integrating these cultural and personal themes into the framework of ḥadīth analysis, he extended the sphere of what ḥadīth scrutiny encompassed and demonstrated his authority on these issues due to his mastery of ḥadīth sciences.

Besides departing thematically from the subject of ḥadīth scrutiny and appealing to the social and political interests and associations of his readership, he showed equal familiarity with their secular literature and knowledge base and integrated these into his ḥadīth analyses. For example, supplementing his critique of an isnād of a report concerning why the sun does not burn what is on the earth, he added that,

[The report’s] contradiction to what has been established in astronomy adds [to its weakness], since [astronomy] explains that the reason for the sun’s not burning what is on the face of the earth is its great distance from the earth, measured at ‘approximately one hundred million kilometers,’ as is stated in the book *Ilm al-falak* (Astronomy) by Ṭālib al-Sābūn, which is taught in the eleventh grade.  

In a rare foray into medicine, in a 1960 article in his Ṣaḥīha series Albānī not only showed his literacy in non-religious texts, but also the applicability of his ḥadīth analysis to medical discoveries. In a column comparing the ḥadīth “One of the wings of a fly carries poison and the other a cure” with the corroborating findings of science concerning the transmission of bacteria on the wings of flies, Albānī concluded with the following assessment:

Many people are confused in thinking that this ḥadīth contradicts what doctors have established concerning the fact that flies carry bacteria on their wings and that if they fall into food or drink those bacteria fall into [the food and drink]. The truth is that the ḥadīth does not contradict the doctors in this matter but rather supports them since it states that one of the wings contains a malady, but it also adds to their view by stating ‘the other [has] a cure.’

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After comparing the evidence of ḥadīth texts with those of modern medicine,

Albānī then argued that not only are the two complementary, but that the former is
superior since it is based on the divinely-inspired guidance of the Prophet.

Specifically, unlike the field of medice – which progresses through the
disagreement of researchers’ findings – ḥadīth science is based around a unified
acceptance of the Prophet’s message.\textsuperscript{286} He wrote:

\begin{quote}
…modern medicine does not attest to the soundness of this ḥadīth, since the views of
doctors differ concerning its [teaching]. I have read many articles in various
journals, each containing either what supports or refutes it, but we [Muslims]
through our traits believe in the soundness of the ḥadīth and that the Prophet ‘does
not speak based on whim for his is an inspiration inspired.’ We are not concerned
with whether this ḥadīth is established from the perspective of medicine, since the
خلاف is a self-sufficient proof (ḥujja qā ‘ima fi nafsihi) and does not need outside
support.\textsuperscript{287}
\end{quote}

Albānī considered his \textit{Da’īfa} and \textit{Ṣaḥīḥa} as part of the same project of steering
society away from weak reports, and thus from wayward practices and beliefs. In
introducing the \textit{Ṣaḥīḥa} he wrote, “it was also necessary to present sound ḥadīth reports
alongside [the weak ones], since the knowledge of the sound reports does not necessarily
follow from knowledge of weak ones.”\textsuperscript{288} In addition to tracing reports, he explained, the
aim of this second series was to mention which legal rulings (fiqh) and linguistic points
(al-fawāʾid al-lughawiyya) might be derived from them.\textsuperscript{289} In this way, whereas the
\textit{Da’īfa} served as a catalogue of all those aspects of his society he deemed to be un-
Islamic, the \textit{Ṣaḥīḥa} was a kind of reference for how to reframe the sphere of acceptable
“Islamic” ideas and practices. Just as Albānī extended the applicability of ḥadīth science

\textsuperscript{286} It was, of course, not entirely fair for Albānī to have made this argument since, as he knew well and
argued explicitly in his vision of a ḥadīth methodology during this period, the very crux of ḥadīth science is
the infinite possibility of refining the determination of a report’s soundness, as we will see in chapter 7.
\textsuperscript{289} Ibid., 7.
to a range of seemingly non-religious issues, so too in his Ṣaḥīḥa Albānī deliberately blurred the distinction between law and what he called “points to be noted” (fawā‘iḍ, sing. fā‘iḍa), demonstrating that it made no difference to which area of life a particular issue belonged when it came to a Muslim’s following the Prophet’s normative guidance.²⁹⁰

By far the most common articles in this series concerned relations with fellow Muslims as well as etiquette and personal habits. The discussions cover a broad range of subjects and are highly detailed. Along with the mantra of adhering closely to any report deemed sound, Albānī’s discussions were occasionally laden with categorical language concerning why he considered something prohibited. Examples of this included Albānī’s insistence that mentioning God and the Prophet at every gathering (majlis) is legally required, and that failure to do so results in Hellfire.²⁹¹ His evidence for this was the phrase in one of the reports cited “they entered Heaven as a reward,” which Albānī understood to mean a reward for praying for the Prophet. Just as this was “a reward for [that individual’s] faith,” by implication, its omission would result in Hellfire. Likewise, deeming sound a number of reports in which the Prophet greeted (sallama ‘alā) worshippers, Albānī emphasized that greeting everyone in a mosque is considered sunna and denounced as “fanatics” those who did not do so.²⁹² In another discussion of greetings, he described handshakes (muṣāfāha) as a sunna based on the actions of the Prophet “which is the means of purging the sins of hand-shakers” (sabab tasāqūṭ dhunūb

al-muṣāfīḥīn), while kissing the hand of a teacher is merely permitted and should not be made into an “enduring sunna.”293 Finally, following a takhrīj of the report “The single traveler is Satan, two travelers are two Satans, and three are travelers,” not only did Albānī write that it is forbidden (taḥrīm) for a Muslim to travel either alone or with one partner, but also that this report contains “a clear refutation of the practice of some of the Ṣūfīs of departing alone into the wilderness to cleanse their souls, as they claim.”294 Albānī also offered an interesting, if unusual, interpretation of the phrase “the houses of Satans” (buyūt al-shayāṭīn) in one report as connoting “ostentatious cars,” writing at the end of the article,

It is clear that the Prophet meant by ‘the houses of Satans’ these ostentatious cars that some people drive with haughtiness and pride. Whenever they pass some of those who need a ride they do not take them. They regard taking them as conflicting with their haughtiness and arrogance!295

In these cases not only did aspects of daily living have guidelines in the sound ḥadīth reports, but, according to Albānī’s understanding of these reports, their actions or omissions had real theological consequences.

Albānī was equally precise concerning how Muslims were expected to interact with non-Muslims in various settings, and here also explained these relations within the context of belief (īmān). In his first article in the series on this subject titled “What One Should Say When Passing the Grave of an Unbeliever,” Albānī wrote at length concerning the legal implications of the ḥadīth “Whenever you pass the grave of an unbeliever, inform him (bashshirhu) of [his place in] Hellfire,”

In this ḥadīth there is an important lesson that most books of law neglect, that is the legal obligation (mashrūʿ iyya) of informing the unbeliever of Hellfire whenever one

passes his grave. The legal requirement to awaken the believer and to remind him of the weightiness of this unbelief is clear…and the ignorance of this lesson is what drives some Muslims to the point of going against what the Noble Lawgiver desired of them. We know that many Muslims visit the lands of unbelief to attend to particular matters. Not content [with merely fulfilling these aims during their travels,] they visit graves of those whom they call ‘great men’ (‘ūjamā’ al-rijāl) among the unbelievers, and place flowers and small foods, and stand before them in awe and sadness…regardless of the fact that the proper [way] to follow the prophets demands action contrary to this…

In the context of one report in which ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib buried his father despite the latter having died a polytheist, Albānī concluded that among the lessons of the ḥadīth are the fact that it “instructs the Muslim to arrange for the burial of his polytheist relative,” and that this requirement “does not nullify [the Muslim’s] rejection [of] his polytheism.” Nonetheless, Albānī was quick to clarify that there was a particular way of arranging for the burial of a non-Muslim that was also legally binding on a Muslim – namely, that it, does not require [the Muslim] to wash him, wrap him [in a shroud for burial], or pray for him, even if he is a relative, since the Prophet did not command ‘Alī to do this…It is not legally obligatory for relatives of the polytheist to follow his funeral procession since the Prophet did not do this with his uncle, despite [the latter] being the most loyal to him of all people…

Writing on the subject of “Consequences of One Who Does Not Believe in the Prophet” Albānī concluded that “whoever heard the Prophet and what he sent…and then did not believe in the Prophet, his fate is in Hellfire, and there is no distinction in this between Jew, Christian, Zoroastrian or atheist.”

Just as there did not exist a clear distinction between legal requirements and mere “points of interest” as far as following the Prophet’s normative guidance, in later Šaḥīḥa

articles (from 1961-1963), Albānī used more explicit language to instruct his readers on those leaders they are required to follow. Indeed, during these years Albānī lived in Saudi Arabia – the cradle of Salafism and the region’s bastion of opposition to Arab nationalism – which no doubt informed his confidence in openly counseling his readers to avoid “[taking orders from] anyone in disobeying (maṣiya) God Almighty, whether it be rulers, scholars or teachers.” Predictably, he included in this category “those who champion the positions of the madhhab over those of the Prophet.” Another group in this category were “those in authority who legislate…systems and laws that go against the [divine] law,” and cited Communism as an example. “This is a calamity that many who call to knowledge and reform have imbibed in this time, such that many among the masses have been deceived by it.”

The importance of the Silsilatayn cannot be overstated. Indeed, their prevalence on the Internet today, usually with little comment or additional references, points to their uncritical acceptance in certain lay circles. Even the series name evokes the similar-sounding Sahihayn of Bukhārī and Muslim – perhaps a deliberate and clever branding strategy on Albānī’s part. Ironically, one byproduct of this dependence on the Silsilatayn is further confusion concerning the scope of ḥadīth criticism and its sources. The discussion of the ḥadīth “Seek intercession for my dignity, since before God my dignity is great,” for example, on the online forum Islamweb.net provides the following terse conclusion: “This ḥadīth is forged (mawḍū’) as shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya and

300 Such an explicit statement, coupled with his pamphlets on his ḥadīth-based legal vision, might very well have aggravated his Ḥanbali Saudi hosts, leading to his ouster from the country in 1963. For more on this event, see chapter 6.
shaykh Albānī said in *Silsilat al-ahādīth al-daʿīfa.* Another website, *IslamQA.com,* gets Albānī’s conclusion “lā aṣl lahu” correct but confuses which of Ibn Taymiyya’s works mentions it. There, in response to the question “What is the status of the ḥadīth ‘Seek intercession for my dignity, since before God my dignity is great’?” the moderator responds, “This ḥadīth has no source. Ibn Taymiyya and Albānī said: It has no source.”

As an easily-accessible corpus of Albānī’s ḥadīth criticisms, the *Silsilatayn* are widely cited in various social and political commentary. One flyer concerning “Prohibited and Polytheistic Expressions” produced by an Islamic media company relies on no less than fourteen citations from the *Silsilatayn* in its list of prohibited expressions, and in supporting the view that those who utter them enter Hellfire. Following the death of Pope Shenouda III in March 2012, a Salafī website featured a long discussion on the question of “Is [A Particular Unbeliever] Judged to be in Hellfire,” in which Albānī’s *Ṣaḥīḥa* discussion of the obligation to remind an unbeliever of his place in Hellfire when passing his grave appears quoted in full. Of course, Albānī’s independent treatises on these issues and citation of these other works in his columns had much to do with marketing his views. However, it is also clear here that his treatment of such a broad array of actions he described as “prohibited” or “obligatory” in a single collection made

306 This, for example, was the case with his *Aḥkām al-janāʿī* (Funerary Rites), which included a discussion of what one must do when passing the grave of an unbeliever.
this a uniquely effective project for readers looking to find quick answers concerning the permissibility of a wide range of statements and actions.

“The publishing house [al-Maktab al-Islāmī] transformed into a kind school of tradition, first in Damascus and then in Beirut, where the scholars among the sons of the Levant, who would soon become famous in both the Arab and Islamic worlds, worked.” – al-Hayāt obituary for publisher Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh, 4 June 2013.307

‘Affā b. ‘Abd Allāh Āl Thānī, emir of Qatar: “What do you want to do? Perhaps I can help you in your work?”
Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh: “I wish to apply myself to publishing books. If you have a book that you want to publish, I could publish it for you.” – An account of the beginning of al-Maktab al-Islāmī.308

Albānī’s life changed in 1957, when he was approached by a young member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh (d. 2013), and the Salafī scholar ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Bānī (d. 2011) to join Shāwīsh’s new publishing house, al-Maktab al-Islāmī (The Islamic Bookstore). 309 This was an offer Albānī could not refuse, and his decision to hand over his watch business to his brother Munīr and join the publishing house’s staff as an editor and ḥadīth tracer (mukharrij) for the next three decades gave him the financial security and time he needed to devote to his scholarship.

Besides enabling Albānī to devote more time to his work at the Zāhiriyya Library, which by the 1950’s had given him his own set of keys and a study room, al-Maktab al-Islāmī served as a unique vehicle for propelling Albānī’s career and international stature during these years. Founded through the patronage of the Qatari royal family, and later the support of the Saudi royal family and the Grand Muftī ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Bāz (d. 1999), al-Maktab al-Islāmī quickly emerged as a transregional hub of Salafism,

with its staff of Syrian, Egyptian and Saudi scholars editing scores of medieval Ḥanbalī
texts and its expanding network of patrons across the Gulf. When Albānī was neither
in the library nor traveling to other Syrian cities to teach, he was with Shāwīsh on the
latter’s travels to dignitaries in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, thereby spreading his own
personal network and name far beyond Syria and Lebanon.

This partnership, however, was not entirely without its complications. Although
Albānī and Shāwīsh were both engaged in providing what they saw as the public service
of disseminating texts of the Salafi heritage, the roles, responsibilities and even
ownership rights of the professional titles they used – mukharrīj (ḥadīth-tracer),
muḥaqiq (editor) and nāshir (publisher) – were far from clearly defined. Indeed, their
backgrounds too did not help this matter. Besides his business acumen and renowned
manuscript collection, Shāwīsh had an ijāza in ḥadīth from Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī, the
towering Damascene ḥadīth scholar of the time, while Albānī did not. By the 1980’s, the
escalating competition between Albānī and Shāwīsh, coupled with the international
stature and independence that Albānī had acquired by that point, led a hostile break
between the two of them. In the “only legal version” reissues of many of his earlier
works from those years onwards with different publishers, Albānī not only criticized
what he viewed as Shāwīsh’s poor ḥadīth attribution, but even accused Shāwīsh of
violating Albānī’s rights to the works because of Shāwīsh’s use of the expression “under

310 “Rahīl al-nāshir Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh…mu’assis al-Maktab al-Islāmī.”
the publisher’s supervision” (*bi-ishrāf al-nāshir*) – a phrase Albānī strategically called “a *bid’a* of the age.”

Beyond the immediate personal interests and fortunes at stake in this feud between Albānī and Shāwīsh, there was also the deeper ontological question concerning the place of religious authority within the modern professional landscape. Specifically, what, if any, were the implications of the functions of *muḥāqqiq*, *mukharrij* and *nāshir* for shepherding the transmission of religious knowledge? It is this question that Walid Saleh, for example, tries to address when he asks, “At what moment does an editor, especially editors in the Arab world, become a member of those contributing to the process of historical assessment?” Not only did this process fundamentally impact the ways in which religious texts were taught and read in the modern period but, in the case of Salafism, it was an essential dimension of how the Salafi canon of texts and ideas was constructed, and by whom.

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Recent scholarship has noted the role of the publishing house in advancing the currency of the “Salafi” label.\(^{314}\) Crediting the Cairo-based Salafiyya Press and Bookstore with “influenc[ing] the perceived meaning of salafiyya and [leading] some observers to believe that the term stood for a broad movement of Islamic modernism,” Lauzière is correct in highlighting how this bookstore, like others that emerged in the twentieth century, contributed in a unique way to the visibility and commodification of the Salafi movement.\(^{315}\) Specifically, as Yves González-Quijano asks in the relationship between the publishing industry and Islamism in Egypt, “To what extent did the evident Islamization of publishing in the Arab and Muslim world coincide with and produce a vast social and political transformative movement?”\(^{316}\)

While, just as with the advent of journalism, the publishing industry helped bring texts and ideas to broader and more geographically diverse audiences, the production of books in particular had an added dimension of managing this dissemination of knowledge


by concurrently providing a kind of finalized and authoritative text. Such a culture of authoritative text production, as well as guidelines and contexts for their transmission – aspects of what Brinkley Messick calls a “textual polity” – were of course well-established in the Islamic scholarly tradition, with the manuals of jurisprudential and ḥadīth. In the light of this particular tradition of textual production and transmission – and their role in institutionalizing the scholarly contexts in which it took shape – the publishing house may be seen as a core aspect of an alternative Salafī “textual polity” to rival it.

As the following chapter will show, it was this weighty task of defining the Salafī “textual polity,” combined with the evolving responsibilities and processes of book publishing during this period, that both helped catapult Albānī into a particular league of interpreters of the Salafī heritage while, at the same time, demanded that he define the authoritative place of the mukharrij within this new professional setting. After a brief sketch of Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh and the circumstances in which he founded al-Maktab al-Islāmī and built its staff and operations, we will take a closer look at how he and Albānī negotiated their roles as nāshir/muḥaqiq and mukharrij respectively in the margins of the editions on which they collaborated.

317 Messick, The Calligraphic State, 6, where he defines a “textual polity” as “entail[ing] both a conception of an authoritative text, involving structures of authorship, a method of instructional transmission, institutions of interpretation, and modes of documentary inscription, and a pattern of textual authority, which figures in state legitimacy, the communication of cultural capital, relations of social hierarchy, and the control of productive resources.”
A Partner in Publishing: Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh

Much like Albānī’s early life, a snapshot of Shāwīsh’s upbringing and early career shows an individual committed to the scholarly aspects of his tradition as well as to the physical defense of his community. Although a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and one fully involved in their experiences in Syria (even representing the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian Parliament in 1961), in reflecting back on his life Shāwīsh claimed that he “was a Salafī from the beginning.”318 Born in 1925, Shāwīsh recounted that he grew up in two worlds: the bustling Maydān neighborhood in Damascus and on the road – usually to Egypt and Iraq – with his father, a merchant.319 Indeed, as Hanna Batatu describes, not only was the Maydān neighborhood a commerce hub in the 1930’s and 1940’s – being one of the country’s most important centers for the grain trade – but was also a nexus of revolutionary ideas, especially in light of the great uprising of 1925-1927, and thus “played a role in shaping the nationalist sentiments of the founders of the Ba'ath party in the heyday of their youth.”320

Reflecting the revolutionary spirit of this neighborhood, Shāwīsh described himself as “a fighter” (mujāhid) who, in the late 1930’s, found himself among refugee Palestinian fighters settled in the Maydān neighborhood. “The Maydān neighborhood where I lived was the center of the Palestinian movement in Damascus,” he recalled. “Anyone who lost a home was there, any youth who wanted weapons, anyone who was injured and needed treatment went there, and I was among them in 1936 and 1938,”

318 Ḥadīth al-dhikrayyāt ma’a al-shaykh Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh.
319 Ibid.
320 Hanna Batatu, Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 134. Batatu also mentions that three of the four members of the Ba'th Executive Bureau that was created in 1945 – Michel ‘Aflaq, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Bīṭār and Midjat al-Bīṭār – were sons of grain dealers (bawāykiyya).
Shāwīsh recounted. He noted that his teacher ‘Aṭiyya ‘Ahmad, a head of one of ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām’s units, “despite little knowledge was still a Salafī and taught us when we were children.”\(^{321}\) In much the same way that Albānī recalled his dropping out of school as a God-sent grace that allowed him to pursue his independent studies, for Shāwīsh leaving school in third grade allowed him to both develop his business skills and to join the fight in Palestine since, as he explained, “jihād is better than education.”\(^{322}\) Eventually his activism brought him into the fight against the French in 1945, and then against the British and Zionists in 1946 and 1949 under the leadership of the muftī Ḥājj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī (d. 1974) and the head of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Muṣṭafā al-Sibā’ī.\(^{323}\)

Shāwīsh’s watershed moment as a publisher came during his first visit to Qatar in 1941, when he began working as a teacher in the country’s only elementary school. Two days after his arrival he was introduced to the country’s chief judge, ‘Abd Allāh b. Zayd Āl Maḥmūd (d. 1997), and to the emir ‘Alī b. ‘Abd Allāh Āl Thānī (d. 1974). With his pedagogical experience, Shāwīsh was quickly commissioned to publish religious educational materials for elementary school.\(^{324}\) He and the emir became close and began meeting on a weekly basis until, as Shāwīsh recalled, “I became a kind of adviser to him on many matters.” Shāwīsh’s relationship with the Qatari royal family grew throughout his career, with visits by him and Albānī in the 1970’s to Khalīfa b. Ḥamad Āl Thānī (b. 1942).

\(^{321}\) “Ḥadīth al-dhikrayāt ma’ a Dr. Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh al-juz’ al-thānī.”

\(^{322}\) Ibid.

\(^{323}\) In addition to his participation in the Palestinian cause, the issue appeared in his writings as well. His main work on this subject is his *al-Malḥūzāt ‘alā al-mawsū’a al-Filasṭīniyya*, third edition (Beirut: al-Maktab al-İslāmî, 1989), which, as he wrote on the title page of this work, he intended as an effort to “preserve what of Palestine is ours… and what belongs to the religion of God of its sacredness…” and which he dedicated to “the unknown martyr who fights in Palestine to elevate the word of God.”

1932) and even participating in the washing of ‘Alī Āl Thānī’s body following the latter’s
death in Beirut and leading the prayers over him.\footnote{Ibid.; “Bukā’ al-kutub wa-l-karāfīs ‘alā wafāt al-shaykh Muḥammad Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh.”}

Eventually, as Shāwīsh described it, the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Qatar
opened a “Department for the Revival of the Islamic Heritage” (\textit{Idārat iḥyā’ al-turāth al-Islāmī}) under the supervision of the emir, whose aim it was to publish Islamic books
largely chosen by the Najdi scholar Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Māni’ (d. 1965) and
Qatar’s Director of Education Qāsim b. Darwīsh Fakhrū (d. 1992).\footnote{Ibid. For a discussion of Ibn Māni’ and Fakhrū’s shared interest in publishing Ḥanbalī texts, and of the

Indeed, Shāwīsh’s earliest publications before he began using the name “al-Maktab al-Islāmī” feature on the
cover and in introductions phrases such as “published through the support of \textit{shaykh ‘Alī}
b. \textit{shaykh ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Qāsim al-Thānī}, the ruler of Qatar…and this is through the
interest (\textit{ihtimām}) of Qāsim b. Darwīsh Fakhrū.”\footnote{Ibid. For a discussion of Ibn Māni’ and Fakhrū’s shared interest in publishing Ḥanbalī texts, and of the

With this support, Shāwīsh’s began copying and publishing “tens of books” and,
in 1957, opened his own publishing house in the Ḥalbūnī neighborhood of Damascus, al-
Maktab al-Islāmī.\footnote{One account cites the publishing house opening date as 1950. See Dhuwālghanī, “Raḥīl al-shaykh al-mujāhid Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh.”}

Its inner mechanics were perhaps just as fascinating as its history.
Although, based on the early works it published, it seemed to have functioned as a
vehicle for extending Wahhābism and Ḥanbalī writings into the Levant,\footnote{As indicated by the dominant representation of Wahhābī and Ḥanbalī titles among its earliest
al-Maktab al-
Islāmī also became a showcase for a cadre of Syrian editors, Albānī among them, who came to serve as interpreters of this heritage. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Arnāʾūṭ (d. 2004) was its director of editing from 1959 until 1968, and Shuʿayb al-Arnāʾūṭ, Shāwīsh and Albānī were among its most active editors, with the aforementioned Ibn Māniʿ overseeing the edition of Ḥanbalī texts in the early years. While occasionally also editing works, much more of Albānī’s efforts seemed to have been confined to “tracing” ḥadīth reports (takhrīj), with Shāwīsh listed as the publisher (al-nāshir), also penning introductions to the texts and authors and contextualizing them within the pre-modern Salafī tradition.330 Most other notable Salafī and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated scholars in Damascus contributed, including Bīṭār, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Bānī, Muḥammad Luṭfī al-Šabbāgh (b. 1930), the Ḥanbalī scholar ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ḥattāwī (d. 1981) and Muslim Brotherhood member Aḥmad al-Quṭayfānī.

In addition to editing manuscripts from the Salafī “heritage” (turāth), which was dominated by pre-modern works of Ḥanbalī law, ḥadīth, and creedal tracts, al-Maktab al-Islāmī also published more recent works on various subjects by contemporary authors with non-Salafī credentials, like Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (b. 1926), whose famous al-Ḥalāl wa-l-ḥarām fī l-Islām (The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam) was republished by al-Maktab al-Islāmī at the insistence of the emir’s son, Fahd b. ‘Alī Āl Thānī.331 In 1963,

330 Occasionally, in distinguishing Albānī’s comments as editor from those of Shāwīsh as publisher, one finds in footnotes Albānī’s statement followed by “Nāṣir” in parentheses, followed by another statement by Shāwīsh, with “Zuhayr” in parentheses. See, for example, Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām, Kitāb al-īmān, ed. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, second edition (Beirut, Damascus: al-Maktab al-Islāmī 1983), 10, fn. 1

331 In 1980, Albānī published his edition of Qaraḍāwī’s al-Ḥalāl wa-l-ḥarām which includes the former’s hadīth tracings, titled Ghāyat al-marām fī takhrīj aḥādīth al-ḥalāl wa-l-ḥarām. Among the other titles by contemporary authors: ‘Abd Allāh Āl Maḥmūd, Yusr al-Islām fī manāsik ḥajj bayt Allāh al-ḥarām

“due to government pressure,” as Shāwīsh recalled, the publishing house shut down its Damascus operations and moved to Beirut, while a number of its employees were imprisoned by the Ba’th government. Shāwīsh himself moved, once again, to Qatar and resumed work there before moving to Beirut and settling there. A publishing house with the similar name al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya (The Islamic Bookstore) was established by Şuhrī Niẓām Sakkijhā (d. 2009) in Amman and became the main distributor of al-Maktab al-Islāmī’s publications, including many of Albānī’s pamphlets written in Jordan during the last two decades of his life when he lived in that country.

Of Editors and Ḥadīth “Tracers” as Interpreters

Although Albānī shared many interests with his Gulf-based patrons, especially with regards to matters of creed, publishing his writings in book form also served his own personal aims by giving greater visibility to his purported mastery of ḥadīth science, and for popularizing his own ideas for society. As mentioned previously, he was invited to join the publishing house because of his record tracing ḥadīth reports. His works

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332 It should be noted that while Albānī published largely with al-Maktab al-Islāmī, he also published occasionally with a number of other publishing houses during this period. Specifically, the Kuwaiti Dār al-Arqam published first editions of his Min kunūz al-sunna (their second edition was put out by al-Maktab al-Islāmī, and a later “only legal edition” published by Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif in the 1990’s, as mentioned previously). He also republished his Naqd nūṣūṣ hadīthīyya fī al-thaqāfā al-‘āmma and his al-Radd ‘alā al-ta’qīb al-hathīth, both originally appearing as articles in al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī, with Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī’s (d. 1953) press, Maṭba‘at al-Taraqqī.

333 We will have opportunity to examine some of these in the next chapter. His pamphlets are especially interesting in cases where the positions he advocates differ markedly from those of his Gulf-based patrons likely held, such as his controversial Hijāb al-mar‘a al-Muslima in which he argued that a woman’s face does not constitute part of her nakedness (‘awra) and thus does not need to be covered. Arguably, this speaks to the pragmatism of his Qatari patrons and such views, of course, would not have been tolerated by a Saudi publishing house.

published by al-Maktab al-Islāmī included editions of various texts from the pre-modern Salafī heritage (in particular, treatises on creed and editions of ḥadīth compendia\textsuperscript{335}) as well as smaller manuals defining religious obligations according to sound ḥadīth reports rather than according to the madhhab.\textsuperscript{336} These two genres of Islamic books were aimed at distinct audiences with distinct aims – the larger annotated turāth works usually for a specialized scholarly readership, while the latter “small media” pamphlets for the lay practitioner aimed at instructing him in the proper observance of Islamic norms. In what follows we will take a closer look at the partnership between Albānī and Shāwīsh in editing and abridging classical treatises of the Salafī heritage. By examining their comments and marginalia as measurements for how these two individuals framed the classical tradition, it is hoped this survey will demonstrate both how Albānī and Shāwīsh sought to present the relevance of this canon of works to a contemporary audience while, at the same time, positioning themselves as authoritative interpreters of these writings in their functions of editor (muḥaqiq) and “ḥadīth tracer” (mukharrij).\textsuperscript{337}

On one level, their contemporary circumstances served as the impetus for reviving particular pre-modern tracts, aiming through them to cure social ills. This objective is evident, for example, in an early work on which the two collaborated, *Musājala 'ilmīyya bayn al-imāmayn al-jalīlayn al-‘Izz b. ‘Abd al-Sallām wa-Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ hawla ṣalāt al-

\textsuperscript{335} These will be the subject of chapter 7. Although Albānī began his editions of the canonical ḥadīth compendia in 1949, he first began publishing them in the 1960’s and so will be treated within the personal and professional context of his life during that decade.

\textsuperscript{336} See chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{337} When working together on a manuscript, often Shāwīsh would explain that he edited the manuscript while Albānī traced its reports. There are also a number of works that Albānī edited and whose reports he traced, such as his edition of Ibn Taymiyya’s *al-Kalim al-Ṭayyib*, where, under the title, it simply states “bi-qalam…al-Albānī” (“by…Albānī”). Shāwīsh further asserted his role as publisher, with some works including a “publisher’s introduction” (muqaddimat al-nāshir).
raghāʿib al-mubtadaʿa (A Scholarly Exchange Between the Great Scholars al-ʿIzz b. ʿAbd al-Sallām and Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ Concerning the Innovated ‘Prayers of Wishes’), first published in 1960. In their introduction on the ʿṣalāt al-ragḥāʿib (Prayers of Wishes), the editors frame their edition through the following rhetorical question: “why publish this exchange now, when the ragḥāʿib prayers barely exist except among some Ṣūfīs and the elderly?” They reply that,

these forms of bidʿa which are intermixed into [the religion] are the most damaging thing to it, and the masses no longer know what God prescribed concerning some issues…When we finish reading this book we understand that bidʿa in religion is a deviation that leads to Hellfire, and that God does not allow the introduction of anything into the religion that is not of it, and that acting on anything other than what God commands is unacceptable…

Thus, as the editors continued, “by reading the book along with the preceding [introductory] comments…we lead the people to the right way and the straight path, the way of the Prophet.”

It was with this aim in mind that the editors deliberately presented the work as a historical case study in the way in which bidʿa was recognized and refuted. In the same introduction they wrote that when al-ʿIzz b. ʿAbd al-Sallām (d. 660) was appointed the imām of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus he “got rid of many forms of innovation, and forbade the ragḥāʿib prayers as well as those held in the middle of the month of Shaʿbān because they are bidʿa.” Reflecting on his ability to combine his scholarly views with his “correction” of prayers, Shāwīsh and Albānī called al-ʿIzz b. ʿAbd al-Sallām “a

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339 These prayers, which, as evidenced by the title of his edition Albānī considers bidʿa and therefore prohibited, are performed by some in preparation for Ramaḍān on the first of Rajab and on the fifteenth of Shaʿbān and consist of twelve bows.
341 Ibid., 14.
342 Ibid., 3-4.
scholar of jihād (kāna ‘āliman fī al-jihād) who fought with his pen and tongue, and with his sword and spear,”343 and cited as his targets both “the Crusaders and the Tatars” and “unacceptable matters and corruptions of the divine law.”344

By contrast, it is because Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ stood on what the editors deemed to be the wrong side of the debate on the subject of the raghāʿib prayers, that his biographical sketch is far less heroic despite his great stature as one of the most important pre-modern ḥadīth scholars. Albānī and Shāwīsh attempted to excuse Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s permissibility of the raghāʿib prayers as being based not on his religious learning but rather on his commendable fear of people introducing their own prayer to replace the raghāʿib – in other words, he was driven by the good intention of not encouraging further bidʿa. The editors thus emphasized that they “do not judge [Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ] according to …[his] good intention of fearing that the people be preoccupied with non-religious matters if they do away with this bidʿa…”345 To drive home the fact that the raghāʿib prayers are unacceptable, the editors appended fatwās by Nawawī, Ibn Taymiyya and Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī as well as statements from Ibn al-Ḥājj’s al-Madkhal and Nawawī’s student, ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-ʿAṭṭār concerning the prohibition of raghāʿib prayers. It is this through this biographical contrast between Ibn ‘Abd al-Sallām and Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, as well as its historical contextualization, that the editors emphasized their position that it is not enough to merely have respectable scholarly credentials but also to act on the correct interpretation of the religion.

343 Ibid., 18.
344 Ibid.
345 Ibid., 10.
In their other editions from the early 1960’s, Albānī and Shāwīsh continued to contextualize the contents of the pre-modern works within what they saw as its contemporary manifestations. Similarly, they praised pre-modern scholars who responded accordingly as role models for how their readers should confront similar issues during their time. Just like with the Musājala, their edition of Ibn Rajab’s (d. 1392) Kalimat al-ikhlāṣ was published “at a time when the people are in need of devotion (ikhlāṣ) in their [connection to] divine unicity (tawḥīduhum) and their deeds for God Almighty” – in other words, urging readers to direct their devotion exclusively to God, rather than to the political preoccupations of either nationalist or Islamist groups. 346 That word of devotion (kalimat al-ikhlāṣ), 347 the editors explained, “distinguishes between unbelief (kufr) and belief (īmān),” and was lost on “ignorant emulators” (al-jahala al-muqallidūn). 348 Just as with the heroic descriptions of al-‘Izz b. ‘Abd al-Sallām, the editors emphasized that Ibn Rajab “issued opinions based on the statements of Ibn Taymiyya” and although his writings contain “an inclination towards Ṣūfism” this was “due to his safeguarding God from [Ṣūfism’s] slipping away from the copious knowledge and Salafī method (manhāj Salafī) that God gave.” 349

Throughout the work the editors consistently singled out pre-modern scholars with superlatives showing their importance to shaping the Salafī orientation. When the text includes a report from Ibn Ḥanbal, the editors identified him in a footnote as “the great imām, the proof (al-ḥujja) the independent jurist (al-faqīh al-mujtahid) Abū ‘Abd Allāh

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347 The kalimat al-ikhlāṣ to which the title refers is the opening of the attestation of faith: “There is no God but God.
348 Ibn Rajab, Kalimat al-ikhlāṣ, 3.
349 Ibid., 5.
Ahmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥanbal, the patient one (al-ṣābir) the one who commands right and forbids wrong (al-muṭasib), defender of the sunna, the teacher of Bukhārī and Muslim.”

Likewise, they described Nasā’ī as “the most knowledgeable teacher in Egypt during his time…in ḥadīth and in [its] transmitters,” and Tirmidhī as “a model for memorization [of ḥadīth].”

Perhaps in an effort to introduce ḥadīth science as a critical discipline in determining creed, in his “treasures of the sunna” (kunūz al-sunna) series Albānī meticulously connected the statements he cited to Salafī polemical issues and to the credentials of the authors of the works. In his introduction to al-Qāsim b. Sallām (d. 838) in the latter’s Kitāb al-īmān, Albānī wrote in response to Ibn Sallām’s statement that “whoever follows the sunna is like one who clutches coal, and today this is more virtuous than whoever strikes a sword in the path of God Almighty,” that “if this was the case in his time, what should be said of our own time?”

Later in the same text, when Ibn Sallām mentions the Mu’ājīs and the Qaḍārīs, Albānī defined the Qaḍārīs as “those who reject divine predestination, among the Mu’tazilīs in the early period, and their ilk today!” In his edition of Ibn Abī Khaythama Zuhayr b. Ḥarb al-Nasā’ī (d. 848)’s Kitāb al-‘ilm (The Book on Knowledge), in a discussion of a ḥadīth in which ‘Umar wanted to

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350 Ibid., 59.
351 Ibid.
354 Ibid., 23.
write down the *sunna*, Āl-bānī provided a long footnote in which he explained that there
was “an old debate among the first generations concerning the writing down of the
Prophetic ḥadīth,” after which he reminds readers that

It is well known that the ḥadīth is that which contains the clarification of what is most beautiful in the Qur’ān and the details of its rulings. Were it not for ḥadīth then we would not know how to pray and fast, and perform other pillars and rituals according to the way in which God Almighty had intended them. And legal obligations emerge only from it. Today there are people who have strayed in claiming that they are not in need of the ḥadīth because they have the Qur’ān. But [the Qur’ān] has said “We have brought down to you the Message so that you may explain to the people what we have sent to them” [Q. 16: 44] and it states that there is an explanation…and that explanation is the Prophet and his ḥadīth…

Albānī’s edition of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s (d. 1070) *Iqtīdā’ al-‘ilm al-‘amal* (A Need for Knowledge and Actions) contains an important digression in the introduction meant to affirm Albānī’s credentials in ḥadīth. After providing a biographical sketch of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, a well-regarded ḥadīth scholar among Traditionalist Salafis, Albānī then described a “point of interest” (*fā’ida*) in which he asked rhetorically, “if this author [Khaṭīb] holds such a high place in his knowledge of ḥadīth …why is it that we see this book of his and others filled with unreliable ḥadīth reports?” He answered with the following assessment:

The principle among scholars of ḥadīth states that whenever the ḥadīth scholar discusses the chain of transmission, he is not responsible for it and is not held accountable for its transmission so long as he also provides a means for the scholar to attain knowledge of whether the ḥadīth mentioned is sound or not, namely the *isnād*.

The first priority for this scholar and for others is that they follow every report by explaining its status, whether sound or weak, but the reality is that that is not

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356 Ibid., 154.
357 In other words, that just because a particular ḥadīth scholar mentions the chain of transmission of a report, one should not immediately assume that he considers it sound until he either states that the case or instructs his readers how they can determine its soundness. This becomes a central aspect of Albānī’s attack on his contemporaries and a motivator for him to explain his ḥadīth methodology in his editions of ḥadīth compendia. See chapter 7.
possible for each one of them, and this is the case with many reports for many reasons which we do not have time to mention here.

However, I will mention the most important [reason] and that is that the soundness or weakness of many of the reports is not apparent until all of the paths and chains have been collected, and this is what helps determine the irregularities (‘ilal) of the report, and which reports are sound with respect to other reports (ṣahīḥ li-ghayrihi). If all hadith scholars aimed at verification and precision in identifying the sound from the false to the extent that they could – and God is most knowing – they would preserve for us this great wealth of reports and their chains of transmission...

Seeing that he did not sufficiently address the issue, Albānī added the following two paragraphs when the work was rereleased in 1984:

Since most people today do not have knowledge of chains or the transmissions, nor [knowledge of] the sound and weak reports, we saw it necessary to comment in this book and others in a manner that explains the cited ḥadīth reports, and some are ‘suspended’, with a discussion of some of their transmitters.

Whatever of the footnotes contains the letter “zāy” is the work of my brother Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh, who oversaw the publication of the book, its binding and its indexes...

These comments, particularly the lengthy introduction to al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s work, served to both reiterate platforms and methods that Albānī deemed central to his cause, as well as to position himself as tracer of ḥadīth reports. By the same token, his clarification of which comments were his and which were Shāwīsh’s at the end of this passage could be understood as a subtle effort to carve out a distinct place for him as an authoritative shepherd of this tradition, whereas Shāwīsh’s role as a publisher was limited to the work’s binding and indexes. Indeed, this is just one example of how Albānī and his employer sought not merely to edit a treatise on an aspect of the Salafī heritage, but to use the text to bolster their positions and authority.

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359 These were retained in the Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif version, along with the reference to Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh.
Ultimately, the dispute between Albānī and Shāwīsh centered on an essential vagueness concerning the relationship between an editor (muḥaqiq) and ḥadīth tracer (mukharrij) – important because of the confusion concerning not only ownership rights over these editions but, from a conceptual standpoint, the qualifications for interpreting these classical texts authoritatively. Albānī spelled out his grievances in the introduction to the fourteenth edition of his Ṣifat ṣalāt al-nabī. In addition to describing how he lost control over his works after his move to Jordan in 1980 and accusing Shāwīsh of both sloppiness in tracing ḥadīth reports and plagiarizing his work, Albānī concluded that Shāwīsh “acted unlawfully…with the discipline of ḥadīth tracing” because “he is not one of its people.”

The 1996 edition of the Kitāb al-Īmān contains interesting clues about how Shāwīsh sought to assert his authority over both Ibn Taymiyya’s text and Albānī’s work on its reports. Shāwīsh explained his function editing and publishing “what benefits the Muslim in his religion and worldly life.” This particular work by Ibn Taymiyya, Shāwīsh continued, contains a silencing refutation of the various agitators against Ibn Taymiyya. [These] include those who deem [him] an unbeliever and those who consider [him] deviant, those who deem him foolish and ignorant…This habit of the people of reprehensible innovation and deviation weakens them from facing the truth. But God reveals their stratagems in their slips of the tongue. Concerning what they reject it suffices to mention what God established about himself concerning His names and attributes, which are associated with His majesty, beauty and perfection. God is distinguished through them from any likeness or similarity, and here [Ibn Taymiyya] explained what God set down without interpretation (tāʾwīl) or denial [of attributes] (taʾṭīl). And all of the Companions followed this path, as well as all of the most knowledgeable scholars of the community, among them the four imāms [of the legal schools]… as well as those knowledgeable in creed such as imām Abū ʿAlī b. Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī.

362 Ibn Taymiyya, Kitāb al-īmān, ed. Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh and Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, fifth edition (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1996), 4. It is worth remembering here that while Salafīs scorn the institution of the madhhab and its later scholars, they hold the eponymous founders of the madhhab's
His two-page biographical sketch of Ibn Taymiyya includes surprisingly little about his ideas and writings, except for the fact that he “was interested in ḥadīth and law and in protecting the true creed,” and that “he wrote over three hundred works in various disciplines.”

Rather than discuss his ideas on creedal matters or even who his students were, Shāwīsh instead harkened back to his own personal experience in political activism by focusing on Ibn Taymiyya’s “defending the lands through the sword” against the Tatars during the Battle of Shaqḥab (1303), and his imprisonment after “asking the rulers to continue the jihād to eradicate the enemies of the community.” The rest of the biographical entry focuses on his prison experience.

Although most often the footnotes feature either details concerning the ḥadīth reports in Ibn Taymiyya’s text or identifications of people he mentioned, others include long digressions about Shāwīsh’s editorial process with Albānī. For example, in the discussion of one report, Shāwīsh mentioned that Albānī changed his mind about a report being acceptable and then went on to say that “It is permissible for Albānī and for others to change their view and judgment of a particular report…but it must be done with etiquette, and likewise his self-defense must be conducted with etiquette…but we do not find this today.”

More revealing are comments that point to tensions in “ownership” of materials, statements and, ultimately, of authority over the interpretation of the texts. In one case, for example, he referred to Masā‘īl Ibn Hāni’ (Ibn Hāni’’s Questions) and Masā‘īl ‘Abd

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363 Ibid., 5, 6.
364 Ibid.
365 Ibid., 6.
366 Ibid., 41.
Allāh (‘Abd Allāh’s Questions), as “my editions” and signed his name, “Zuhayr” at the end of the footnote. In another section where Albānī cited Muḥammad al-Marwazī’s Kitāb al-salāt (Book on Prayer), Shāwīsh added, “May God help us return to this copy, since the remaining portions of the manuscript and our rights to it are with the wrongdoer (al-zālim) [i.e. Albānī] !!” Likewise, he described a later edition of Albānī’s Ṣaḥīḥ al-Adab al-mufrad not published with al-Maktab al-Islāmī as an “illegal edition.”

In this work, which includes identifications of which comments were made by Shāwīsh and which by Albānī (presumably to make clear to readers how involved the two were in editing the work), Shāwīsh asserted his authority in explaining ḥadīth reports and extending theological positions. He criticized the order in which Albānī cited two transmissions of a ḥadīth in which Ibn ‘Abbās’s appears before ‘Ā’isha’s. He also identified Albānī’s inconsistency in deeming a report “a lie from the Prophet” in one work while deeming it sound elsewhere. In another note, he accused Albānī of naming God by other than His names when he erroneously attributed the phrase “al-ḥamdu li-l-lāh” to the father of Anas b. Mālik, adding “[this is one of] tens of statements that could only be made to make the people more ignorant and to change their views. We only say: May God pardon his state and forgive us and him.”

Based on this overview of the beginnings of al-Maktab al-Islāmī and the survey of the early editions on which Shāwīsh and Albānī collaborated, it is clear that not only were

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367 Ibid., 198.
368 Ibid., 245.
369 Ibid., 27.
370 In some cases when a work was written or edited by Albānī, Shāwīsh adds “arranged by Shāwīsh” (tartīb al-Shāwīsh). See, for example, ibid., 10, 12, 13.
371 Ibid., 58. The issue here is that ‘Ā’isha holds a more central place in Islamic tradition, being the wife of the Prophet, than Ibn ‘Abbās, and so should take precedence when their reports are cited.
372 Ibid., 85.
the efforts of publishing houses essential for controlling the distribution of the pre-
modern Salafi heritage, but that defining how these texts were edited was equally integral
to determining who may do so. In this way, Albānī’s relationship with al-Maktab al-
Islāmī illuminates vividly the shift from personal dependence (especially in employing
him and giving him access to an international readership) to professional competition, in
particular once Albānī experienced challenges in controlling his role in distributing this
literature. Ultimately, the collaborations and, eventually, collisions between
editor/publisher and ḥadīth tracer in this case – just as other tensions in religious authority
in the modern Sunnī experience – had as much to do with the creation of a new scholarly
context (the cadre of editors working for the publishing house) as it did with the
superimposition of traditional scholarly pursuits such as ḥadīth scholarship onto this new
professional landscape.
Sunna and Small Media: Translating Public Rites into Popular Resistance

“Damascus knew its greatest ḥadīth scholar, the great scholar the shaykh Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī [sic]. When he died the region lost a leader whom people would seek out regarding ḥadīth science. However, there was a young Albanian who had an upbringing of religious knowledge and piety, and had great fortune come to him: the teacher Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn. He is known among the youth for his service to ḥadīth and its sciences. Young people gather around him, and he has become famous among them. Through the eloquence of his Arabic language, and the grace of his speech, and the seriousness of his debating and his madhhab science, and his timber of prayers, ‘al-muṣallā khārij al-balad hiya al-sunna.’ However, there is no doubt that reviving this sunna requires the foundation of a new group that calls upon all these other disparate groups in the many mosques. But the aim of this new group is to gather all the [other] groups into one, just as it was during the time of the Prophet and that of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs. It is necessary for this group to exist since a single community cannot rise except through it.” – Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, 1952.374

Albānī’s articles for al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī and his career as an editor with al-Maktab al-Islāmī – professional involvements he used in order to advance his personal ambition of promoting the exclusive authority of ḥadīth science, and himself as master of the discipline – mirrored a concurrent campaign he waged on the ground in Damascus. In the 1950’s, he produced a series of concise manuals on basic religious prescriptions such as prayer, pilgrimage, the veil, funerals and weddings – subjects relevant to all Muslims.375 Although he claimed that many originated as requests from followers or commissions in honor of celebrations, Albānī’s attempts at redefining these and other

375 The first of these that was his Ṣifat ṣalāt al-nabī min al-takbīr ilā al-taslīm ka-annaka tarāhā (Description of the Prophet’s Prayer from the takbīr to the taslīm as if You See It), which he finished writing in 1947, as indicated on the last page of the Aṣl edition. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, Aṣl Ṣifat ṣalāt al-nabī, 3 volumes (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Maʿārif, 2006), 3: 1041. Although the first edition of the book was not published until 1970, Albānī made repeated references to the Ṣifā in his writings in the 1950’s, suggesting that a complete draft might have existed by that point, even if it had not yet been published. The takbīr is shorthand for the opening formula of prayers, “Allāhu akbar.” The taslīm is shorthand for the closing formula of prayers, “al-salām ‘alaykum wa-raḥmat Allāh.”
religious observances that had been thoroughly explicated and rehearsed over the centuries were driven by another motive: to introduce what he deemed to be the authentic version of those practices based on the sound ḥadīth reports rather than on madhhab-based jurisprudence. Accordingly, Albānī argued that these universal Islamic practices required elucidation because “people today are so distant from the guidance of the Prophet.”

Some, such as his Ādāb al-zūfāf (Wedding Etiquette), allegedly written in honor of the wedding of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Bānī’s daughter, were distributed freely at celebrations, while others were available at around one Syrian pound each.

Of course, as a number of scholars have observed, popular pamphlets on Islamic practices were ubiquitous in dense urban areas like Damascus and Cairo in the early-mid twentieth century and were intimately linked with the Islamic revival during this period. Using the straightforward and simple language germane to this genre, Albānī’s pamphlets differ in one significant way. While such pamphlets, as Saba Mahmood

378 In 1955, one Syrian pound was equivalent to 28 cents which would be worth $2.44 in 2015 with inflation. Hanna Batatu provides indispensable information concerning literacy rates during this period that suggest such pamphlets were accessible to some, although far from a majority, of urban families in 1960. Establishing a precise figure for readership based on literacy rates, however, is especially difficult since one must also assume that these works were read aloud to large groups. Thus one can assume that the number of those who accessed the information in these works – between those reading and being read to – was potentially slightly higher than Batatu’s figures. Batatu tells us that out of a population of approximately 4.3 million that year, about 32% of the urban population could either only read or both read and write (about 42% of men and about 21% of women), while 12% received primary certificates (about 15% of men and 8.5% of women) and 5.7% received certificates from secondary institutions (7.8% of men and 3.5% of women). As to income, a survey in 1953 estimated the yearly national average income at 440 Syrian pounds per capita although, because of great income disparity, most live under this average, with urban industrial workers, for example, earning 3-4 pounds per day. Batatu, Syria’s Peasantry, 6, 72-73; The Economic Development of Syria, Report of a Mission Organized by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development at the request of the Government of Syria (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1955). 1, 25-26.
379 See especially Saba Mahmood, The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Starrett, Putting Islam to Work, especially the discussion in chapter 5 on “the Transformation of Texts.”
describes, typically presented “the majority opinions of jurists from the four main 
schools,” Albānī’s, by contrast, sought to provide an alternative to what Mahmood 
calls the “doctrinal pluralism” of the different schools by offering a monolithic vision of 
normative practice. As Albānī explained, his aim was “to give my Muslim brothers who 
are interested in following the Prophet’s guidance in their performance of rituals as 
comprehensive a book as I can…to ease for those lovers of the Prophet’s sunna the 
realization of his command.”

In other words, rather than distill centuries of madhhab jurisprudence for the lay practioner as his Islamist counterparts were doing, Albānī instead hoped to excavate the sunna buried beneath them.

Besides relying on a different source material – the work of ḥadīth scholars and ḥadīth reports rather than opinions of jurists – in order to identify the sunna of various observances, Albānī also meticulously catalogued what he deemed not part of it; namely, the additions to those practices that he and other Salafis considered bid‘a (reprehensible innovation). Some, such as his Ḥkām al-janā‘iz wa-bida‘uhā (Rulings and Reprehensible Innovations of Funerals), include sections on bid‘a, and many of the examples he provided were quite specific to his times and milieu. For instance, commenting on the prohibition of prayer over the nonbeliever, Albānī criticized “some Arab leaders” for praying for Stalin, “who, along with his [Communist] school are among the harshest and most vehement enemies of religion” and also criticized others for praying for Bernard Shaw. Among practices he considered bid‘a were both universal ones such as reciting the Ṣātiḥa over the deceased, as well as ones more germane to life

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380 Mahmood, Politics of Piety, 81.
382 Idem, Ḥkām al-janā‘iz, 97.
in Damascus, such as women’s visitation of the shrines in the Ṣālihiyya neighborhood and visiting the tomb of the unknown soldier.\textsuperscript{383}

Albānī’s unique objectives and approach in his pamphlets on religious observances caused tremors in scholarly and popular circles. A famous example was his insistence that, according to sound ḥadīth reports, a woman’s face and hands do not constitute nakedness (‘awra) and therefore do not require covering. As one measure of how effective and controversial these pamphlets were, his \textit{Ḥijāb al-mar’a al-Muslima} (The Veiling of the Muslim Woman), in which he expressed this view, invited no less than seventeen refutations, by one counting, and jeopardized his residence in Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{384} According to Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix, another pamphlet, \textit{Ṣifat ṣalāt al-nabī} (The Description of the Prophet’s Prayer), in which Albānī presented as the true \textit{sunna} iconoclastic practices such as praying while wearing one’s shoes, inspired Juhaymān al-‘Utaybī’s group that violently occupied the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979.\textsuperscript{385}

Indeed, seeing their effectiveness and accessibility, Albānī continued writing these pamphlets throughout his life and used them as a vehicle to rectify what he considered erroneous popular practices and beliefs. Rather than a comprehensive survey of his pamphlets – a subject that could serve as its own theme of study – this chapter will instead examine the circumstances that inspired his initial foray into this genre as he began his scholarly career in post-colonial Damascus in the 1950’s. Specifically, his

\textsuperscript{383} Ibid., 258.
\textsuperscript{385} Hegghammer and Lacroix, “Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-‘Utaybi Revisited.”
writings during this period, beginning with his Taḥdhīr al-sājid min ʿittikhādh al-
qubūr masājid (A Warning to the Worshipper about Turning Graves into Mosques),
centered on customs surrounding the space and manner of prayer.

One might ask why Albānī was so concerned with the the minutae of how public
rites were performed at a time and place of such momentous changes in political
structures – a subject that preoccupied his contemporaries, and about which he was
virtually silent. Here Saba Mahmood’s work on the women’s mosque movement in Egypt
is especially helpful in illustrating the point that “political agency does not consist in
engaging the usual forms and institutions of politics.”386 She explains that “what is at
stake” in the movement’s focus on “performative behavior and ritual observances” were
“different imaginaries of personal and collective freedom, presupposing different
relations to forms of social authority.”387 In much the same way, we can gain a deeper
appreciation of the message and actions of Albānī and his followers concerning the
reorganization of social authority within a new and evolving political order. Indeed, much
as his predecessors a generation earlier sought to preserve mosques and religious schools
as the last vestiges of religious authority, so too Albānī maintained a similar ambition as
he began his career. 388 Not only was his advice to readers on where and how to pray in
these pamphlets disruptive to the normal course of religious practice in Damascus, but it
also served as an essential channel for promoting and popularizing his vision of a Salafī
communal identity in Damascus during this mercurial time.

386 Mahmood, Politics of Piety, 152.
387 Ibid., 122.
388 Commins, Islamic Reform, 5.
In light of Mahmood’s observation about where and how political agency is practiced, this chapter will seek to explore Albānī’s motives in changing the performance of prayer by examining the paper trail he left from 1952 to 1957. In those years he produced a series of pamphlets, including the aforementioned Taḥdīr, collectively titled Tasdīd al-Iṣāba ilā man zaʿama nuṣrat al-khulafāʾ al-rāshidīn wa-l-ṣaḥāba (Hitting the Mark in Targeting the One Who Claimed to be Defending the Rightly-Guided Caliphs and the Companions). Albānī wrote these in response to a series of pamphlets, accordingly titled al-Iṣāba fī nuṣrat al-khulafāʾ al-rāshidīn wa-l-ṣaḥāba (Hitting the Target in Defense of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs and the Companions). This latter series was penned by a number of traditional scholars and mosque leaders during Ramadan 1952 as a reaction to Albānī’s influence on his followers, “the propagandists of ijtihād who sought to do away with the four madhhab.” Framed as a response to those

389 These pamphlets include: Šalāt al-ʿiddayn fī al-muṣallā; Šalāt al-tarāwīḥ; al-Bīdʿa; Taḥḍīr al-sājid min ʿittikhād al-qubūr masājid; al-Tawassul.
390 Unfortunately, this series of pamphlets could not be located in any major library in the US or abroad and, due to current circumstances in Syria, I was not able to travel to the country during the research stage of the dissertation to inquire about it, despite numerous requests to those residing in the country. The most complete information available to us about it and its author are found in Abāẓa’s biographical dictionary and in references Albānī makes to it in his rebuttals.
391 At the helm was a mosque preacher named Muṣṭafā Ḥamād al-Juwayjātī (d. 1991) and ʿAbd Allāh al-Habashī (d. 2008). Ḥabashī, a recent émigré from Ethiopia, was especially threatening to Albānī since he was rumored to succeed the great Syrian ḥadīth scholar Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī (d. 1935). Indeed, Albānī was concurrently involved in a heated debate with Ḥabashī in successive issues of al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī over whether or not rosary beads were permissible during prayers. The debate, entitled al-Taʿqīb al-ḥathīth ʿalā man taʿana fī mā saḥḥa min al-ḥadīth wa-l-radd ʿalayhi (‘The Rapid Investigation Against the One Who Defamed What Was Deemed Sound of the Ḥadīth’ and His Refutation), was later published as a stand-alone pamphlet by Maṭbaʿat al-Taraqqī. See Albānī, al-Radd ʿalā al-taʿqīb al-ḥathīth li-l-shaykh ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥabashī (Damascus: Maṭbaʿat al-Taraqqī, 1958). In 1983 Ḥabashī, who was also a staunch ʿAshʿarī, founded the eponymously-named Ahbash organization in Beirut, also called the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP). Albānī’s followers continue to vilify Ḥabashī and his group, both for their theological views and for their alleged Ṣūfī leanings. See, for example, “Exposing Abd Allah al-Harari and his sect the Ahbash of Lebanon,” Sectarian Refutations, 7 December 2011, http://sectarianrefutations.blogspot.com/2011/12/exposing-abd-allah-al-harari-and-his.html?m=1 Accessed 8 March 2015; “Muslims Beware of ʿAbdullah Habashi,” Sunnah.org, http://www.sunnah.org/ith/muslims_beware.htm Accessed 8 March 2015.
392 For more on Juwayjātī see Abāẓa, Tārīkh ʿulamāʾ Dimashq, 3:563-565.
393 Abāẓa, Tārīkh ʿulamāʾ Dimashq, 3:563-565.
who “claimed to defend the Rightly-Guided Caliphs and the Companions” Albānī’s pamphlets sought to clarify what he believed to be the correct articulation of what the Prophet and his early community of followers actually held – in other words, to define the authentic version of the religion practiced by the pious predecessors. He summarized this objective with the following points on the back cover of each of his pamphlets:

Our call (da‘watunā):
1 – A return to the Qur’ān and the correct sunna and their understanding according to the way that the pious predecessors understood them.
2 – Familiarizing Muslims with their true religion, and calling them to pursue its teachings and rules, and to extol its merits, which guarantee them the praise of God, and through which happiness and glory will be realized for them.
3 – Warning Muslims of polytheism (shirk) in its various forms, of reprehensible innovation, of spurious ideas, and of unacceptable and forged ḥadīth reports that have defaced the beauty of Islam, and have prevented the progress of Muslims and their restoration.
4 – Revival of liberated Islamic thought (al-taḍkīr al-Islāmī al-ḥurr) within the framework of Islamic scholarly principles. Removing the intellectual stagnation (al-jumūd al-fikrī) that has taken hold of the minds of many Muslims and has distanced them from the pure wellspring of Islam. Cooperation in presenting Islamic solutions to contemporary problems.
5 – This is our call and we beseech Muslims to help us carry this trust that will revive Muslims and which will spread the lasting message of Islam.

In light of the popular unrest they caused as well as their call to unity among Muslims in upholding the standard of the salaf of defending the “pure” sunna and warding off bid‘a, these sets of pamphlets can be considered “small media” in the sense that Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi use the term; within the context of the Iranian Revolution, Mohammadi and Mohammadi explain that “small represent “potential sites of struggle” that “connect people through the use of shared printed material, visual slogans, or electronic broadcasts… [and] can help to foster an imaginative social solidarity, often as the precursor for actual physical mobilization.”

393 See, for example, back cover of Albānī, Tahdhīr al-sājid.
In Albānī’s case “small media” were crucial because of their effect on altering the structures of communication and authority. As these publications were aimed at lay readership, Dale Eickelman explains that such media “create an irreversible trend toward a freer market in religious, political and social ideas and foster a pluralism often resisted and poorly understood both by states and religious authorities.” Albānī thus fulfilled what Eickelman describes as “challeng[ing] those who seek authoritatively to demarcate the lines between the licit and the illicit.” By pointing out errant practices from the perspective of ḥadīth science rather than the more common jurisprudential manuals, and marketing his work as a defense of the Salafī community, these do-it-yourself guides sought ultimately to both tear away at the authoritative hold of two dominant institutions in Syria during this period – the madhhab and Ṣūfism – and, in the process, to provide Salafīs with a unity of purpose.

In what follows we will examine the function of Albānī’s “small media” during this period as vehicles for public mobilization in redefining basic tents of religious practice as well as creating this sense of community for Salafīs. As a self-appointed spokesperson for Damascus Salafīs by virtue of his purported command of ḥadīth science, and in framing the project as a defense of the sunna, Albānī sought to construct what Mahmood describes as a new “scaffolding” for self-identity that would not only counteract the social authority of nationalism but also of the well-established traditions of Ṣūfism and madhhab-adherence in Damascus. It is this broader objective that Albānī

396 Ibid.
397 Mahmood, Politics of Piety, 148.
likely had in mind when he advocated in one of these pamphlets that prayer services during the two high holidays must be held in the outdoor prayer space (muṣallā) rather than inside a mosque:

There is no doubt that reviving this sunna requires the foundation of a new group (jamā’a jadīda) that calls upon all these other disparate groups in the many mosques. But the aim of this new group is to gather all the [other] groups into one, just as it was during the time of the Prophet and that of the Rightly-Guided caliphs. It is necessary for this group to exist since a single community cannot rise except through it.398

In order to understand both why Albānī chose this area of religious observance, and what made his contribution to defining it so disruptive, this chapter will begin by examining the socio-political authority of the mosque in late-Ottoman and colonial Damascus, and the influence of Şūfism in shaping it. The chapter will then contrast Albānī’s restrictive definition of bid’a pertaining to mosques with that of his Salafī predecessor, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, who also catalogued bid’a practices surrounding the mosque, although took a more lenient position concerning which ones to accept. While both the number of followers Albānī had and the resonance of his message is nearly impossible to determine with certainty, what we can observe are the steps Albānī took to deliberately project an image of a robust community of followers who sought his counsel. The chapter will thus close by surveying some of Albānī’s marginalia and stylistic idiosyncrasies in his pamphlets as one measure of how he tried to convey that the positions on religious observance he expressed were also shared by a purportedly devoted community of followers.

398 Albānī, Ṣalāt al-‘īdayn, 38.
The Mosque as Message

Before delving into the content of Albānī’s pamphlets, it is useful to appreciate the levels of significance that the mosque played for Albānī specifically, and within the Syrian milieu generally during this period. For obvious reasons, the mosque was perhaps the most significant symbol of Islamic authority, being the space most often visited by the largest groups of Muslims. Albānī was no doubt aware of this when he targeted the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina as potential sites where the transgression of prayer beside graves took place.399 Here we can benefit from Clifford Geertz’s discussion of the connection between charisma and centers. “Centers,” Geertz writes, “are essentially concentrated loci of serious acts; they consist in the point or points in a society where its leading ideas come together with its leading institutions to create an arena in which the events that most vitally affect its members’ lives takes place.”400 Focusing on this “center,” Geertz goes on to explain that “it is involvement, even oppositional involvement, with such arenas and with the momentous events that occur in them that confers charisma. It is a sign, not of popular appeal or inventive craziness, but of being near the heart of things.”401 Geertz’s observation is thus an apt

399 Unlike with the Umayyad Mosque, Albānī ultimately exempted the Prophet’s Mosque from this criticism since it allegedly had a partition between the grave and the mosque when he visited it. Nonetheless, Albānī advised the Saudi king to “return the mosque to how it was during the time of the Companions” by building a higher separation between the mosque and the site of the Prophet’s grave since he noticed, during a visit in 1948, that there was a small elevated seat and a mīhrāb at the Prophet’s grave, suggesting that it had been used as a prayer site. Albānī, Taḥdhīr, 65, 69-70. His criticism from that visit appears to have had a lasting influence among certain audiences as recently as September 2014, when a Saudi academic issued a 61-page proposal for the removal of the Prophet’s tomb, using the euphemism of “expansion” to describe the changes to the mosque. Andrew Johnson, “Saudis Risk New Muslim Division with Proposal to Move Mohamed’s Tomb,” The Independent, 1 September 2014. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudis-risk-new-muslim-division-with-proposal-to-move-mohameds-tomb-9705129.html Accessed 16 September 2014.
401 Ibid., 123.
description of the Salafī campaign to reform mosques, suggesting that, far from being merely a grab at social or political authority, defining the appearance of mosques, in the Salafī view, represented a redefinition of the faith.

On a personal level, of course, it was in the mosque that Albānī first broke with his father and, according to some of his followers, the first draft of his Taḥdhīr was written during that period of his life. Syria’s mosques were also of interest to Salafīs since many were sites of shrines, and therefore often became loci for pilgrimages as well as Ṣūfī and popular rituals. During his one-month stay in Damascus in 1955, the Saudi Ibn Khamīs observed that there was “fierce fighting” between the Salafīs and other groups concerning “the lives of the Prophets in their graves.” This particular exchange centered on the practice of tawassul (intercession) whereby worshippers petition saints and prophets at their graves to intervene on their behalf in divine judgment. So pressing was this issue that leading Salafī scholars published pamphlets attempting to purge

402 See, for example, ‘Awda, Qaṭf al-thimār, 27-28; Hādī, Ḥayāt al-‘allāma al-Albānī, 8. Although not explicit, the organization of the latter seems to follow the chronology of Qaṭf. There, in a section titled “The First Period in Resisting Bid‘a,” the author writes that in his youth Albānī encountered a statement in Ibn ‘Asākir’s history of Damascus that the Umayyad mosque was allegedly the site of John the Baptist’s church, which also contained the latter’s tomb. This discovery startled Albānī and he confronted Sa‘īd al-Burhānī about the prohibition concerning praying at graves, to which Burhānī replied that Albānī did not successfully demonstrate the prohibition against such prayers because the sources he used were not considered sources of law. Thereupon Albānī set out to fully investigate this issue and the result was his Taḥdhīr. All of this occurred while he was still under his father’s tutelage and before his banishment from home. This genealogy of the Taḥdhīr, however, is not mentioned anywhere in the actual published version of the Taḥdhīr that was released as part of the Tasdīd and so cannot be corroborated through Albānī’s account there or elsewhere. See Ibn ‘Asākir, Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq, ed. ‘Alī Shīrī, 80 volumes (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995-2000), 2: 254-257. For a discussion of the connection between the basilica of John the Baptist and the Umayyad Mosque, see Joseph Nsrrallah,”“De la cathédrale de Damas à la mosquée omayyade,” La Syrie de Byzance à l’Islam VIIe-VIIIe siècles, ed. Pierre Canivet and Jean-Paul Rey-Couquis (Damascus: Institut français de Demas, 1992), pp. 139–144; Nancy Khalek, Damascus after the Muslim Conquest: Text and Image in Early Islam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), especially chapter 3. I thank Christian Sahner for pointing me to this scholarship.

403 Ibn Khamīs, Shahr, 81.
mosques of such practices and, in the process, issued harsh judgments of Şūfism as well.\footnote{404} There was another, and arguably more significant, level of meaning that this particular campaign to reform mosques symbolized; specifically, it was in the mosque that political legitimacy was negotiated in Damascus. Two factors were particularly sensitive in this regard: the first was the space of the mosque itself and, second, the role of Şūfism within this space. Echoing Geertz’s connection between centers and charisma, during the colonial period the French authorities would regularly use the mosque to affirm their place in Syrian society. The journalist ʿAdnān al-Mallūḥī (b. 1924), who grew up in Homs and whose father was the imām at the Nūrī Mosque there, recalled that the French instructed local governors to attend the mosque as their representatives twice a week during Ramadan, as well as during the two high holidays and during each Friday sermon.\footnote{405} These governors, Mallūḥī writes, would arrive at the mosque with an official procession, would “display piety… [by] taking out a long rosary with a hundred or more beads.” Such ceremonies, Mallūḥī explains, showed that the “[French] colonization affirmed its place, more than anything else, through ceremoniously consecrating its existence” thereby “exploiting religion and men of religion and mocking the minds of simple people.” Rather than oppose them, Mallūḥī writes, the religious leaders would instruct their congregations to follow the French by citing Q. 4:59, “Obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority amongst you.”\footnote{406} Salafi thinkers were acutely aware


\footnote{406} Ibid., 70.
of the significance of this space and, in some cases, openly demanded instituting correct practice there. Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī called upon leading scholars to petition the rulers and the police to enforce penalties for bid‘a in mosques, invoking the Qur’ānic injunction to “command right and forbid wrong,” and praised the efforts of one Rushdī Bāshā al-Shirwānī, a former governor of Damascus, who in 1865 forbade “the bid‘a habits of crying in mosques” and “wailing at funerals” which “disturbed worshippers.”407

Aside from the space of the mosque, the prospect of Şūfism being in a position of authority was a threat that resonated deeply with Syrian Salafīs because of doctrinal differences as well as Şūfism’s privileged place in the country’s history. From the perspective of beliefs and practices, not only did Şūfism, in the eyes of Salafī thinkers, guide the masses toward errant rituals such as shrine visitation and intercession, it also perpetuated a charismatic hold over its adherents. Indeed, Paulo Pinto describes it as “one of the main forms of public Islam” in Syria during the twentieth century.408 It is perhaps because of Şūfism’s success at representing the religion on a popular level that inspired Albānī to level the weighty accusation of violating the unicity of God’s names and attributes (tawḥīd al-āṣmā’ wa-l-ṣifāt) at its leaders by alleging that they claimed for themselves attributes restricted to God, such as knowledge of hidden matters.409

In the realm of political authority, Salafī concerns over Şūfism in power also reflected their awareness of the unique privilege and accommodation that Şūfis in Syria enjoyed, one that was often coupled with the marginalization of the Salafī community. As

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408 Paulo Pinto, Mystical Bodies: Ritual, Experience and the Embodiment of Sufism in Syria (Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston University, 2002), 5.
Itzchak Weismann shows in several works, in the late nineteenth century “the Salafi trend in Damascus constituted a religious response to the political alliance forged between the Ottoman State under the modernizing autocracy of Sultan ‘Abdulhamid II and orthodox Sufi shaykhs and ‘ulama’ who were willing to mobilize the masses in his support.”

This partnership between the Ottomans and the Sufis, and the ensuing response from the nascent Salafis, had real implications for the position of Salafis as well as for the spread of Sufism. An example of the former was the Mujtahid Incident of 1896, described earlier, in which a number of Sufi scholars and others brought a group of Salafi leaders to court for claiming to be mujtahids through their hadith-focused study sessions.

Moreover, Weismann argues that “it was the conduct of the orthodox ‘ulama’ and Sufi shaykhs in Damascus that turned some of their reformist counterparts toward the new principles that gradually crystallized into the teachings of the Salafiyya,” noting especially ‘Abdulhamid II’s recruitment of Sufi shaykhs of various orders to mobilize support for his secularizing policies.

The Sufi experience in Syrian society could not have been more different from the Salafi one during this period. Not only did Sultan ‘Abdulhamid II’s relationship with Abû al-Hudâ al-Ṣayyâdî (d. 1909) strengthen the position of the Rifâ’iyya but also, as Butrus Abu-Manneh shows, even smaller orders common among the working classes such as the Kayyâliyya, the Jandaliyya and the Ḥarfîriyya also benefitted since Ṣayyâdî linked their genealogies to the Rifâ’iyya as well.

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410 Weismann, Taste of Modernity, 273-274.
411 See chapter 2; Weismann, “Between Sufi Reformism and Modernist Rationalism,” at: 210-212.
412 Ibid., 228.
Ma‘arrat al-Nu‘mān in 1911 and later became the director of the faculty of sharī‘a at Damascus University, recalled that these benefits amounted to the government dispensing monthly stipends to Ṣūfī shaykhs, funding the renovation and construction of Ṣūfī zawiyas, and exempting Rifā‘ī adherents from military service. Indeed, Hanna Batatu writes that “Prior to World War I, Sufism loomed large in the life of many of Syria's peasants. No other movement played a greater role in the shaping of their beliefs and values.” Batatu describes how the national landscape changed following the Young Turk Revolt of 1908 and the death of Ṣayyādī in 1909, when the status of the Rifā‘iyya, and Ṣūfism more generally, waned significantly. Although diminished from its former status, with the decline in public dhikr recitations and its disappearance altogether from certain villages by the 1930’s, Ṣūfism nonetheless retained a hold over its adherents, especially peasants. For example, Batatu tells of Ṣūfī shaykhs who fought alongside peasants during the great Syrian revolt of 1925-1927 as well as the strong presence of the Rifā‘iyya and Qādiriyya in certain villages in the Ḥawrān region, even during the Ba‘thist years, owing in part to the patronage of clans such as the Zu‘bī and Ḥarfīrī.

This historical background, although nowhere explicit in Albānī’s writings, is useful in understanding why he exerted so much energy on defining public rites, particularly those having to do with prayer and the mosque, in the name of his community. Not only did the Salafīs have a comparatively weaker domestic base than Ṣufis and the madhhab tradition, but they were equally marginalized in the national

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415 Batatu, Syria’s Peasantry, 103.
416 Ibid., 106-107.
417 Ibid., 108.
discourse of post-colonial Syria. In the 1940’s, as Jennifer Dueck observes, “The Syrian government considered Islamic activism a domestic threat that should be suppressed, and did not construe it as a result of foreign meddling.”\textsuperscript{418} Moreover, with the priorities of state-building and national governance, both foreign and local governments likely saw local mosque movements as politically immaterial and thus rarely engaged them.

Criticizing the “traditional approach of the West” of solely meeting with the elite and thereby neglecting the masses of Syrian society, Afif Tannous, who visited Syria in 1955 on behalf of the United States Department of Agriculture, observed that

During the years of struggle for independence, religious differences and identifications were minimized, ignored or covered up. The feeling of the need for unity was paramount, and was strongly expressed in such slogans as ‘Religion is for Allah, and Country for all,’ and ‘We shall not be divided by religion; as we are united by the Arabic language.’\textsuperscript{419}

Indeed, religion rarely came up in parliamentary discussions in the post-colonial period, with national discourse dictated by Syria’s foreign relations as well as by the popular Socialist rhetoric, as Joshua Teitelbaum argues.\textsuperscript{420} An aberration was one ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf Abū Ṭawq (d. 1998), a former mosque preacher who proposed in 1956 that the Syrian charter eliminate partisanship (ḥizbiyya) and instead base itself on Islamic principles as a way of responding to popular needs.\textsuperscript{421} Another was Fayṣal al-‘Asalī (d. 1980), president of the Cooperative Socialist Party, who argued in Parliament that the country must return to Islamic law to resolve the day-to-day

issues of citizens but then, in deference to his socialist affiliations, went on to explain that the country should adopt a socialist approach in creating balance in society. His evidence for this position included the Qur’ānic injunction to care for the poor, and his claims that the caliphates of ‘Abd al-Mālik b. Marwān and ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz were, in his historical reading, devoted to “elevating the community,” and that the workers are God’s most beloved social class.422

Where it did surface, religion appeared either to bolster certain political partnerships or was merely ceremonious, while the applications of its laws in the new political system remained vague. During the Algerian coup of May 1958, for example, the Grand Muftī of Syria announced that it was permissible to donate zakāt to the Algerian fighters in accordance with the Mālikī madhhab.423

Despite their prior attempts at overlooking religion, Tannous writes, the government and the elite “began to find out that religion was all-important to their masses in urban centers and rural areas. It was in fact their way of life, predominantly Islamic, the only foundation on which they could develop themselves and their countries.”424 Even the Muslim Brotherhood was virtually mute on the question of how to incorporate Islamic traditions into the nascent Syrian state, leading Teitelbaum to observe that “there was a surprising lack of emphasis on Islam per se in the activities of the Ikhwan; indeed, at times their activities could not be differentiated from common nationalist politics.”425

422 Ibid., 589. ‘Asalī also mentioned that according to Ibn Ḥazm if someone is deprived of food in a particular town and then dies from starvation, God judges the people of that town to be murderers and blood money must taken from them.
424 Tannous, 14.
Not only did it seem to Salafīs that the tenets of Islamic practice were lost in the midst of these political and legal changes, but the insistence on a united Islamic front was muted by the din of Arab unity, even, as we saw, among those groups that purported to represent Islamic interests. Lamenting the popularity of shrine visitation in Damascus, the Saudi visitor Ibn Khamīs observed in 1955 that “This suffocating voice which I found in Damascus and in other Arab cities called ‘Arab nationalism’ does not dare to answer this call [of countering shrine visitation and bid’a], discarding that foundational and true Islamic unity which is the equitable path to returning glory to the Arabs.”

Albānī’s pamphlets defining religious rites, therefore, were just as much a part of the Damascene Salafī tradition of Riḍā that he inherited as they were his reaction to the country’s changes that he experienced. Standing, as he did, on the margins of mainstream society and national discourse, his calls for religious rigor likely fell on deaf ears. Moreover, with the establishment of the third Saudi state in 1932, hostilities towards Salafīs, including Albānī, intensified, and opponents began designating them with the derogatory label “Wahhabi,” as mentioned previously. Lacking both the institutional context and the credibility for wielding social authority, Albānī departed from his contemporaries by refocusing his efforts on affecting change in the religious practices and performances of the masses rather than the political institutions and ideologies of the state. It was through redefining the space and manners of prayer that Albānī was able to construct an alternative context for negotiating social authority and to project himself and his group as preserving the authentic vision of Islam.

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Molding a Message for the Times

It was in the area of devotional law (ʿibādāt), specifically prayers and mosques, that Albānī first outlined his concept of bidʿa. It was also in the 1950’s, while conscientiously recording both the sunna and bidʿa of these rituals, that he began drafting his Qāmūs al-bidaʿ (Dictionary of Bidʿa), an 800-page tome published posthumously by his students that, in addition to listing bidʿa of various devotional acts, also meticulously excerpts all of Albānī’s references to bidʿa throughout 119 of his works. He was, of course, not the first to address the issue. In her dissertation on the subject, Raquel Ukeles surveys medieval treatises on bidʿa, and concludes that jurists historically debated both its definition and acceptability, with Ḥanbalīs and Mālikīs (notably Ibn Taymiyya and Shāṭībī, respectively) universally rejecting it in devotional acts, while Shāfiʿīs (especially Suyūṭī) judging the performance of a bidʿa on the basis of its underlying intentions. As will be evident in this discussion, Albānī sided closer with the former group. Rejecting all forms of bidʿa as well as the label of a “good bidʿa” (bidʿa ḥasana), Albānī argued that one may only “draw near to God” (al-taqarrub ilā Allāh) through what He prescribed since “Islam is built upon two principles: that we not worship anyone other than God, and that we not worship Him through anything other than what He legislated. Whoever violates one of these, violates the other.” Albānī supported this view with a variant of the Prophet’s Sermon of Necessity (khutbat al-ḥāja) on the authority of Jābir b. ʿAbd Allāh (d. 673), which includes the following proclamation:

427 Āl Salmān, Shakūkānī, eds. Qāmūs al-bidaʿ, 12-23.
428 See Raquel Margalit Ukeles, Innovation or Deviation: Exploring the Boundaries of Islamic Devotional Law (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2006). The Shāfiʿī position was likely based on the statement attributed to Shāfiʿī, “there are two types of bidʿa: a good bidʿa and a reprehensible bidʿa.”
The best speech is the Book of God
And the best guidance is the guidance of Muḥammad
And the worst of things are invented matters (muḥdathāt)
And anything invented is a bid‘a
And every bid‘a is deviation (ḍalāla)
And all deviations lead to Hellfire.\textsuperscript{430}

This take on the concept also provides a window onto Albānī’s vision of what constitutes 
\textit{sunna}, and thus what counts as “Islamic.” As we shall see, whereas Jamāl al-Dīn al-
Qāsimī, for example, had a more inclusive view of \textit{sunna}, holding that one must follow 
everything instructed by the Prophet unless it is explicitly rejected – a view he based on 
verses such as Q. 3:31\textsuperscript{431} and Q. 6:153\textsuperscript{432} – for Albānī anything without precedent in the 
Prophet’s actions or statements was prohibited.\textsuperscript{433} Qāsimī, as Commins explains, 
“suggested that innovations would vanish if ulama clearly distinguished between ritual 
obligations and superregatory rites.”\textsuperscript{434} This view was informed by Qāsimī’s general 
orientation to how Islam was practiced in society, as well as to the intellectual 
environment in which he was brought up.\textsuperscript{435} This background helps understand why 
Qāsimī did tolerate and even respect, as Commins points out, certain kinds of Śūff

\textsuperscript{430} Idem, \textit{Khuḥbat al-hāja allatī kāna rasūl Allāh yu’allimuhā aṣḥābahu}, second edition (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1969), 32-33. In this pamphlet and elsewhere, Albānī insisted on the custom of opening all 
lectures, books and classes with this sermon, based on the fact that the \textit{salaf} would open all of their sessions 
with it. The sermon of necessity, with this variant, became an imprimatur of Albānī’s students today, 
effectively distinguishing them through their conception of what constitutes \textit{bid‘a}. It appears, however, that 
Albānī did not adopt the practice of opening his works with this sermon until the 1960’s. Citing Ibn 
Qayyim al-Jawziyya, Qāsimī too insisted on the preacher’s opening his sermon with this formula, but 
did not explicitly require that every public presentation must open with it as Albānī did. Cf. Qāsimī, \textit{ İslāh}, 47. 
For Albānī’s students, see chapter 8.

\textsuperscript{431} “If you love God then follow me and God will love you and will forgive your sins…”

\textsuperscript{432} “This is My straight path so follow it…”

\textsuperscript{433} Qāsimī, \textit{ İslāh al-masājid}, 10. For a discussion of Qāsimī’s \textit{ İslāh al-masājid}, and on his views on \textit{bid‘a}, 
see chapter 6 of Commins, \textit{Islamic Reform}.

\textsuperscript{434} Commins, \textit{Islamic Reform}, 80.

\textsuperscript{435} Ibíd., 81. For example, Commins notes that Ahmad al-Jazā‘irī was a Qādirī shaykh and taught the ideas 
of Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī, and Qāsimī’s colleague, ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bīṯār, also studied Şūfī.
practices and grave visitations conducted within certain socially-acceptable boundaries.\textsuperscript{436}

By contrast, for Albānī, based on the view suggested in the aforementioned Sermon of Necessity, there was no room for anything except for what was literally prescribed by the proof-texts. Taking this position further, Albānī wrote elsewhere that those who follow the \textit{sunna} are not only rewarded, but are a part of the “saved sect.”\textsuperscript{437} Thus the entire sphere of human activity, especially the realm of devotional law, is never neutral.

That this vision took shape alongside Albānī’s promotion of ھادیث science in works such as his \textit{Silsilatayn} seemed, moreover, far from coincidental. Rather, Albānī’s restrictive definitions of \textit{sunna} and \textit{bid'a} in his pamphlets must be viewed as expressions, or case studies, of his approach to ھادیث. Specifically, as we saw elsewhere, Albānī located the Prophet’s \textit{sunna} in ھادیث reports deemed sound through his method of verification (i.e. through assessing the status of the \textit{isnād} based on its transmitters, and not based on whether that \textit{isnād} was transmitted through a tawātur or ًاّھاد method, or whether the report is mentioned in the \textit{Ṣaḥīḥayn}).\textsuperscript{438} This, and no other factor, qualified a report as authentic. Put differently, any kind of practice, statement or belief in any sphere

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\textsuperscript{436} Ibid. Concerning the latter, for example, Commins explains that “Qāsimī opposed popular customs that marred tomb visits and sarcastically nicknamed ulama who defended the practice “al-ًاّقبّرییyah,” which we might loosely render as “tombsters”…On the other hand he wrote that it was permissible for Muslims to visit the tombs of relatives and ancestors if one restricted oneself to greeting the deceased relative, praying to God, and seeking God’s forgiveness. Muslims must neither seek intercession nor believe that visiting a tomb is better than prayer in a mosque. Muslims must not use the Prophet’s tomb as a place of prayer, let along the shrines of other prophets and saints.”

\textsuperscript{437} Albānī, \textit{Ṣalāt al-‘īdayn}, 39-41. See also the discussion of subject by Riḍā in chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{438} This requires clarification: Although Albānī did not believe that a report’s mention in the \textit{Ṣaḥīḥayn} suffices to deem it \textit{sahīḥ}, he did rely on statements from ھادیث scholars about transmitters or reports, such as those of Bukhārī and Muslim, since those figures, as Albānī believed, operated within the field of ھادیث science (‘\textit{ilm al-ًاّھادیح}).
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of devotional law that did not have a basis in these reliable reports was not only not sunna, but was also deemed a bid’a and therefore was not permissible under any circumstances. Likewise, falling short of anything that the Prophet did or instructed – a sunna – meant, of course, failure to adhere to proper Islamic conduct.  

Albānī’s predecessor Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī wrote on bid’a with respect to mosques in his Islāh al-masājid min al-bida‘ wa-l-‘awā’id (Purging Mosques of Innovations and Customs), a work that Albānī credited with sparking his interest in the subject and which he edited with Shāwīsh in 1970. However, Albānī was also quick to clarify where he differed with Qāsimī, writing elsewhere concerning the prevalence of weak and forged reports that lead people, including Qāsimī, to commit or condone bid’a:  

One example is the virtuous shaykh and the great scholar, the verifier Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, who wrote a good book, Islāh al-masājid min al-bida‘ wa-l-‘awā’id, from which many of the rulings I mentioned benefitted. Despite this, he included a section of which one must be cautious…[concerning a child entering a mosque] he said: ‘the ḥadīth “keep the children and the insane away from your mosques” is because the child’s habit is to play, and by playing he disturbs those praying. The possibility of their playing would thus negate the purpose of the mosque and thus one must avoid bringing them.’ [To this] I say: This ḥadīth is weak and may not be used as proof. [Moreover,] a group of imāms have deemed it weak such as ‘Abd al-Ḥaq al-Ishbīlī, Ibn al-Jawzī, Mundhirī, Būṣīrī, Haythamī, ‘Asqalānī and others. Despite this, it was lost on shaykh Qāsimī, and he based a legal ruling upon it, namely keeping children away from mosques in order to sanctify the mosque. The reality is that this [view] is a bid’a because it goes against what was followed during the time of the Prophet.  

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439 His explanation was slightly more nuanced with respect to actions outside the sphere of devotional law, which Albānī referred to as “customs” (‘ādāt), although did reach similar conclusions about their permissibility when these customs had any religious implications. Citing Ibn Taymiyya in the context of intercession (al-tawassul), he wrote that “the principle in devotional acts is prohibiting unless there is a proof-text [that permits], while in interpersonal exchanges (mu’āmalāt) [it is] to permit unless there is a proof-text [that prohibits].” Based on this principle he cautioned against recommending actions (istiḥbāb), which connotes something more than merely permitting them (ibāha). The issue arises in the issue of tawassul, which Albānī divided into two types: al-tawassul al-kawnī, wherein someone seeks to attain something mundane through an object (his example is using clothing for protection or warmth), and al-tawassul al-sharʿī, seeking to attain something with religious implications (his example is reciting the shahāda in order to attain paradise). Idem, al-Tawassul: anwā’u hu wa-aḥkāmu hu, fifth edition (Beirut: al-Maktab al-İslāmī, 1986), 30.

440 Idem, al-Awjiba al-nāfi’a, 55-56.
Just as with the medieval debates on the subject, the conceptual break between Qāsimī and Albānī centered on the categories of *bid‘a* and the motivations behind them. Specifically, citing Shāfi‘ī, Qāsimī wrote that “there are two types of *bid‘a*: a good *bid‘a* and a reprehensible *bid‘a*” and that “the good *bid‘a* is one that accords with the principles of the divine law and does not oppose it in anything, and is thus permissible, and those who do it with good intentions are rewarded.”

His examples of such good *bid‘a* were the constructions of minarets, *madrasas*, and *khāns*, all of which did not exist during the Prophet’s time but which were clearly done for the benefit of the religion. Qāsimī’s source for the permissibility of “good *bid‘a*” was the caliph ‘Umar’s statement concerning the additional *Tarāwīḥ* prayers during Ramadan, which the latter allegedly described with the phrase “what a fine *bid‘a*” (*ni‘mat al-*bid‘a*). Qāsimī explained this remark as its “not having existed before but also not having been prohibited previously” since when the Prophet performed the *Tarāwīḥ* prayers during Ramadan in the mosque but later stopped, it was only so that the people not mistake it for an obligation.

On this point, Albānī corrected Qāsimī’s position by explaining that in this context ‘Umar did not use the word *bid‘a* in its legal sense (*bid‘a* shar‘iyya) since “all *bid‘a* is a deviation,” but rather in its literal sense, viz. something that had not existed previously. What this meant in the case of the *bid‘a* of *Tarāwīḥ* prayers, Albānī explained, was not that they were never performed before (which would make the concept of *Tarāwīḥ* prayers unlawful – i.e. the legal *bid‘a*) but that they had never before been performed in this manner (i.e. they did exist during the Prophet’s time, but now they were conducted behind a single *imām* and so only appeared different). In other words,

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442 Ibid., 15.
for Albānī anything that did not exist during the time of the Prophet was considered a bid‘a and thus always prohibited, whereas for Qāsimī some forms of bid‘a were permissible if they were done with the good intention of benefiting the religion.

Beyond the sphere of normative practice, there was a critical difference between Qāsimī and Albānī in what these differences reflected concerning how each approached social norms. Ultimately Qāsimī displayed what Commins describes as a preference for “social elitism” through his “approval of sober Sufism and denunciation of popular Sufī orders [which] bespeak a fundamental lack of sympathy for the popular classes’ beliefs.”443 For Albānī, on the other hand, these very standards of social elitism were part of the problem, connected, as they were, to the national and social customs informed by the new authority structures. Albānī’s standard for socially-acceptable behavior, therefore, was exclusively those reports he deemed reliable through a methodology he would articulate in later decades.

Albānī’s earliest definitions of bid‘a appeared as appendices to two works republished in the early 1960’s; his al-Ajwiba al-nāfi‘a ‘an as’ilat lajnat masjid al-jāmi‘a (Beneficial Answers to the University Mosque Committee), first written in 1950, and Aḥkām al-janā‘iz wa-bida‘uhā, first written in 1953. In both cases, the section was added “to serve as a kind of warning for Muslims” since “it is not possible for a Muslim to draw near to God Almighty except through avoiding it.”444 “This,” Albānī continued,

is also the case with polytheism (shirk), in that whoever does not know it commits it, as is evident among many Muslims who draw close to God through shirk such as [through] vows to saints (awliyā‘) and righteous ones and swear by them and in circumambulating their graves, and building mosques atop them and other actions that are known to be shirk among the people of knowledge. Therefore, it is not enough for the sake of worship to only summarize the sunna but also what kinds of

443 Commins, Islamic Reform, 87.
bid’a violate it, just as it is not sufficient for belief to [describe] divine unicity (tawḥīd) without also describing what kinds of shirk violate it.445

In the context of funerary rites, likewise, he defined bid’a as follows:

a) Every statement, action or belief, even if derived from ijtihād, that goes against the sunna.
b) Every matter that is used in order to draw near to God, but which the Prophet forbade.
c) Every matter that cannot be performed except by way of a proof-text or through their explicit divine instruction but does not in fact have a proof-text, this is a bid’a, except whatever is based on [the actions or statements of] a Companion.
d) Those customs of the unbelievers that pertain to worship.
e) Whatever some scholars, especially later ones, deem permissible (istiḥbāb) but which, in fact, has no proof-text.
f) Every form of worship whose manners of performance are derived only from weak or forged ḥadīth reports.
g) Excess in worship.
h) Every form of worship that the Lawgiver or the people have restricted such as by place, time, description or number.446

What stands out immediately is the fact that Albānī did not make any exception for actions or statements derived from ijtihād – the hallmark of Qāsimī’s reformist tradition but one that, as mentioned earlier, he explicitly did not inherit in the same manner.447

Moreover, he provided a definitive recipe for determining whether something qualified as a bid’a – namely, if it originates in weak or forged ḥadīth reports – demonstrating that since the beginning of his career his efforts at purging bid’a were part and parcel of his ḥadīth project. Indeed, as he explained in his al-Awjiba al-nāfi’a “the reasons for [committing] bid’a are many…one of which is [following] weak and forged ḥadīth reports.”448 Finally, he set himself and his followers apart from their surroundings by marginalizing the opinions of later scholars (including those of his generation) as well as

447 See chapter 2. We will have an opportunity to see how Albānī situates ijtihād within ḥadīth science in chapter 7.
448 Albānī, al-Awjiba al-nāfi’a, 55.
practices of the masses that veered into the category of excess (*al-ghulūw*), showing that only his prescriptions are faithful to the Prophet’s *sunna*.

Albānī provided further comments on *bid’a* in a third work from a slightly later date, 1960, *Ḥijjat al-nabī* (The Prophet’s Pilgrimage). At the conclusion of the short pamphlet, he set out two conditions for actions to be acceptable to God; the first, that they are devoted purely to God (*khāliṣ li-wajhihi ‘azza wa-jalla*) and, the second, that they are correct (*ṣāliḥ*). “They can only be correct,” he explained, “if they accord with the *sunna* and do not go against it” and that “any form of worship that the Prophet has not taught to us and through which he did not draw near to God…is considered contradictory to his *sunna*.”

Any given *bid’a*, Albānī explained, can originate in one or more of the following causes:

First: weak ḥadīth reports, which may not be used as evidence and which may not be attributed to the Prophet, and may not be followed…

Second: forged ḥadīth reports, or ones that have no source, as well as those with which some jurists have been lax and upon which have founded rulings …

Third: forms of independent reasoning (*ijtihādāt*) and juridical discretion (*istiḥsānāt*) by some jurists, especially among later ones, which they support through any legal proof-texts, and followed them through any of the accepted paths, until they [themselves] became a kind of *sunna* that became followed! It is obvious to anyone who looks into his religion that this is not permissible, since there is no law except for what God legislated. As for the actions that are permitted – if he is a *mujtahid* – it is permissible for him to follow what he deems good through his discretion and God will not rebuke him. But if the people take this as a law and as a *sunna*, then it is not allowed…

Fourth: customs and corruptions that the divine law did not prescribe and which the mind does not fathom, but rather which some of the ignoramuses do and which they took as their law…”

After listing these sources of *bid’a*, Albānī included a cautionary note:

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450 Ibid., 102-103.
*bid’a* is not all of the same gravity, but rather it exists according to degrees, some of which are considered polytheism and unbelief…and others are less. But it is necessary to know that even the smallest form of *bid’a* that a person commits in religion is forbidden once it is explained [to him] that [the act constitutes a] *bid’a*. In contrast to what some believe, there is no such kind of *bid’a* as ‘reprehensible *bid’a*’ for the Prophet said of one who performs *bid’a*: ‘Every *bid’a* is a deviation, and every deviation leads to Hellfire.’…thus the matter of *bid’a* is very dangerous, and many are still unclear about it, and no one knows about it except a group from among the people of knowledge…  

Qāsimī provided a broader definition of *bid’a*, not mentioning the role of weak and forged reports, and counseled to judge an act of *bid’a* based on the intentions behind it. Towards the beginning of his work, he provided the following explanation for how one could stray from the divine will and the consequences for this:

One who strays from [the *sunna*] is either an exaggerating tyrant, or an independent thinker, or an interpreter, or one who emulates, or an ignoramus. Some of these merit punishment and others are pardoned, and others are only given one reward, [each] according to its intentions and independent reasoning with respect to obeying God Almighty and His Messenger or neglecting them. In summary, whoever follows the Prophet in his statements or actions is on God’s right path, and is one whom God loves and whose sins God pardons. Whoever opposes Him in his deeds is an innovator (*mubtadi’*), and [thus] follows the path of Satan, and is not included among those to whom God has promised love, forgiveness and good.  

Qāsimī showed here that every act of *bid’a* has a clear cause and is thus deserving of a punishment or reward appropriate to that cause. In other words, to Qāsimī *bid’a* represents not so much deviation from the literal sense of the *sunna*, but primarily deviating from its underlying purposes. This is evinced in one rationale he gives for not following a *bid’a*, which he based on Ghazālī’s (d. 1111) view that “it is not permissible to imitate the malefactors (*ahl al-fisq*) since whoever imitates a group is one of them.” Albānī contested this notion, stating that “if the malefactors adopt [the Prophet’s *sunna*] this does not make it prohibited, since it is [still] imitation of the Prophet.”

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451 Ibid., 103.  
453 Ibid., 23. Albānī’s evidence for this view was ḥadīth reports that attested to the Prophet’s having worn a Byzantine robe – a clear imitation of the Byzantines. If, Albānī explained, one follows the Prophet’s *sunna*
Several examples highlight the differences between Albānī and Qāsimī in their approaches to the reasons for avoiding bid’a. One was Qāsimī’s criticism of the maqṣūra, the raised box reserved for the ruler located near the miḥrāb, on the grounds that it divides the rows of worshippers, creating a disunity that goes against the sunna since “it raises the congregant over the imām.”\textsuperscript{454} Another example, showing more clearly their different approaches, was the question of where a muʿadhdhin must stand when performing the adhān (call to prayer). Here, Qāsimī and Albānī agreed that the individual must stand on a high place, but disagree on the reason. For Qāsimī this was because that is the place where one makes announcements (li-annahu fī al-iʿlām) while for Albānī “because it is the sunna.” Similarly, Albānī criticized muʿadh dhins who raise their voices when performing the call to prayer rather than stand in high places, thus going against the sunna.\textsuperscript{455}

Another important fault line for seeing where Albānī differed from Qāsimī was the question of adding to (al-ziyāda ‘alā) or embellishing prescribed acts, which Albānī described as faḍāʾil al-aʿmāl (refinements of actions). As we saw with minarets and madrasas, which he called “good bid’a,” Qāsimī was relatively lenient when it came to those improvements on Islamic practice done with good intentions and which posed no conflict with the prescribed performance of the act. Once again basing himself on Ghazālī, he framed his discussion of “bad bid’a” within the context of the proper circumstances for “commanding right and forbidding wrong,” stating that there are two

\textsuperscript{454} Ibid., 104-105.
\textsuperscript{455} Ibid., 130. However, Albānī did allow for one to raise his voice in calling to prayer if he is also standing on a raised place.
types of wrong actions (munkarāt), reprehensible (makrūha) and prohibited (maḥẓūra) ones. Concerning the former, it is preferable to avoid them, while being silent about them is frowned upon but is not forbidden, whereas for the latter both being silent about them and performing them is forbidden.456

For Albānī, the question of adding to prescribed actions, just as with other legal questions, had to do not with the intentions behind them but, once again, with whether or not they were based on sound ḥadīth reports and proof-texts. The issue came up in the context of Tarāwīḥ prayers concerning whether the Prophet performed eleven or twenty bows and, in the case that no sound proof-text attests to twenty, whether one may simply add those nine bows since the Prophet did not explicitly forbid them. Responding to this, Albānī wrote that “we consider adding to [the sunna] a form of opposition to it, since the command with respect to devotional acts is to stop [at what the Prophet did] (al-tawqīf) and to follow [him] (al-ittibā’) and not to rationally improve (al-taḥṣīn al-‘aqlī) and innovate (al-ibtidā’).”457

Another example of Albānī’s narrow views concerning the prohibition of fāḍā’il was the practice of reciting the Qur’ān at the grave, which he considered a bid’a since the practice is allegedly based on a weak ḥadīth.458 In his Aḥkām al-janā‘iz he noted that some “with no knowledge” believe that “just because the experts (ahl al-ikhtīṣās) were quiet concerning [the ḥadīth] (i.e. they did not explicitly deem it weak) it is permissible to cite that ḥadīth and to follow it in refinements of acts.”459 At issue here, and consistent

456 Ibid., 18.
458 The ḥadīth report in question is “Whoever passes graves and recites ‘Say: He is the one God’ twelve times and then gives his reward to the inhabitants of the graveyard, his reward will be the number of people [buried in the graveyard].”
with his ḥadīth-based vision, was the view that scholars often admit that these actions are based on weak reports but allow them anyway since their intention is only to enhance the actual practice. However, to Albānī this approach violated the cardinal principle of basing Islamic faith and beliefs exclusively on those reports deemed sound, and therefore deliberately overlooking this – even with the best of intentions – was not only unacceptable but was also a form of bid‘a.

These examples illustrate not only Albānī’s restrictive take on bid‘a but also serve as case studies for how he envisioned the application of ḥadīth reports in legal matters. His views concerning bid‘a, particularly in defining it in the most restrictive sense as any deviation from sound reports, reflected his distrust of all other contemporary sources of textual and personal authority which he believed led the ignorant masses astray. It was also the perceived laxity with respect to bid‘a practices in Damascus – ranging from how people prayed, to where they prayed to where they were buried – that Albānī saw an opportunity not only to reframe the standards and sources of social authority, but also to marginalize the traditional institutions of religious guidance.

One example of this was his Taḥdīr al-sājid, which warned against treating mosques as graves – a custom that not only brought scrutiny on historic sites, but also the practices of mainstream Muslim society. In the opening of this pamphlet, he attacked the obsequiousness of traditional religious scholars for their “silence…about [the authors of the Tasdīd]…fearing the masses or flattering them in the way of those who [seek to] keep their reputation with them.” Albānī then drew a causal link between the “silence and

460 Idem, Taḥdīr al-sājid, 3-4.
ignorance” of these religious leaders and the transgressions of the lay practitioners, explaining that,

Many people have committed what God Almighty forbade…and would that the matter had stopped there! But some have drawn near to God Almighty with this! You see many benevolent ones, and those who occupy mosques among them, paying a great deal of money to build mosques for God and to treat them as graves and in their wills request to be buried there after death!\textsuperscript{461}

After surveying these errant practices by well-meaning Muslims and the lapses of their leaders, in the same pamphlet Albānī strategically sought to curry favor with political institutions by citing what he framed as instances of their steering Islamic practice away from \textit{bid’ā}. For example, in one case Albānī thanked the Ministry of Religious Endowments in Damascus for forbidding someone’s burial in an old mosque in eastern Damascus – a decision that was most likely informed by regulations concerning the city’s antiquities. Albānī, instead, explained that the ministry’s decision “did not emanate from political or social or other considerations, [and represents] a good beginning on the path towards purifying the mosques of the \textit{bid’ā} and rejected activities that crowd [the mosques]!”\textsuperscript{462}

In this and other examples it is evident that Albānī saw the issue of warning about \textit{bid’ā} as a channel for reframing the tools and contexts of social authority by attempting to mediate directly between the local government and the lay masses in steering religious guidance away from its traditional institutions. In order to convince his readers that these views were not only intended to bring society back to an authentic expression of these practices but were also being preserved by a particular vanguard of committed followers

\textsuperscript{461} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{462} Ibid., 6-7.
during their own time, Albānī designed his pamphlets as a kind of marketing campaign for himself and his cause – a subject to which we will now turn.

**Constructing Community: The Power of Parenthetical Comments**

As mentioned previously, Albānī claimed to have written many of his smaller works on devotional law in response to requests from students and colleagues in the context of some milestone in their lives. While it is not immediately clear whether or not he did in fact receive these requests, his inclusion of the circumstances for why he authored these works not only brings readers into the social context in which they originated but was clearly aimed at demonstrating to readers that he had a formidable base of followers. In Charles Taylor’s words “One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it.”463 The clearest example was, of course, his *Tasdīd* series which was written in response to the *Iṣāba* – a group of pamphlets Albānī described in the introduction to his *Ṣalāt al-‘īdayn fī al-muṣallā hiya al-sunna* (Prayers for the Two High Holidays in the Outdoor Prayer Space is *sunna*) as “a refutation to some of the innovators who fought our revival of this *sunna* in Damascus….they fought without clemency with their tongues and pens against this *sunna* and against those who upheld it.”464 Describing the *Iṣāba*, Albānī wrote strategically that its authors published it “as a refutation of [the *sunna*], nay, I should say ‘of us.’”465

465 Ibid.
Demonstrating that his community of followers had extended beyond Arab countries, he wrote that one of the reasons for the rerelease of his Ṣifa in 1961 was that, the requests for [the book] have multiplied both far and wide. The fact that [the book’s] reception has not been limited to Arab countries, but has extended to other countries like Pakistan, indicates that the book has been received among those who know its power, the lovers of the sunna of the Prophet. And one of the noble teachers has informed me that the book has been abridged and translated into Urdu to allow for people [who speak it] to benefit from it in their language.\(^{466}\)

In other cases, such as his Ādāb al-zifāf, by writing that the treatise was commissioned by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Bānī, a towering scholar among Salafīs in Damascus and an advisor for al-Maktab al-Islāmī, in honor of the wedding of the latter’s daughter, Albānī also suggested that his reputation was affirmed not only by students but also by his colleagues and mentors, who turned to him for guidance. This was also the case in those texts where no names are mentioned, such as his al-Ajwiba al-nāfiʿa, written because in 1950 this committee allegedly approached a number of the leading scholars to instruct their members on how to perform the call to prayer and other activities in their mosque.\(^{467}\)

While, once again, it might very well have been the case that such a committee did exist and that Albānī was approached to answer their questions, at the same time the fact that Albānī highlighted possible confusion concerning religious obligations so fundamental and universal to Muslims as prayer suggests a kind of choreographed performance on his part to carve out a niche for himself as an arbiter of these practices.

Aware, of course, of his lack of religious licenses (ijāzāt) and his autodidactic origins, Albānī also used these excurses to bolster his credentials and scholarly stature. After criticizing Qāsimī’s laxity concerning bidʿa due to his negligence with with respect

\(^{466}\) Albānī, Ṣifa (al-Maktab al-Islāmī), i.
\(^{467}\) Idem, al-Ajwiba al-nāfiʿa, 5.
to ḥadīth reports, Albānī then placed himself in the company of those who wrote correctly on the subject of bid‘a and promoted his work as a part of this tradition. He wrote:

Paying attention to bid‘a is a matter incumbent upon the people of knowledge, and a group of them have done so, and wrote many books on this subject. Some of [these books are] on the principles and sources of bid‘a, and others on cases of it, and some on both. I have read all of them and have also read hundreds of other books in ḥadīth, jurisprudence, prose, and other subjects, and have collected from them a good measure of [information concerning] bid‘a that I do not think anyone before me has done. This is the foundation of my aforementioned book, Qāmūs al-bida’, and I ask God to ease its organization, drafting and distribution to the people.468

Whether these anecdotes occurred is difficult to verify. More importantly, their consistent appearances in the introductions to these texts signified in no uncertain terms that Albānī knew that his manuals outlining the tenets of basic religious observances might have seemed odd to readers, given that these subjects had been elaborated and defined over the centuries by generations of highly acclaimed jurists. Aware his controversial ambitions, he included anecdotes about students asking him to define the normative way to do so. Aside from serving as literary foils, these anecdotes also implied that existing institutions and teachers were not providing guidance to a certain cross-section of society, and that by writing on these subjects, Albānī gave direction to this dispossessed group.

These societal dynamics are most evident in sections that Albānī appended either immediately after the introduction or at the end of the pamphlets titled Shubuhāt wa-jawābuhā, roughly translated as “Doubts and Answers.” Such a section would appear superfluous immediately following or introducing his outline, in basic language, of what is the sunna or bid‘a. In fact, their content rarely, if ever, addressed the details of the subject of the pamphlet but, instead, focused on Albānī’s larger vision of returning

468 Ibid., 56.
society to the sunna. These Shubuhāt sections, like the personal anecdotes in his introductions, restated his mission and helped define his community of followers. Here too, the issues he chose to include and the answers he gave are telling about his motivations in writing these works. In his earliest pamphlet, the Ṣifa, he wrote that the

Shubuhāt wa-jawābuhā section

Had a great influence on the ranks of believing youths [because it] guided them to the obligation of returning in their religion and worship to the pure wellspring of Islam: the Book and the sunna. The followers of the sunna have, thank God, increased among them, even becoming known for [their observance of] it...I have noticed some of them wavering in rushing to perform [the sunna]... because of the doubts raised by the emulating shaykhs (al-mashāyikh al-muqallidūn), [and therefore] I saw it fitting to stand up to them and refute them so that perhaps some may afterwards rush to follow the sunna alongside the others who follow it and thus become part of the ‘saved sect,’ with the permission of God Almighty.469

This section was added around 1958, as he explained, which was incidentally during the same time that he waged his Tasdīd campaign – a time during which it was important to unite ranks and mobilize in defense of his cause. In the Shubuhāt section of a pamphlet from this series, he used the opportunity to insist on the “return to the sunna” and to “revive this sunna in these parts, for God’s hand rests upon the community (jamā’a), the community of the sunna and not that which opposes it!”470

Just as Albānī’s opponents depicted him as an enemy of the Prophet’s early followers in the context of prayers, so too Albānī used this attack as an opportunity to define the sources of what was religiously required and forbidden, sunna and bid’ā. It was within this heated contestation of normative Islamic behaviors associated with the mosque, and in his concurrent promotion of ḥadīth science in his Silsilatayn, that Albānī outlined the contours of a new Salafi orientation – one based not on reforming social

469 Idem, Ṣifa (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif), 33.
470 Idem, Ṣalāt al-‘īdayn, 37.
practice and promoting the religious scholars, but rather on uprooting the foundations of both. By defining his group as the one that most truthfully represented the imagined practices of the *salaf*, he sought ultimately to form a sense of social authority around the notion that only his views represented the authentic expression of the faith during a period of political and institutional transition. Whether hubris or heroism, this campaign further isolated Albānī from the traditional religious establishment as it elevated him to international fame in the global Salafī movement – a new period in his life that began with his invitation to teach ḥadīth at the Islamic University of Medina in 1961.
Part III

From Local Movement to Global *Manhaj* (1961-1999)
Curriculum and Community: Ḥanbalī Theology and the Saudi Dimension

“In any revolution, someone like you would consider it his duty to carry it out.” – 'Abd al-'Azīz b. 'Abd Allāh b. Bāz to Albānī in informing him of the termination of his post at the Islamic University of Medina.472

“The war between the people of ḥadīth and the Jahmīs is greater than that between the armies of unbelief and the armies of Islam.” – Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), Ijtimā’ al-juyūsh al-Islāmiyya.473

In 1961, the Grand Muftī of Saudi Arabia, Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Āl al-Shaykh (d. 1969), invited Albānī to teach ḥadīth at the newly-opened Islamic University of Medina (IUM). Albānī’s two academic years there (1961 to 1962, 1962 to 1963), particularly his exchanges with Islamists from around the world who came to study or teach at the IUM, coincided with Albānī’s efforts to expand his emphasis beyond ḥadīth and to incorporate Ḥanbalī theology into his definition of a Salafī method (manhaj).474

That this new emphasis on theology might have been connected to his stay in Saudi Arabia is supported by our record of his time there, his behavior after his departure

471 I use the word “creed” for ‘aqīda, while I use “theology” to refer to the broad spectrum of concepts and debates dealing with the divine (to include cosmology and eschatology), as well as the schools of thought about them. The use of the word “theology” does not imply that the school or position I describe accepts rationalist assumptions of “theology” as that discipline is known in the European curriculum, but only that it is concerned in a basic sense with theological concepts. I refer to the Islamic rationalist discourse of theology engaged in by the Mu'tazilis and Ash'arīs as kalām or “speculative theology.” So, for example, the debate on the divine attributes is a theological one, and the position of the Ḥanbalī theological school forms the foundation of what Salafīs consider the Salafī creed (‘aqīdat al-salaf).


474 It is difficult to identify a precise date when Albānī first used the term manhaj to refer to the “method of the pious predecessors,” but to the best of my knowledge the term does not appear anywhere in his writings or teachings before his first edition of Ibn Rajab’s Kalimat al-Ikhlāṣ in 1960. See Ibn Rajab, Kalimat al-Ikhlāṣ, 5. Albānī did teach on the connection between ḥadīth and creed as early as 1957 in Damascus. One of his lectures on the subject from that date was published in 1974 as Wujūb al-akhdh bi-ḥadīth al-āḥād fi al-'aqīda (“The Obligation to Follow Ahād Hadīth Reports in Creed”). He gave a lecture of a similar name and topic in Spain in 1974, which was published posthumously by his student Muḥammad 'Īd al-'Abbāsī. See Albānī, Wujūb al-akhdh bi-ḥadīth al-āḥād fi al-'aqīda wa-l-radd 'ala shibh al-mukhālīfīn, Rasā‘il al-Da‘wa al-Salafīyya 5 (n.l.: n.pub., 1974); idem, al-Ḥadīth ḥujja bi-nafsihi.
and his own reflections. Although he had previously taught Wahhābī texts in Damascus, criticized what he considered manifestations of shirk and bid’a there and even authored pamphlets connecting ḥadīth to creed, from the 1960’s onwards he made Ḥanbalī theology more central in his writings and teachings. He began to publish editions of medieval treatises on the topic, in some instances producing a second edition of the same work where his comments focused almost exclusively on theological concepts rather than on the status of ḥadīth reports. Moreover, it was during this period that he began to attack Islamist groups – especially noteworthy given his close collaboration with Islamists during his earlier period in Syria – and their divergence from Ḥanbalī theology was his weapon of choice. Indeed, his attacks on some of the most prominent Islamic figures of the twentieth century, including Muḥammad ‘Abduh, Sayyid Quṭb and Ayatollah Khomeini, all revolved around theological issues. As Albānī saw it, just as

475 This seems to have been the case with his famous edition of the Sharḥ al-‘Aqīda al-Ṭaḥāwīyya, which he first edited with his takhrīj in 1962. In 1974 he published what seems to be a different work al-‘Aqīda al-Ṭaḥāwīyya: sharḥ wa-ta’līq which contains Albānī’s explanations of theological concepts, and for takhrīj he referred readers to the 1962 edition. He then republished the earlier work in 1983, where he included a lengthy introduction containing his famous attack on ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (d. 1997). Albānī accused the latter of having filed a complaint with scholars in Saudi Arabia concerning Albānī’s approach to takhrīj. His edition of Ibn Taymiyya’s al-Kalim al-Ṭayyib, first published in 1962, likewise lacks any discussion of ḥadīth reports.

476 Albānī criticized Muḥammad ‘Abduh for his rejection of the story about the apocalyptic battle between Jesus and the dajjāl at the End of Days, allegedly because the latter did not trust the veracity of āḥād reports, and cited Rashīd Riḍā’s Tafsīr in which ‘Abduh rejected the story. Albānī said of Sayyid Quṭb that he “was not a scholar, but rather a literary critic” and accused him in various places of aligning with Ṣūfīs and Mu’tazilīs for his espousal of the idea of wahdat al-wujūd and for using tā’wīl (allegorical interpretation) regarding the verses concerning the divine attributes. He explained his takfīr of Khomeini and his followers (“al-Khumaynīyyūn”) for their “call to establish their state on Muslim lands, ignorant or feigning ignorance of unbelief and waywardness,” and that his differences with them concerned “the principles (al-uṣūl)” and not the aspects of positive law (al-furū’). See Albānī, Qīṣṣat al-masīḥ al-dajjāl wa-nuzūl ‘Īsā wa-qatluhu iyyāhu (Amman: al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, 2000), 9ff. On Albānī’s views regarding Sayyid Quṭb see the compilation by his student, ‘Alī al-Ḥalabī, Haqq kalimat al-imām al-Albānī fī Sayyid Quṭb, as well as the 29 March 2005 fatwā released by the Albānī Center in Amman on the subject, both found on Ḥalabī’s website, http://kulalsalafiyeen.com/vb/showthread.php?t=7402 Accessed 1 October 2014. For Albānī’s 21 August 1987 fatwā excommunicating Khomeini, see Albānī, Fatwā al-‘allāma al-Albānī fī takfīr al-Khumaynī, 12/26/1407 (08/21/1987) http://www.alalbany.net/5355 Accessed 1 October 2014.
one’s approach to ḥadīth determined how closely one adhered to the “method of the pious predecessors,” the positions on creed that derived from that approach to ḥadīth was the litmus test for how closely one’s beliefs aligned with those of a “true” Muslim.\(^{477}\)

There do, of course, exist good scriptural and scholastic precedents for justifying Albānī’s connection between Ḥanbalī theology and the so-called Salafi creed (‘aqidat al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ). Chief among these is the ḥadīth of the ‘saved sect’ (al-ṭāʾifah al-mansūra or al-firqa al-nājiyya), ubiquitous in Salafi rhetoric, in which the Prophet told of a time in the distant future when his community would divide into seventy three sects, all of which will perish except for one. When the Prophet was asked “which is that saved sect,” accounts have him responding variously that “it is that [sect] which follows me and my Companions” or “that it is the people of the sunna and the community” (ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa). With Albānī’s mission of reviving the Prophet’s sunna, the eschatological resonance of this particular ḥadīth no doubt added to his cause. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the school associated with what is considered the Salafi creed is sometimes known as the “People of Ḫadīth” (ahl al-ḥadīth),\(^{478}\) and Albānī capitalized on this historic connection, explaining that “the [saved] sect is the People of Ḫadīth and those who follow them.”\(^{479}\) Moreover, theology was the subject of the religion’s earliest

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\(^{477}\) Albānī’s critique of the Qur’ānists is a helpful case study for appreciating this perspective. Albānī came down harshly on the group for relying exclusively on the Qur’ān for normative religious guidance, which resulted in their having different creeds, prayers and practices. See Albānī, Wujūb, 32.

\(^{478}\) See J. Schacht, “Ahl al-Ḥadīth,” EI².

\(^{479}\) Albānī went further and examined the reference to the jamāʿa (community) in this ḥadīth, asking “Who is this ‘community’…is it Ḫizb al-Taḥfīr? Or is it the Muslim Brotherhood? Or is it Jamāʿat al-Tablīgh…‘the community,’ as Ibn Masʿūd correctly stated, is ‘whoever has the truth, even if it is one individual’…this ‘community’ is the path of the believers (sabil al-muʾminīn).” Albānī, al-‘Aqīda al-Ṭāhāwiyya: sharḥ wa-taʿlīq (Damascus: al-Maktab al-İslami, 1974), 46; idem, Silsilat al-hudā wa-l-tāʾifah 740/ 6/10/00 and quoted in Āl Nuʿmān, Jāmiʿ turāth al-Albānī fī al-‘aqīda, 211-212, 250. One sees later Salafi authors adopt this topos, producing works with titles such as Fawzī b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Athari’s al-Azhār al-manṭūra fī tabyīn anna ahl al-ḥadīth hum al-firqa al-nājiyya wa-l-ṭāʾifah al-mansūra, Silsilat al-hudā wa-l-tāʾifah 21 (n.l.: n.pub., n.d.).
sectarian divisions and scholarly disputes, with the famous example of the persecution (*miḥna*) of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855) and his circle – the original People of Ḥadīth – who faced harsh consequences from the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Ma’mūn (d. 833), who held the view of the *ahl al-kalām*, for Ibn Ḥanbal’s position on the Qur’ān’s “createdness.”

Indeed, a number of pre-modern figures later regarded as Salafī scholarly authorities depicted the fallacies of rationalist schools by explaining the consistency and superiority of Ḥanbali theology, and in their arguments sometimes explicitly linked their theological positions with those of the pious predecessors. These experiences, particularly the vivid hagiographical depictions of the persecution of figures such as Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Taymiyya, provide contemporary Salafīs with fodder for justifying and even dramatizing their own efforts.

Notwithstanding these reasons – certainly integral to appreciating the discursive universe that Albānī inhabited – there were a number of important circumstantial dimensions to Albānī’s sudden interest in commenting on theology. Not least significant among these was the professional context of al-Maktab al-Islāmī’s growing prominence and access to Saudi patronage, which we have examined earlier. Shāwīsh continued to gain renown as a collector of rare manuscripts, and his staff’s opportunities for fame and prestige only multiplied. This, for example, was the case with Albānī’s edition of Ibn Abī al-‘Izz’s (d. 1390) *Sharḥ al-‘Aqīda al-Ṭahāwiyya*, which became a standard version.

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480 See M. Hinds, “Miḥna,” *EI*.  
481 The most famous of these was Ibn Taymiyya, whose *magnum opus*, *Dar’ ta’aruḍ al-‘aql wa-l-naqil*, which set out to demonstrate the superiority of scripture over human reason. The work opens with an exposition of the inconsistencies of applying logic to the verses pertaining to the divine attributes. Scores of pre-modern scholars, including Ibn Taymiyya, have linked this literalist theological approach to the Salafī creed.  
482 See chapter 4.  
483 Indicated, for example, by publications such as Rāshid b. Muhammad Ibn ‘Asākir, *al-Makḥṭūṭāt al-najdiyya fī al-khizāna al-Shāwīshiyah* (Riyadh: Dār al-Tāj, 2011).
of the text in part because it was allegedly the first to rely on a newly-discovered manuscript that uncovered the work’s true author.  

Aside from the operations of al-Maktab al-Islāmī, one cannot ignore Albānī’s personal experiences during this period. The Grand Muftī terminated Albānī’s contract at the IUM shortly before the start of classes in the fall of 1963, and, as Albānī himself recounted, Ibn Bāz delivered the news along with the explanation, “in any revolution, someone like you would consider it his duty to carry it out.” Although in his reflections Albānī did not elucidate Ibn Bāz’s cryptic statement, it certainly suggested that in some corners of the Saudi religious and political establishment Albānī’s presence in Saudi Arabia was a threat to either the country’s physical or, more likely, cultural security.

The details that we have of Albānī’s professorship at the IUM, on whose advisory board he served twice, suggest a tense climate owing both to his controversial legal positions and his exclusive adherence to ḥadīth reports. Examples of the former included his restrictive take on the Ẓarāwīḥ prayers and the prayers of the two high

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484 Ibn Abī al-‘Izz, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqīda al-Ṭahāwīyya*, ed. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, eighth edition (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1984), 6-8. Shāwīsh was quick to point out that the Azharite theologian Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (d. 1951) objected to the identification of the text as belonging to Ibn Abī al-‘Izz, who, like Kawtharī, was also a Ḥanafī. According to Shāwīsh, his edition of the text became a standard version taught in both the Islamic University of Medina, as well as in shari‘a faculties in Damascus and Baghdad. See ibid., 9ff. This work, it seems, was also important because of the Ḥanafī madhhab (in law) of Ibn Abī al-‘Izz, the same madhhab against which Albānī rebelled in his youth and which both Kawtharī and, later, Albānī’s nemesis ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (d. 1997) followed.

485 As far as I know, Stéphane Lacroix’s is the only study in English or Arabic (outside of interviews with Albānī and his students, on which much of my account as well as Lacroix’s is based) that explicitly mentions Albānī’s difficult time at the IUM and his subsequent expulsion in 1963. It is worth noting, perhaps as would be expected, that all written accounts I have come across do not mention any of this, but only that he taught at the university for three years and contributed to the country’s instruction in ḥadīth. See Lacroix, “Between Revolution and Apoliticism.”

holidays, which he had published in Damascus. More famously, in his treatise on the 
*hijāb* he argued that the woman’s face and hands do not constitute her “nakedness” 
(*'awra*) and thus do not require covering – a view that did not sit well with the country’s 
more conservative circles. Saudi scholars criticized the book, first published in Damascus 
in 1951, condemning its author of spreading strife (*fitna*) – a fact Albānī admitted 
towards the end of his life:

> When I read all the books and treatises collected for me written in this age which 
> concern the woman – which number in the tens – I found that most of them are 
> refutations of me. Some of them carry the title of [my] book and its author and 
> others deal with the issue directly without the personal attack.

Besides his legal positions, Albānī’s commitment to his ḥadīth methodology and 
pedagogical style raised the ire of his colleagues. Sometime after Albānī completed the 
first draft of his *Sharḥ al-‘Aqīda al-Ṭāḥāwīyya* in 1961-1962 the ḥadīth scholar ‘Abd al-
Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (d. 1997) “brought a tyrannical complaint before a committee of 
scholars in [Saudi Arabia]” over Albānī’s ḥadīth criticisms in his edition of the 
*Ṭāḥāwīyya*. Abū Ghudda’s review of Albānī’s edition, allegedly commissioned by the

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September 2014.

488 See, for example, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Khalaf Āl ‘Abd Allāh, *Naẓārat fī kitāb Ḥijāb al-mar’a al-Muslima li-

489 Albānī, *al-Radd al-muf̢him ‘alā man khālaqa al-‘ulamā’ wa-tashaddada wa-tasība wa-alzama al-
mar’a an tastur wajhahā wa-kaffayhā wa-awjaba wa-alam yaqna‘ bi-qawlihim: innahu sunna wa-

490 For the details of this incident told from Albānī’s perspective, see Ibn Abī al-‘Izz, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqīda al-
Ṭāḥāwīyya*, 60-62, which invited a rebuttal by Abū Ghudda (*Kalimāt fi kashf abāṭil wa-ifaṭārāt* [sic], wa-
hiya radd ‘alā abāṭil Nāṣir al-Albānī wa-ṣāhibīhi sābiqan Zuhayr al-Shāwī sh wa-mawāzirayhimā, third 
edition (Aleppo: Maktab al-Maḥbū‘āt al-Islāmiyya, 1990)). In his rebuttal, Abū Ghudda included a copy of 
the decree, dated 1381 AH (1961), ibid., v. Abū Ghudda also mentioned that Riyadh University asked him 
to review the book in 1390 AH (1970) but this is most likely a typographical error, based on the date on his 
reproduction of the decree. Likewise in Albānī’s rebuttal to Abū Ghudda’s *Kalimāt*, which the former titled 
*Kашf al-niqāb ‘ammū fi kalimāt Abī Ghudda min al-abāṭil wa-l-ifaṭārāt* [sic], second edition (n.l.: n.pub., 1978) 
he explained that Abū Ghudda issued the complaint “in 1391 [1971] or slightly earlier” but that he had 
been reading it for the previous ten years (1961-1971) and complained to both “officials and non-officials” 
about it in Saudi Arabia. Albānī, *Kашf*, 13
deans of the college of sharī’a at Riyadh University, resulted in a decree from the country’s Ministry of Scholarly Institutes to suspend the circulation of Albānī’s edition of the Ṭaḥāwiyya. In his rebuttal against Abū Ghudda, whom he called a “tyrannical partisan [of the Ḥanafī madhhab]” (al-muta’āṣṣib al-jā’ir), which he published in the introduction to the 1983 edition of the work, Albānī used creed rather than ḥadīth to appeal to readers (having in mind, presumably, his Saudi audience). Albānī ascribed Abū Ghudda’s rejection of his ḥadīth criticisms to the latter’s adherence to the Ḥanafī madhhab. Moreover, Albānī intimated that Abū Ghudda’s partisanship to the madhhab constituted a rejection of the creed of the salaf outlined in the Ṭaḥāwiyya.

Albānī’s teaching style and behavior at the university did not help his cause. At the university he later recalled that he was “like one of the students.” Instead of retiring to the faculty lounge in between classes with the other professors “whom the students regarded as kings,” as he described, he would instead hold court with students of all classes outside and drive them to and from the university. As an example of the kind of influence Albānī had with students and how it might have frustrated the other faculty, on one occasion a professor of jurisprudence wrote the ḥadīth “The disagreement of my

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491 Incidentally, while both Albānī and Abū Ghudda mentioned the latter’s objection to the edition because of Albānī’s ḥadīth criticisms, the language of the decree – perhaps because of the general audience – mentions nothing about ḥadīth explicitly, but rather only that the decision was based on “the observations presented by the teacher Abū Ghudda concerning Albānī’s comments” and that the work was ultimately rejected as a “a source for the discipline of tawḥīd” (marjī’ min marājī’ māddat al-tawḥīd), ibid.

492 In the next chapter we will have an opportunity to examine this feud in the context of Albānī’s use of takḥrīj to rival the canonical status of the ḥadīth compendia. Although Albānī acquired a diverse array of enemies throughout his career, his rivalry with Abū Ghudda has a number of dimensions that make it unique. Both were acquaintances from Syria (Abū Ghudda was originally from Aleppo), and later became the head of the Aleppian branch of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, like Albānī he was a professed ḥadīth scholar but unlike Albānī he was a follower of the Ḥanafī madhhab and was able to secure his professorship in Saudi Arabia.

494 “Al-Albānī yatakallam ‘an ib’ādihi min al-Jāmi’a al-İslāmiyya.”
495 Hādī, Ḥayāt al-ʿallāma al-Albānī, 15.
community is a grace” on the blackboard. Albānī’s student ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Abd al-Khāliq (b. 1939) – who later became a leader of Salafism in Kuwait – interrupted the professor, saying “Albānī deemed this ḥadīth weak.” As ‘Abd al-Khāliq later described, Albānī “became a kind of authority (marjī’)” who threatened the establishment, resulting in “the plot of malicious ones” (makāyid al-ḥāqidīn).497

Despite these experiences, sympathetic biographers and even Western academics tend to relegate Albānī’s turbulent relationship with the IUM and the country’s religious elite to a mere footnote, taking for granted both his Wahhābī bona fides and his contributions to the country and university.498 Biographers include lengthy sections on Albānī’s “influence on the university,” and cite his pioneering work in shepherding ḥadīth science as a university discipline.499 Albānī acknowledged his achievements in this area, recalling that “this Saudi Arabia that you see [today] flooded with students of

496 “Al-Albānī yatakallam ‘an ibādihi min al-Jāmi’ā al-Islāmiyya.”
497 See, for example, ‘Awda, Qaṭf al-thimār, 41; “Murāja’āt ma’ā al-shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Abd al-Khāliq – al-ḥalqa al-ūlā.” ‘Abd al-Khāliq explained that jealousy (ḥasad) “was the most important reason” for Albānī’s ouster.
498 See, for example, Stéphane Lacroix’s observation that “[Albānī’s] conception of the creed was impeccably Wahhabi” in Stéphane Lacroix, Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia, trans. George Holoch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 84. Michael Farquhar offers a welcomed alternative approach to the meaning of Wahhābī more broadly in the context of the Islamic University of Medina, with his pioneering research on that institution in which he states, “Against a common tendency to view Wahhabism as a hermetically sealed and rigid tradition, I argue that the pedagogy that came together at this particular Wahhabi institution was in fact partly shaped by a dynamic of unequal reciprocity with staff and students hailing from all over the world, a process of give and take which saw them influencing the university at the same time as they were influenced by it.” Michael Farquhar, “The Islamic University of Medina since 1961: the Politics of Religious Mission and the Making of a Modern Salafi Pedagogy,” in M. Bano and K. Sakurai, eds. Globalizing Islam: al-Azhār, al-Medīna and al-Mustafa (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming), 1. I am grateful to Michael Farquhar for sharing his work with me ahead of its publication, which has been helpful in understanding the development and curricular composition of the Islamic University of Medina.
499 See for example Shaybānī, Hayāt al-Albānī, 1: 61, who wrote that “[Albānī’s] method of hadīth instruction at the university, ‘isnād study’…he was the first teacher to set out this discipline in any university in the world, and no Islamic university at the time had anything like this, even the Azhar…”
ḥadīth…when I visited there no one was interested in this discipline.”

Indeed, beyond ḥadīth science, Albānī’s footprint on the IUM appears in other parts of its curriculum and culture. For example, after Albānī’s departure the Sharḥ al-ʿAqīda al-Ṭahāwiyya was added to the disproportionately Najdī-Wahhābī curriculum. Moreover, official university publications began to use statements such as “[The Islamic University of Medina] assures its students that partisanship (taʿṣṣub) to so-and-so is not permitted; and it is not permissible to say that the truth lies with so-and-so without a proof-text…”

Eventually, of course, the story did have a happy ending, with both the Kingdom and Albānī acknowledging the other’s merits. In January 1999, several months before Albānī’s death, the country awarded him its King Faisal Prize for Islamic Studies for his “service to the Prophetic ḥadīth.” The text of the award mentions that “Shaykh al-Albānī is considered a scholarly figure and founder of a distinguished school.” For his part, recalling his “good memories in calling to the Qur’ān and the sunna according to the method of the pious predecessors when I was a teacher there,” Albānī bequeathed his personal library to the Islamic University of Medina.

In attempting to reconcile the evidence pointing to a positive relationship between Albānī and the Saudi religious elite, on the one hand, with the clear tensions he

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500 Hādī, Muḥaddith al-ʿaṣr, 78. This, of course, was not entirely accurate, particularly since Medina housed the Dār al-Ḥadīth Institute, which predates the IUM and was incorporated into the latter in 1964. Farquhar, “The Islamic University of Medina,” 3.
501 Of course, this is not to say that the introduction of the Ṭahāwiyya was directly, or exclusively, tied to Albānī’s influence. Farquhar, “The Islamic University of Medina,” 11.
502 Ghāmidī, ed. al-Kitāb al-wathāʾiqī, ix.
504 ʿAwda, Qaff al-thimār, 99.
experienced during his first extended stay in the country.\footnote{The reader will recall that Albānī visited Saudi Arabia at least once prior to his tenure as professor at IUM, and that visit too seemed to be particularly negative. Albānī performed ‘umra in 1948 and his lasting impression of this first visit to Saudi Arabia was marred by his observation that the barrier between the Prophet’s grave and the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina was not high enough, and his appeals to renovate it fell on deaf ears. Albānī, Tahdhir al-sājid, 65, 69-70.} This chapter offers an alternative reading of the events. His writings and teachings from the 1960’s onwards that include lengthy expositions of Ḥanbalī theology, sometimes in places where one would expect to find ḥadīth criticism, suggest a deliberate strategy to demonstrate his Wahhābī credentials in order to redeem his standing in Wahhābī circles. Put differently, his expulsion from the very cradle of Salafism served as an embarrassing reminder to Albānī that even in certain circles his commitment to the Prophet’s sunna alone was not enough to demonstrate his common cause with those scholars.

Additionally, as we shall see, that Albānī had this realization during this particular period in the history of Saudi Arabia proved to be one of the most fortuitous coincidences in his career.\footnote{This background until the top of p. 180 is reproduced verbatim from Olidort, “The Politics of ‘Quietist’ Salafism,” 12-13.} The Islamic University of Medina was an institution of great strategic importance to Saudi Arabia at the time.\footnote{For the most comprehensive study on this institution to date, see Michael Farquhar, “The Islamic University of Medina since 1961: the Politics of Religious Mission and the Making of a Modern Salafi Pedagogy,” in M. Bano and K. Sakurai, eds. Globalizing Islam: al-Azhar, al-Medina and al-Mustafa (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).} As the country’s first Islamic university, the IUM served a dual domestic and foreign policy purpose during its founding.\footnote{Ibid.} On the domestic front, Crown Prince Faysal (r. 1964-1975) had in mind the conservative clerics concerned about the fate of religious guidance following the establishment of the secular Riyadh University in 1957.\footnote{Although he formally became king in 1964, Faysal is universally regarded as being the main architect of Saudi Arabia’s “modernization” projects during this period and its conduct of foreign policy. See, for example, David D. Commins, The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 104-129.} At the same time, Faysal sought to promote a kind of pan-
Islamic unity to counteract Gamal Abdel Nasser’s secular Arab Nationalism. To this end, the IUM, not insignificantly established in the Prophet Muhammad’s final resting place, Medina, directly challenged the Azhar University, the premier Islamic institution, which was based in Cairo and which Abdel Nasser had recently nationalized. From its beginning, the IUM – to this day the country’s only all-male institution of higher education – enrolled and staffed predominantly foreign students and faculty members, a number of whom were members of the Muslim Brotherhood expelled from Egypt and elsewhere due to hostile conditions in their home countries.

Albeit unrelated, the foreign and domestic circumstances surrounding the IUM’s establishment had at least one aspect in common: Islam – specifically of the Saudi Wahhābī variety – was integral to the university’s curriculum and character. Despite Stéphane Lacroix’s observation that it was part of an educational system “at the service of the [Muslim] Brotherhood” owing to the high numbers of Brotherhood members who staffed these universities and helped shape their curricula, creedal topics on those curricula remained out of their reach.

In addition to serving as a tool for rapprochement with the Kingdom, explicitly promoting Wahhābī creed became a useful weapon for Albānī in his attacks on Islamist groups who, he felt, rushed into popular mobilization through the formation of political

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510 Commins estimates that as much as 75 percent of the student body consisted of foreign students. Commins, Wahhabi Mission, 112.
512 As Farquhar writes, “The question of creed, and the issue of tawḥīd in particular, had been the keystone of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s reformist mission and remained a paramount concern for his Najdi inheritors when the new university opened its doors some two centuries later. It was their particular conception of tawḥīd that grounded the opposition of the reformist Najdi ‘ulama’ to traditional religious practices, like seeking the intercession of saints, which they saw as amounting to shirk or polytheism. It was thus to be expected that this aspect of teaching at the IUM would be subject to a special degree of control.” Farquhar, “The Islamic University of Medina since 1961,” 11.
By prioritizing the political arena over the theological, Albānī argued, Islamist groups distorted the “correct” Islamic creed. In one rare account of his time in Saudi Arabia, Albānī provided the following vivid description of his early tensions with Islamists, illustrating his differences with them:

So long as I live I will never forget this discussion that took place about ten years ago in Medina [1962] with one of the preachers and sermonizers... who visited us during a pleasant evening at which were gathered a group of Salafī students such as myself... [The visitor said]: 'we live at a time during which Muslims are surrounded by strife (fitan) from every side. These [forms of] strife touch at the very core of belief and creed. [Albānī then paraphrased the visitor as citing ‘apostate Communists, Nationalists and other unbelievers’ as causes of strife.] It is incumbent upon us all to unite in fighting these groups and to defend against their threat to the Muslims, and put aside discussions and debates about matters of juridical disagreement (al-umūr al-khilāfiyya) such as issues of the night prayer (qiyyām) and intercession (al-tawassul) and the like!'

Albānī next reflected on the statement of his visitor that evening, whom he identified in another account as “the leader of an Islamist group well-known in some countries.”

Albānī wrote:

For us, this discussion reflects the reality of many Muslim missionaries today... They exhort all those who associate with them without bringing them knowledge or proofs from the Qur’ān and the sunna about divine unicity (tawhīd), and without correcting erroneous understandings of it. Rather, their interest lies in Islamic ethics (akhlāq) and educating their followers about politics and economics, and other topics that occupy most writers today. We see some of them not even praying, all the while calling to establish an Islamic society and Islamic governance. How preposterous! For an Islamic society cannot be realized unless the call to it resembles the Prophet’s call to God, according to what is contained in the Book of God that His Messenger explained.

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513 Although concrete evidence is lacking here, these two motivating factors could have overlapped. Indeed, given the negative reputation Islamic activists would later acquire in Saudi Arabia – notably in 1979, with the takeover of the Great Mosque in Mecca by Juhaymān al-‘Utaybī’s group (to which Albānī was connected, albeit indirectly) and, later, with the Ṣaḥīwa movement – it is not inconceivable that Albānī became more sensitive to his standing with respect to the country’s leadership. For the connection between Albānī and Juhaymān al-‘Utaybī, see Hegghammer and Lacroix, “Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia.”
514 Dhahabī, Mukṭṣaṣr al-‘Ulūw, 58.
515 See Albānī’s Silsilat al-hudā wa-l-nūr recorded sessions quoted in Āl Nu’mān, Jāmi’ turāth al-Albānī, 169.
516 Dhahabī, Mukṭṣaṣr al-‘Ulūw, 59.
In the next section of this chapter, we will examine how Albānī wove creed into his condemnations of Islamist groups and into his definition of the Salafī method. Specifically, we will see first how he used Islamist groups and their ideologues as foils for defining an epistemology that prioritized belief over reason and, second, how he systematically classified both pre-modern and contemporary scholars according to whether they defended or opposed this epistemology. In this way, he implicitly constructed a canon of authors and texts that, in his view, alone defended the creed and method of the pious predecessors. In this account, it will also be evident that the institutional context of the development of higher education in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Arab world in the mid-twentieth century served as a timely forum for Albānī to address the subject of what kind of Islam was being taught to an increasingly activist study body.\(^{517}\)

### Setting the Stage: The Case for an Epistemology of Belief

Albānī was not the first to point out the Ash'arī and Mu'tazilī theological preferences of certain Islamist thinkers, many of whom wrote quite extensively on the subject.\(^{518}\) Indeed, in some cases Albānī was not even the first to condemn these authors...
for their theological views. Rather, what was new in Albānī’s case was how he framed his critique, his methodological approach and the implications he drew from it. Specifically, instead of limiting himself to attacks on the views of particular scholars, Albānī extended his attack to their followers, whom he addressed as “Islamists,” “Islamic groups” (al-jamā‘āt al-Islāmiyya) and “Islamist writers” (al-kuttāb al-Islāmiyyūn).

Moreover, beyond merely attacking a stance on a particular theological issue, Albānī neatly connected these “flawed” positions to what he described as a departure from the way of the pious predecessors, especially in their approach to the Qur’ān and ḥadīth, as the sole guarantors of infallibility (‘ismā), as he would later teach. By demonstrating that the Islamists’ “blind” adherence to a madhhab (in this case, the school of speculative theology) resulted in their adoption of heretical creeds, Albānī delineated where belief (īmān) ends and where unbelief (kufr) begins.

We will begin by examining the contours of this epistemology, as well as its implications concerning belief and unbelief – a decidedly new dimension to the critique
of Islamist groups which, although bolstering Albānī’s Salafī *bona fides*, would ultimately return to haunt him towards the end of his life in his confrontation with Jihādīs. Following this overview, we will look at how Albānī used this critique with reference to early Islamic heresiography to shape the boundaries between Salafīs and non-Salafīs.

Albānī’s attack on Islamist groups for their epistemology was a variation on a theme that recurred in his lectures and writings during his early period in Damascus, specifically concerning his idea that legal rulings and creed must be based on āḥād reports if they are demonstrated to be sound. He argued there that *tawātur* is not a valid condition for accepting or rejecting a report for two reasons. To begin with, as Albānī explained, *tawātur* merely illustrates how a report was transmitted but says nothing about the report’s status (sound or weak) – the latter being determined only by the trustworthiness of the individuals in its chain of transmitters. Second, it is impossible to definitively prove whether, in fact, a report did meet the criterion of *tawātur* – that, to use

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521 This will be examined in chapter 8. The issue of *kufr* (unbelief) and *takfir* (excommunication based on belief) is probably the most controversial, and certainly unresolved, legacy that Albānī left behind, arguably more controversial than either his rejection of the *madhhab* or his interrogation of the canonical ḥadīth compendia. Salafī-Jihādīs and their supporters took him to task for it during the last decade of his life, although surprisingly only on the question of ritual observances rather than creed (namely, whether one who forgets to pray is considered an unbeliever, for which Albānī’s explanation that committing a sin or forgetting once does not on its own constitute grounds for excommunication has precedent and is fairly safe). The roots of the problem lie in this chapter in his more controversial links between ḥadīth methodology and creed. Ironically, it is because of Albānī’s watertight exposition of his ḥadīth methodology that the issue remains unresolved, with the equal potential for citing Albānī in both the defense and opposition of *takfir* with respect to ḥadīth criticism. At its most basic level, the issue begins with Albānī’s view that both creed and legal rulings are based in āḥād ḥadīth reports. If one follows this logic, this statement suggests that those who do not accept āḥād ḥadīth reports do not have correct creed, and, because of their incomplete or incorrect views on belief could, in theory, be considered unbelievers. Albānī was aware of this implication and therefore probably for this reason never spelled out this conclusion.
Albānī’s language, *tawātur* is a “relative issue” (*qaḍiyya nisbiyya*).\(^{522}\) Indeed, as we have seen previously, this was a point that his mentor Rashīd Riḍā emphasized as well.\(^{523}\)

In 1957 Albānī gave a lecture to students in Damascus on the theme “The Obligation to Accept *Āḥād* Reports in Creed,” which was subsequently published in 1974, and in 1972 gave a lecture on a similar theme to Muslim students in Spain. Among their distinct features, and as further evidence of the unique concerns of each, were the different targets of Albānī’s attack. In the earlier lecture given in Damascus, as he did in his pamphlets and articles from that period, Albānī cited the Āḥādīs and the Qur’ānīs, the latter a movement that recognized the Qur’ān as the exclusive source of Islamic law and practice.\(^{524}\) As might be expected, he faulted the latter for knowingly ignoring the Prophet’s *sunna*, and even questioned their status as Muslims because of their different practices and beliefs emanating from their sole reliance on the Qur’ān.\(^{525}\)

In his 1972 lecture, as suggested by its title “Hadīth is a Demonstrative Proof in Creedal Matters and Legal Rulings,” Albānī broadened the focus beyond creed, presumably to re-emphasize the equal importance of both in Islam.\(^{526}\) More immediately, he also did so to respond to new trends in politics and education among his contemporaries. He explained that “the Prophetic *sunna*…is the second and final source

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\(^{523}\) See the section “Dispelling the *Tawātur* Myth” in chapter 2.


\(^{525}\) Albānī, *Wujūb*, 32. See also Albānī, *Kayfa ‘alaynā an nufassir al-Qur’ān al-karīm* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 2007), especially 7-11; See also idem, *Manzilat al-sunna*, 12ff, which Albānī originally presented as a lecture in Doha, Qatar in 1972.

\(^{526}\) Indeed, in various writings Albānī teaches that the distinction between *‘aqā’id* (creed) and *ahkām* (legal rulings) is an arbitrary one that did not exist during the Prophet’s time. As we will see, this title is in fact a direct response to the views of Taqī al-Dīn al-Nabahānī (d. 1977), who believed that creed cannot be based on *āḥād* reports while legal rulings can be, thereby implying a separation between the two. See Albānī, *al-Hadīth ḥujja bi-nafsihi*, 49.
of Islamic law in all aspects of life, from hidden creedal matters, to actionable legal rulings, to political and educational [matters], and it is not permissible to oppose any aspect of this through personal opinion (ra’y) or independent reasoning (ijtihād) or analogical reasoning (qiyās).”527 Not only were the distinctions between legal rulings, creed and other areas of human activity arbitrary but, moreover, to Albānī, all of these areas collectively constituted the province of the sunna.

While he continued to vilify the Alḥmadīs and Qur’ānīs, in this lecture he also addressed the Islamist da’wa (missionizing) efforts, whose popularity he witnessed among university students. Towards the end of the lecture, he acknowledged that he once heard “one of [the youth] sermonizing with all praiseworthy Islamic passion and zeal that ‘sovereignty belongs to God alone’ (al-ḥākimiyya li-llāh waḥduhu)528 and with this attacked the unbelievers’ systems of government.” Albānī even praised the students’ passion, calling it “a nice thing, even though we cannot change [the government].”529

Albānī then reminded the students,

While you learn about the efforts and writings of some of the Islamist writers such as Sayyid Quṭb and Mawdūdī and others who say that the right to legislate (ḥaqq al-tashrī‘) belongs to God Almighty alone...what they have called ‘sovereignty[belonging] to God Almighty’...I say at the same time that many young people do not pay attention to the kind of partnering [with God] that contradicts (al-mushāraka al-munāfiya) this principle of ‘sovereignty belonging to God Almighty’ [i.e. in matters of creed and practice].530

527 Albānī, al-Ḥadīth ḥujja bi-nafsīhi, 25.
528 Here Albānī invoked the idea promoted by Quṭb and Mawdūdī that obedience be given only to God. The earliest use of the phrase “lā ḥukm illā li-llāh” (sovereignty belongs to God) is by the Khārijīs. Salafīs incorporate ḥākimiyya into the other forms of tawḥīd, rububiyya (God’s lordship), ulūhiyya (God’s divinity) and al-asmā’ wa-l-ṣifāt ([God’s] names and attributes). See Bustami Khir, “Sovereignty,” Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān.
529 Albānī, al-Ḥadīth ḥujja bi-nafsīhi, 91.
530 Ibid., 90-91.
Despite his vocal opposition to Islamists that began in this period, his personal attacks on their leaders were relatively rare. One exception, and likely the target of this particular lecture, was Taqī al-Dīn al-Nabahānī (d. 1977), the founder of Ḥizb al-Tahrīr, whom Albānī called a “political party missionary” (al-dā’iya al-ḥizbī) and elsewhere as “not a ḥadīth scholar but rather among the jurists of the present age whose jurisprudence is one of emulation (taqlīdī).”\(^{531}\) Specifically, Albānī faulted Nabahānī for perpetuating the idea promoted by the Ḥanafī school\(^{532}\) that the āḥād report does not on its own carry certainty and therefore cannot serve as the basis for creed. In response, Albānī wrote, “the distinction between āḥād and tawātur was only established by [later] scholars, so does it serve the Muslim masses to study this idea?… No, since it only introduces doubt into their creed.”\(^{533}\)

In a number of works, Nabahānī celebrated the fact that Islamic creed is “rational” (‘aqīda ‘aqliyya), that Muslims are capable of not only relying on rational proofs but also defending their positions in debates with others on the basis of rational arguments. He praised the “method of the speculative theologians” (manhaj al-mutakallimīn) for setting out principles and ways of proving their beliefs through “logical rational arguments.”\(^{534}\) It is because of this robust rational

\(^{531}\) Albānī, Fatāwā Judda, “al-Athar,” Quoted in Āl Nu’mān, Jāmi’ turāth al-Albānī, 348-349.

\(^{532}\) For more on this, see the formalist-materialist categorization of the legal schools offered by Aron Zysow in his The Economy of Certainty, where the Ḥanafīs represent the position of the formalists, who accept probability along with a system of adjudicating it, while the Ḥanbalīs and Zāhirīs are the materialists, who do not admit probability and only accept certainty. See also my summary of this distinction in the context of Traditionalist Salafism in the “Dispelling the Tawātur Myth” section of chapter 2.

\(^{533}\) Āl Nu’mān, Jāmi’ turāth al-Albānī, 350.

framework that Nabahānī forbade relying on āḥād reports, which must be demonstrated by rational principles (such as tawātur) to have some measure of reliability.\textsuperscript{535}

In his book on “the Islamic Personality,” Nabahānī explained that “belief (īmān) means believing in a decisive way following the conditions laid out by proofs (dalīl), since if there is no proof then it cannot be considered belief.”\textsuperscript{536} The proof, he continued, “can be either rational (‘aqālī) or textual (naqlī), depending on the subject matter,” and those matters that can be felt by human senses are “rational” insofar as they can be processed by the intellect through rationalization. Islamic creed, as Nabahānī understood it, contains both “rational” and “textual” concepts. An example of a “rational” concept is the belief in God which, he explained, can be ascertained through the senses (viz., by observing the existence of created beings) while an example of a “textual” concept is belief in angels, which cannot be perceived by the senses.\textsuperscript{537}

For both creedal matters and religious observances – namely sunna – textual proofs must hold the status of certainty (yaqīn) in order to be legally binding. In Nabahānī’s discussion of the different kinds of reports, only the mutawātīr is definitively established as certain since it was transmitted through sufficient numbers of trustworthy individuals in each of the first three generations.\textsuperscript{538}

\textsuperscript{535} Nabahānī’s views on this subject appear, among other places, in his al-Tafkīr, in which he champions the human intellect, explaining that Islamic creed is defined through it. See Taqī al-Dīn al-Nabahānī, al-Tafkīr (Beirut: Hizb al-Tahrīr, 1973).
\textsuperscript{536} Nabahānī, al-Shakhṣīyya al-Islāmiyya, 1: 29.
\textsuperscript{537} Ibid., 29, 55; Commins, “Taqī al-Dīn al-Nabhānī,” at: 197.
\textsuperscript{538} Ibid., 3: 82.
Beyond epistemological principles, the relationship between rational and textual proofs were, in Nabahānī’s view, the very factors responsible for the success of the Islamic mission through the centuries. As he wrote in the same work,

The Islamic mission (al-daʿwa al-Islāmiyya) brought to the conquered lands a violent intellectual clash with members of other religions... The members of other religions knew some philosophical ideas, and had views based on their own religions, and would sow doubt and debate Muslims on creed...

Despite this, he continued, “it was the commitment of the Muslims to the Islamic mission, and their desire to refute their opponents, that made them learn philosophical ideas to arm themselves against their enemies.” After mentioning that the Qurʾān itself advocates using reason, and basing one’s understanding of its creeds on rational faculties and proofs, Nabahānī emphasized that “the Islamic debating principles (ahkām al-Islām fī al-jidāl), and the existence of philosophical ideas, have protected Muslims…and through them the Islamic lands have become battlegrounds for presenting and debating the views of other religions.” With its cultivation of rational tools of argumentation, Islam towers over other world systems, particularly nationalism and patriotism, which, as David Commins explains, Nabahānī viewed as “poor bases for social unity because they are based on temporary, capricious sentiments and expedient interests.”

540 Nabahānī, al-Shakhṣiyā al-Islāmiyya, 1:49.
541 Ibid.
542 Ibid., 51.
The broader ideological dimension of Nabahānī’s views, as well as its implications for the Muslim masses, were surely not lost on Albānī. Nonetheless, Albānī’s critique of Nabahānī consistently focused on the latter’s discussion of ḥadīth and epistemology, all the while steering clear of Nabahānī’s longer and arguably more famous manifestos on ideology and the Islamic order (al-nizām al-Islāmī). In addition to Albānī’s aforementioned insistence on the possibility of the āḥād report’s certainty and therefore binding nature, much of his concern with Nabahānī’s views was aimed at the danger of how the latter’s ideas promoted partisanship among his followers and thereby clouded the means and intentions of ascertaining the Prophet’s guidance.

As an example, he cited a hypothetical scenario in which Nabahānī might mention a ḥadīth report that he considered to be mutawātir, but for which, unlike his followers, he had actually traced the report’s path among the various “levels” such that “[for Nabahānī] the report has a channel of certainty that determines that the Prophet actually said it.”\(^{544}\) By contrast, when Nabahānī’s followers claim the report is mutawātir, it in fact remains āḥad since, as Albānī explained, “it was just another member of his party (ḥizbī) who says ‘I consider this report mutawātir’ – meaning among the members of Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr – and he has no other evidence outside of political parties.”\(^{545}\) In other words, by only transmitting reports from individual members of the party, or even from the entire party, that bit of knowledge still only has āḥād status since it was not truly corroborated through concurrent transmissions from others outside the party, tawātur.


\(^{545}\) Ibid.
Given Albānī’s lexical precision, particularly when it came to terminology, it was not entirely coincidental that he consistently referred to Nabahānī and his followers using the term “political partisan” (ḥizbī). Indeed, inasmuch as Nabahānī’s promotion of a rationalist epistemology was constitutive of his conception of the “Islamic personality” and the Islamic ideological worldview, so too Albānī’s critique of tawātur – a product of that very rationalist tradition – served as the chief example of how Nabahānī’s party, and Islamic political parties in general, threatened the very essence of the religion they claimed to represent.

After explaining that he noticed that books authored by members of Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr were “filled with weak reports,” Albānī wrote:

Do you ever consult with individuals outside of your political party?! Knowledge must flow from you and must come from someone other than you, and so forth. When I say that I have a report that I have determined [to have been spoken by the Prophet] by way of tawātur…this does not in fact meet the threshold of tawātur for you since I am only one person. Ḥadīth specialists from across the Islamic world must also tell you that this ḥadīth is mutawātir, but this is impossible [to achieve]. Therefore, I cannot imagine that you [actually] believe a creed spread by a mutawātī ḥadīth since such a ḥadīth does not exist for you as members of Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr, nor for your great leader Taqī al-Dīn [al-Nabahānī]. He, like any reader, has read the ḥadīth in a book which states that it is āḥād or tawātur, but [the report] does not thereby reach tawātur [status] for him since he read it with the discernment (dalāla) of one person, and this differs greatly from the rules governing the determination of a ḥadīth’s tawātur status.⁵⁴⁶

In other words, Albānī explained that their unfamiliarity with the chief Islamic discipline that governs the transmission of religious knowledge from the Prophet –ḥadīth science – has led members of Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr astray in the kinds of religious practices and ideas they advocate. Moreover, by associating themselves with a political party, these individuals continue to confuse their channels and authorities of religious guidance and, instead, create further divisions in the community.

⁵⁴⁶ Albānī, Ṣilsilat al-hudā wa-l-nūr, 269/12:27:00, quoted in Āl Nu’mān, Jāmi’ turāth al-Albānī, 389.
Islamist Groups as Islamic Sects: The Politics of Belief

Albānī traced the origins of Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr’s approach to the Mu’tazilī school “in their departure point on the way to belief,” explaining that both “give the intellect a greater privilege than is necessary.” Specifically, he clarified that the Mu’tazilīs “corrupted and rejected many aspects of the divine law by allowing their intellect to govern over the texts of the Qur’ān and sunna, and so have replaced and changed aspects of it.” The Mu’tazilī position, which Albānī ascribed not only to Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr but also to “all Islamic parties,” “gives to the human intellect more weight than what Islam gives it…despite the differences between the Muslim intellect and that of an unbeliever.”

Far from a question of who is more knowledgeable – indeed Albānī further subdivided these categories into “knowledgeable” and “ignorant” intellects – his distinction between the intellect of a Muslim and an unbeliever was rather an explicit statement about how epistemology carries implications concerning one’s status as a believer. Citing Q. 67:10 and 7:179 in connection to unbelievers, Albānī explained that “the true intellect is that of the Muslim, who believes in God and His Messenger… [and] submits to the text of the Qur’ān and the sunna,” the method that the pious predecessors had espoused. He stopped short of taking

548 Ibid.
549 Ibid., 239.
550 “Had we but listened or used our own reasoning we would not have dwelled among the people of flames.”
551 “…They have hearts and yet they do not understand with them…”
552 He used the distinction between al-’aql al-haqiqī and al-’aql al-majāzī (the figurative intellect), presumably because of the well-established contrast between haqīqa and majāz. While the connotation of al-’aql al-haqiqī is something akin to “true,” the exact meaning of al-’aql al-majāzī which he uses to describe the intellect of the unbeliever is not entirely clear other than some kind of less-than-true intellect.
this discussion to its logical conclusion about belief, perhaps seeing the point as both too obvious and too sensitive for explicit mention, \(^{554}\) and instead stressed the fact that the Mu’tazilīs “became corrupted in the principles they upheld that opposed the divine law.” By following their example, Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr likewise went astray by “relying on the intellect more than is appropriate.”\(^{555}\)

Beyond their methodological similarities, tracing the origins of Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr and other Islamist groups to heretical sects of the medieval Islamic period gave an added historical grounding to Albānī’s views. By excavating parallels between them and prior groups that the People of Ḥadīth had maligned, and using the same vocabulary as he did in his critique of the madhhab as Rashīd Riḍā did before him, Albānī also located his “method” of the salaf in a continuous historical tradition.\(^{556}\) “The importance of this qualification, [of it being founded] ‘upon the method of the pious predecessors,’ will become clear to you,” Albānī taught, explaining that,

Given the reality of Islamist groups (al-jamāʿāt al-Islāmiyya), nay Islamist sects (al-firaq), from the day they first revealed their necks, or their horns\(^ {557}\) …from the day

\(^{554}\) Indeed, this is the only instance that I have come across in which Albānī adopts a stance bordering on an acceptance of takfīr. He certainly takes a vocal stance against “excessiveness in takfīr” in his later years, which we will examine in chapter 8 in the context of his confrontations with Salafī-Jihādīs.\(^ {555}\) Āl Nuʿmān, Jāmiʿ turāth al-Albānī, 241-242.

\(^{556}\) In the context of “those who imitate Europeans,” as we saw in chapter 2. For another example of this kind of lexical co-mingling of madhhab and political groups and their ideologies by others during this time period see Fatḥī Yakan, Ḥarakāt wa-madhāhib fī miṣān al-Īslām: al-qism al-awwal: al-shuyuʿiyya, al-raʾisāliyya, al-Māṣūmiyya, al-qawmiyya al-Sūriyya, al-qawmiyya al-ʿarabiyya, third edition (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risāla, 1979). Albeit Yakan (d. 2009) was an Islamist leader in Lebanon, his use of technical terms like madhhab irrespective of their technical meanings in this context suggests that Albānī might have even borrowed his rhetorical style from the Islamist critique of secular national ideologies.

\(^{557}\) The term “the horns” seems to be based on a ḥadīth in Bukhārī (4:336) in which the Prophet allegedly warned that chaos (fitna) will spread and will originate in the House of ‘Āʾisha. The text in that ḥadīth is “The turn of unbelief is here, where the horns of Satan will emerge.” A number of Salafīs and Salafī-Jihādīs have appropriated this ḥadīth for their anti-Shīʿī polemics today. For one example see Albānī’s student Mashhūr b. Hasan Āl Salmān’s comments on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria’s (ISIS) announcement of a caliphate, in which he called them Khārijīs, and explained that their appearance today coincides with that of the Shiʿīs, as it had throughout Islamic history. “When the Shiʿīs show their horns, look for Khārijīs and you will find them.” Mashhūr b. Hasan Āl Salmān, “Taʾliq al-shaykh Mashhūr Ḥasan Salmān hawlal iʿlān al-khilāfa fī Dawlat al-Irq wa-l-Shām-Dā’ish,” YouTube, posted by “ʿAzīrī Muhammad,” 24 July 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fleI1xYBI1M Accessed 22 October 2014.
that the Khārijīs ‘went out’ against the Commander of the Faithful ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib...all these groups, whether old or new, there is no group that claims ‘we do not follow the Qur’ān and the sunna’....all these groups, who divide themselves [based] on their understanding of their religion, say as we do ‘we follow the Qur’ān and the sunna.’ But they differ from us and do not say that which is the summation of our call, ‘and upon the method of the pious predecessors’....Ḥizb al-Tahrīr does not build its ideas upon this principle, nor does the Muslim Brotherhood, nor the other many Islamist parties...  

Old Foes, New Frontlines: Kawtharī and the Defense of the Salafī Creed

Unlike Albānī’s dispute with Nabahānī, which focused squarely on epistemology (only suggesting its implications concerning creed), his attack on Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (d. 1951) was far more explicit concerning the connections between accepting the positions of Ḥanbalī theology and correct belief. Moreover, with his descriptions of the latter such as “the damned” (al-hālik) and “one of the leaders...of those who attack the Salafis for their belief,” Albānī clearly saw Kawtharī as a representative of everything that Salafism sought to correct and of everything that stood in its way. So important was attacking Kawtharī that Albānī continued to do so well after the former’s death, for example dedicating much of the seventy-page introduction to his edition of Dhahabī’s (d. 1348) al-‘Ulūw lī-l-ʿālī al-ghaffār fī ṣaḥīḥ al-akhbār wa-saqīmihā (The Loftiness of the Merciful One on High as Attested in the Sound and Weak Reports), which Albānī penned in 1972, to an attack on Kawtharī.

What accounts for Albānī’s persistent interest in Kawtharī and, more importantly, for what he represented to Albānī? His theological attacks on Kawtharī could be understood on a number of levels, not least important of which was the fact that Kawtharī was a staunch Ḥanafī and seemed to have been a major influence on Albānī’s arch-
nemesis, ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (d. 1997), who allegedly gave himself the agnomen “al-Kawtharī,” to associate himself with Kawtharī. Not only was Kawtharī a Ḥanafī, but he saw adherence to *madhḥabs* as indispensable for correct Islamic practice and, likewise, in his writings urged reconciliation between the *madhḥabs* (*al-taqrīb bayn al-madhāhib*) in order to preserve their “inherited” jurisprudence (*al-fiqh al-mutawwārath*) and attacked “non-madhhabism” as “the pursuit of discord in the name of reform” and “a bridge towards atheism.” Indeed, Kawtharī’s articles towards the end of his life on aspects of popular religious observance, particularly prayer and dress, suggest that those were likely direct responses to Albānī’s earlier pamphlets on similar topics, albeit he never mentions the latter by name. Finally, there was the fact that Kawtharī was a traditionally-trained scholar and an assistant to the last *shaykh al-Islām* of the Ottoman Empire — in other words, a symbol of the traditional and political institutions of religious authority that Albānī opposed. Moreover, Kawtharī used his position to marginalize the Salafī textual influence on the curriculum at the Azhar by trying to stop

560 See, for example, Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī, *Maqālāt al-Kawtharī* (Cairo: al-Matkaba al-Tawfīqiyya, 1953[?]), 543, in which the editor writes that “Abū Ghudda studied with Kawtharī at the Azhar and after graduating [Abū Ghudda] taught in his city of Aleppo. I saw him many times in Egypt asking Kawtharī and recording from him. He attained a fervent adherence to him such that he associated himself with him by calling himself “al-shaykh ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda al-Ḥanafī al-Kawtharī.”

561 See, for example, Kawtharī, *Maqālāt*, 9, 120-137.

562 While he does not mention Albānī by name, presumably not wanting to give the latter more attention than he already had, it is likely that he wrote these articles in response to Albānī, using phrases such as “those who feign *ijtihād* (al-mutamujtahīdān) in the context of the issue of whether to cover the head and feet during prayer (which Albānī permitted). For examples, see Kawtharī’s “Binā’ masāḥij ‘alā al-qubūr wa-l-ṣalāt ilayhā (ibid., pp. 153-165), “Kashf al-ru’ūs wa-l-ṣalāt (ibid., 165-228); and his “Ḥijāb al-mar’a” (ibid., 229-232), in which he wrote, possibly seeing the popularity among women of Albānī’s position that women are not required to cover their faces, that “the permission for a woman to reveal her face and ankles during prayer and in the vicinity of the ḥaram of Mecca does not prove that she may do so when leaving her house if need be, since the issue of her dress [here] is restricted to times of worship.” Ibid., 231.


564 Dhahabī, *Mukhtasar al-‘Ulūw*, 156.
the distribution of several classical works of Ḥanbalī theology and warning about their nefarious influence.  

Kawtharī’s anti-Salafi views, particularly his promotion of Māturīdī theology and his condemnations of Ibn Taymiyya, became the subject of a series of refutations published in the early-mid twentieth century by the main Salafi luminaries of the time. Mimicking the rhetorical style of his Salafi predecessors who capitalized on the literal sense of “Sunnī” (i.e. adherence to the sunna) and equated it with Salafism, Albānī’s efforts to depict Kawtharī as the archetypal enemy of Salafism through historical comparisons between his positions and those of early Muslims and pre-modern scholars as “defenders” or “enemies” of the “true” creed seemed to serve a two-pronged function. Explicitly, they connected his Salafi community with the past through a shared theology and set of beliefs and, at the same time, created a boundary between it and non-Salafi communities. Implicitly, by meticulously listing pre-modern and contemporary scholars who upheld this position, Albānī created a parallel tradition of continuous Salafi scholarly authorities, along with their important works, and inserted himself into this golden chain.

Albānī’s lengthy critique of Kawtharī centered on the latter’s rejection of the Ḥanbalī principle of God’s “loftiness” (al-‘ulūw), the idea that God is situated (istiwā’).

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565 Notably, ‘Uthmān b. Sa’īd al-Dārimī’s al-Radd ‘alā Bishr al-Marīsī and Ibn Ḥanbal’s Kitāb al-Sunna. His articles on curricular reform at the Azhar, with the series titled Mażhar ja’dīd lī-l-Azhar al-ḥadīth (The New Face of the Modern Azhar), have been reprinted in Kawtharī, Maqālāt.

566 A number of these, including articles by Bahjat al-Bīṭār and ‘Abd al-Razzāq Ḥamza, have been collected and published in perhaps the most widely-available single Salafi critique of Kawtharī, to which Albānī penned an introduction, Mu’allimī, al-Tankīl bi-mā fī ta’nīb al-Kawtharī min al-ābād, ed. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh and ‘Abd al-Razzāq Ḥamza, 2 volumes, second edition (Beirut: al-Maktab al-islāmī, 1986).

567 See, for example, Bīṭār’s refutation, which includes a section title “[Kawtharī’s] opposition to the Sunnīs in affirming the [divine] attributes,” in ibid., 79.
on high above the seven heavens on His throne.\footnote{568} Beyond serving as merely another way to defend their literal understanding of the Qur’ānic verses against accusations of anthropomorphism, it was the question of God’s location that, more than any other theological issue, typified for Salafis the fallacies of speculative theology. For them, the question of “where God is” (ayna Allāh) was not only one of location, but also one of ontology. Namely, as the Salafi perspective went, the vast differences between the early schools of theology on this question – especially, in the Salafi caricature of these groups, the Mu‘tazilīs\footnote{569} who claim God is everywhere and Jahmīs\footnote{570} that God is nowhere – was concrete proof of the kind of confusion caused by kalām concerning something so central and basic as God’s nature.\footnote{571} In contrast, through the statements of early Companions who affirmed God’s location and attributes according to the apparent meaning of the Qur’ānic verses (while denying His likeness to human beings through the principle of bi–lā kayf, “without asking how”),\footnote{572} Salafis demonstrated the infallibility and historical precedence of their position.

\footnote{568}{This is based on the Qur’ānic verses such as Q. 2:29, “It is He who created all that is on earth, and then rose to the heavens and created seven heavens and He is all–knowing,” and Q. 20:5 “The Merciful is established on His throne.”}

\footnote{569}{Basing their position on the fact that God is not a body, and therefore cannot be described in anthropomorphic terms as being confined to a single place. For more on Mu‘tazilī views see D. Gimaret, “Mu‘tazila,” \textit{EF}.}

\footnote{570}{The Jahmīs are an especially popular target for Salafīs and Hanbalī theologians, even though the group did not survive beyond its eponymous founder, Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 745). He represents one of the earliest efforts against anthropomorphism in Islamic history, and his ideas are largely preserved in the heresiographical works of Ash’arī (d. 936) and Shahristānī (d. 1153). See R. C. Martin, “Anthropomorphism,” \textit{Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān}.}


\footnote{572}{For more on the bi–lā kayf doctrine, see Binyamin Abrahamov, “The bi–lā kayf Doctrine and Its Foundations in Islamic Theology,” \textit{Arabica} 42 (1995), pp. 365-379.}
For Albānī, Kawtharī’s insistence on interpreting metaphorically rather than taking literally the Qur’ānic verses and ḥadīth reports was a statement about his preference of “his teachers” over his “pure devotion in his knowledge of God,” and thus represented a “defamation of the leaders of ḥadīth and the salaf [who were] purely devoted to God.” Moreover, beyond his theological positions, Kawtharī’s comments concerning the reputations and statements of a number of early Muslims and pre-modern scholars served as an occasion for Albānī to rehabilitate these and other figures through his attack on Kawtharī. In 1967, he attacked Kawtharī’s “accusations of the leaders and transmitters of ḥadīth of [promoting] anthropomorphism (tajsīm) and likening [God to His creations] (tashbīḥ)” and, by questioning the trustworthiness of these early figures, “sows enmity between them and Abū Ḥanīfa” and, without consulting the proper references, “proceeds to characterize some [Companions] as weak transmitters.”

Rather than pursuing Kawtharī on the basis of the latter’s knowledge of the ḥadīth, Albānī instead highlighted his “errant” theological views and his “strong enmity towards the imāms of the salaf and of tawḥīd.” Albānī published Dhahabī’s al-‘Ulūw

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573 Dhahabī, Mukhtaṣar al-‘Ulūw, 39.
574 Besides his ascription of anthropomorphism to Ibn Taymiyya, and his famous commentary on Bayhaqī’s (d. 1066) al-Asmā’ wa-l-ṣifāt – which Albānī attacks in his edition of the Mukhtaṣar – and Kawtharī’s contestation of al-Khaṭīb al-Bağhdādi’s sources for his entry on Abū Ḥanīfa, the latter being the main focus of Mu’allimī’s al-Tankīl, Albānī accused Kawtharī of “[describing] both Mālik [b. Anas] and Shāfi’ī as not being Arab but rather mawlās, and that they did not speak Arabic….” – an absurd polemical claim since both were, indeed, Arab. Moreover, according to Albānī, Kawtharī did not consider Aḥmad [b. Ḥanbal] a jurist and alleged that Kawtharī described Ibn Ḥanbal’s son ‘Abd Allāh, as well as Ibn Khuzayma, ‘Uthmān b. Sa’īd al-Dārimī, and Ibn Abī Ḥātim anthropomorphists. For these and other polemics, see Mu’allimī, Tankīl, 171-172. For a refutation of these accusations, see Gibril F. Haddad, “Those Who Attack al-Kawthari,” Living Islam: Islamic Tradition http://www.abc.se/~m9783/n/akaw_e.html (Accessed 30 October 2014).
575 Indeed, his Min kunūz al-sunna series of treatises on creed which we examined in chapter 4, many of them authored by the aforementioned figures, could on some level be seen as an effort to redeem their Sunni credentials in response to attacks on their trustworthiness by Kawtharī and others.
576 Mu’allimī, Tankīl, 172.
577 Dhahabī, Mukhtaṣar al-‘Ulūw, 39.
as “a cure for one of the most dangerous issues of creed on which Muslims have divided themselves since the onset of the Mu’tazilīs until our times.” More immediately, Albānī’s interest in this topic seemed connected to Kawtharī’s famous edition of Bayhaqī’s (d. 1066) *al-Asmā’ wa-l-ṣifāt* (The [Divine] Names and Attributes), from which he drew his examples. It was likely that Albānī had Kawtharī in mind when he wrote several pages later that “we still see the recklessness of many scholars of the khalaf in their opposition to the salaf when interpreting the Qur’ānic verse pertaining to God’s sitting and other verses and ḥadīth reports relating to the divine attributes.”

After explaining how “some sects corrupted the sunna” by introducing the practice of *ta’wil* (interpretation), thereby “allowing Satan to set a stratagem for them, and preventing them from following the Straight Path,” Albānī likened this to the experience of Abū Muḥammad al-Juwaynī (d. 1046), father of the famous polymath Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 1085). Citing several paragraphs from a manuscript written by the elder Juwaynī in which the latter documents why he broke with the Ash’arī school concerning the issue of the attributes, Albānī found particular instructional value in his experience since he “describes with precision his confusion and his indecision during a stage of his scholarly life between following the salaf and between following the scholars of kalām during his time who interpreted ‘the sitting’ as ‘taking

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578 Ibid., 23. It should be clarified here that although the figures Albānī described, particularly Kawtharī, did not adhere to the Mu’tazilī school, Albānī and other Salafīs commonly used the Mu’tazilī label because of the extent to which the latter had been vilified and reduced in Islamic history. By imposing on his adversaries the Mu’tazilī label, Albānī thus aimed at further marginalizing them.

579 Ibid., 27. He specified later Kawtharī’s “corruption” of Bayhaqī’s *al-Asmā’ wa-l-ṣifāt* and referred to further comments by Kawtharī in his *Furqān al-Qur’ān bayn ṣifāt al-khāliq wa-ṣifāt al-akhwān*, ibid. 36.

580 *Furqān al-Qur’ān bayn ṣifāt al-khāliq wa-ṣifāt al-akhwān*. 198
hold over’ (al-istīlā’).” To drive his point home, Albānī contrasted Juwaynī’s exemplary behavior with Kawtharī’s deviant beliefs, explaining that “the most likely scenario is that [Kawtharī] is like Juwaynī, who was influenced by the scholars of kalām, but when [Juwaynī] became devoted solely to knowledge of God Almighty, God guided him to the creed of the salaf...”

Us and Them, Then and Now: Boundaries of the Salafī Community

Beyond a foil for explaining the flaws of Kawtharī’s position, for Albānī Juwaynī’s experience demonstrated the extent to which kalām, particularly through its encouragement of ta’wīl, drove generations of Muslims away from the original meaning of the verses. He ascribed the strong hold of the kalām tradition to the popular saying that “the way of the salaf is safer (aslam), and the way of the khalaf is more knowledgeable and wiser.” The idea here, as Albānī explained, is that “the way of the khalaf contains more explanations and refutations against opponents, and is therefore preferable.” It was this outlook, refuted, as Albānī documented, by Ibn Taymiyya, Saffārīnī, Ibn Rajab and others, that not only privileged later scholars over earlier ones throughout Islamic history, but also led to the vilification of the salaf and their followers, both pre-modern and contemporary.

581 Dhahabī, Mukhtaṣar al-‘Ulūw, 27, 31. The idea being here, as Albānī explained later, that istīwā’, being situated, is a characteristic that in the Ash’arī and Mu’tazilī view, may only be applied to created beings and not to God.
582 Ibid., 39.
583 Ibid., 33.
584 Ibid., 34.
The issue of the divine attributes served as an example for Albānī not only of the major hermeneutical differences between Salafīs and non-Salafīs but of the ocean of difference separating their conceptions of their faith. In this regard Albānī explained that “most Muslims, even teachers, professors…disagree with the correct answer [concerning God being in the sky],” since the “correct” understanding, in Albānī’s view, derives from “the apparent meaning [of the verses], and the way the salaf understood them.”

Establishing a fundamental distinction between himself and this group, he continued:

Whether you are with us or against us concerning this creed [of the divine attributes], both [the Muʿtazilīs and other schools of kalām] resemble the millions of Muslims from hundreds of years ago until today. And as for those included in the group that accepts the aforementioned question [‘where is God?’] and answer [‘in the sky’], [they are] shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya and his student the verifier Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and all of our Ḥanbalī brothers today who follow the shaykh Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.

To further cement the distinct historical identities between these two groups, Albānī used the phrase “the people of truth” (ahl al-ḥaqq) to refer to figures who understood these verses literally, thereby capitalizing on the dual meaning of ḥaqq in this context (namely, as a contrast to majāz, figurative interpretation).

Moreover, his objective in this work and other editions of theological treatises was not merely to explain Dhahabī’s exposition of the question of God’s loftiness, but to demonstrate how other scholars “from the tradition” did so by including “the sections from manuscripts written by some ‘Salafī scholars’ (baʿd ‘ulamāʾ al-salaf).” To Albānī, the ideas of these figures and pre-modern scholarly authorities represented

A consummation of the proofs concerning how many of the later ones (al-khalaf) erred, and that the position requiring the belief in the true essence (ḥaqāʾiq) of the

586 Dhahabī, Mukhtaṣar al-‘Ulūw, 65.
587 Ibid., 66.
588 See, for example, in the context of the debate on the createdness of the Qurʾān, ibid., 19.
divine attributes and their meaning is the *madhhab* that distinguished Ibn Taymiyya and those who followed him … therefore I have decided to publish this book before you by al-Dhahabī, to instruct through it that which has been hidden from you and from others, and this is among the strongest reasons for the distancing from the Salafī creed and the Muḥammadan way.589

In other words, the objective in this work was not merely to remind readers of Kawtharī’s theology but, rather, to explain how following Ḥanbalī theology leads to correct belief and to document those pre-modern figures who adhered to it. “Hold fast to this principle concerning the discussion on the [divine] attributes and understanding it well,” Albānī wrote, “for it is the key to guidance and uprightness. Juwaynī relied on it when God guided him to the way of the salaf….and it is the pillar upon which all the verifiers relied such as Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim and others.”590

The format of Dhahabī’s work, a digest of statements made by early Muslims affirming the divine attributes, lent itself to Albānī’s objective of demonstrating to Kawtharī and others that the Ḥanbalī position on the divine attributes was the religion’s mainstay. “It is [an issue] upon which all those who came before, ḥadīth scholars, jurists, exegetes, lexicographers and others have agreed, and you will find them listed by name here such that their number reaches two hundred,” Albānī explained. “If the student purely devoted to the truth accepts their words, it will become certain [to him] that they have never agreed upon a deviance, and that in fact any knowledge that contradicts theirs is deviant.”591 By showcasing their views together, and retroactively assigning to them the “Salafī” label, Albānī prescribed a tradition and a set of scholarly authorities for his readers. Indeed, his hope for readers was that

You will find [in Dhahabī’s *al-‘Ulūw*] that which will give you certainty in your belief that the Qur’ānic verses, the Prophetic ḥadīths and the statements of the

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590 Ibid., 49.
591 Ibid., 52.
[prior] Salafis (al-āthār al-salafiyya) all agree that God [sits atop] His throne, distinct from His creatures…and you will see that the imāms of the madhhab and their earlier followers as well as those who followed their way until the sixth Hijrī century all agree in their fatwās and their statements in establishing God’s loftiness above His throne, above His creatures and above every location. 592

Albānī’s critique of Islamists, along with their scholarly predecessors (both contemporary and pre-modern) through the prism of theology was a truly prescient strategy for establishing his place within the Salafī pantheon. While his chief legacy was his promotion of ḥadīth science, and for good reason as we will see in the next chapter, it was theology that he needed to explicitly incorporate into his message in order to draw himself into that continuum of pre-modern and contemporary scholars who followed the “creed of the pious predecessors.” On the most basic level, emphasizing theology served as an effective way of broadening his message beyond his more nuanced scholarly intervention into madhhab jurisprudence with his ḥadīth methodology – certainly a symbolically controversial gesture, but one whose details might have been lost on the masses. By turning to theology, he not only took his ideas on ḥadīth to their logical conclusion (viz., that adhering to “correct” ḥadīth principles leads to “correct” belief), but also unambiguously drew boundaries between his followers – those who followed the “method” of the salaf – and the followers of the major Islamist leaders of his day

592 Ibid., 51-52.
“Bringing the Sunna Before the Community” Between Authenticity and the Academy

(Syria, 1963-1980)

“My models in this task are the leaders who came before who wrote Ṣaḥīḥ compendia, such as Bukhārī, Muslim, Ibn Khuzayma, Ibn Ḥibbān and others. And those who wrote Da‘īfa and Mawdū‘a works such as Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī, Shawkānī…may we be included in their group under the flag of the master human being, our prophet Muḥammad.” – Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī.

“I do not know why this man persists in his delusion that he is the true model for every Muslim and that whatever he understands is required for everyone to understand, and whatever he does not understand all may join him in rejecting and not understanding?!” – Muḥammad Sa‘īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī about Albānī.

Alongside Albānī’s break with his Ḥanafī father, a common motif in hagiographies is his prison experience under the Ba’th government in Syria. He was incarcerated twice; the first time in 1969595 and then once again for several months shortly thereafter. After being sentenced “without having committed a crime except for calling to Islam and teaching it to the people,” Albānī was then placed under house arrest (al-iqāma al-ṣabrīyya), and stopped his monthly trips to other cities.596

While the exact circumstances of his arrests remain unclear,597 it is worth noting their importance for Albānī and his followers. For his biographers, these incidents capture the essence of both his scholarly dedication and his emulation of his pre-modern Salafī

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595 Although Albānī remembers this date as 1969 (see, for example, Albānī, Mukhtaṣar Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 4 volumes (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 2002), 1: 8-9) other accounts place it at 1967. See, for example, ‘Alī, Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, 26-27.
596 Hādī, Muḥaddith al-‘asr, 13.
597 Some sympathetic accounts suggest that it was Būṭī who lobbied the Syrian government to imprison him, alleging that Albānī was an “agent of colonialism.” See Muḥammad ‘Īd al-‘Abbāsī, Bid‘at al-ta‘ṣṣub al-madhhabī (Amman: al-Maktab al-Islāmiyya, 1970), 8. Albānī cites this in his Difā‘ ‘an al-hadīth al-nabawī wa-l-sīra fī al-radd ‘alā jahālāt al-dukūr al-Būṭī fī kitābihī “Fiqh al-Sīra” (Damascus: Mu‘assasat wa-Maktabat al-Khāfīqin, 1977), iii. Other biographers write more generally that the circumstances for his imprisonment were that “some of the Sūfī shaykhs tried to set stratagems against [Albānī] and to lie and warn against him, which led to his imprisonment for six months…” ‘Alī, Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, 27.
predecessors. One author, Muḥammad al-Shaybānī, for example, writes that “for fighting scholars (al-‘ulamā’ al-mujāhidūn) prison is heaven,” and after citing Ibn Taymiyya’s prison experience, goes on to explain that “it was among God’s blessings to shaykh Nāṣir [al-Dīn al-Albānī] that during the course of his prison experience he summoned the inmates to that which he preached outside of prison.” Likewise, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Sadḥān writes that “Albānī was among those scholars who were taken away to prison… in the way of those scholars who came before him in continuing to give and to improve himself and those with him.”

That this was supposedly the very same prison where Ibn Taymiyya was held – al-Ḥasaka – no doubt added another layer of symbolism to the event. Albānī’s accounts about his experience made good use of this connection to Ibn Taymiyya. Just like his predecessor, who redirected his fellow inmates from “chess, backgammon and the like” to prayer, so too Albānī allegedly held the first Friday prayers in the prison since Ibn Taymiyya’s time. Likewise, he recalled, “I never felt estranged in prison… just as Ibn Taymiyya said: ‘my imprisonment is sweet.’”

Besides the opportunity for emulating Ibn Taymiyya, there was a more practical reason for the sweetness of Albānī’s sentencing. By preventing him from travel and teaching, Albānī’s periods of incarceration and house arrest gave him that most precious gift for scholars: time. “God decreed that I not possess anything [in my cell] except my
most beloved book, Ṣahīh al-imām Muslim, a pencil and an eraser,” 205 he wrote, and spent the three months of his first imprisonment “working day and night, without tiring or boredom” editing the book. Similarly, when “a number of successive governments prevented me from visiting other Syrian cities” which, Albānī explained, “would have taken a significant amount of my time,” he was able to complete “a great number of scholarly works.” Thus, Albānī reflected, “the wishes of the enemies of the community were transformed from vengeance upon us into a blessing for us…”

Just as the dramatic portrait of Albānī editing a ḥadīth compendium under lamplight in a prison cell symbolized for his students his scholarly zeal and piety, for Albānī that period of imprisonment and subsequent instances of government suppression were opportunities to sharpen his editorial skills. Just before his imprisonment in 1969, he stumbled upon Zakī al-Dīn al-Mundhirī’s (d. 1298) Mukhtaṣar Ṣahīh Muslim and was especially struck by the latter’s omission of both isnāds and the content of certain reports. Thus, Albānī passed the time in his cell studying Mundhirī’s style and sought to “abridge [Ṣahīh Muslim] in my own way.” Albānī explained that producing accessible versions of the ḥadīth compendia by way of an abridgment (mukhtaṣar), as ḥadīth scholars before him had done, was something he had long hoped to achieve but was only able to do once he found this period of relative quiet.

His edition of Mundhirī’s work in 1969 became the first installment of his own abridgment effort, which he called “Bringing the Sunna before the Community” (taqrīb

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603 Ibid.
605 Ibid., 1: 9.
606 Ibid.
607 Ibid., 1:8.
608 Ibid., 1:8.
al-sunna bayn yaday al-umma). It was this project – likely because of its objective and its opportunity for engaging in the textual production of pre-modern ḥadīth scholars – that allowed Albānī to insert himself into their tradition and thus, presumably, to overcome his lack of traditional scholarly credentials.

In his scattered references to the Taqrīb in his other writings, he clearly distinguished it as his magnum opus, describing it as “the most important project of my life,” and, towards the end of his life, as “my long-standing project to which I dedicated my youth, with which I spent my middle age and with which I now complete my old age.” The aim, he explained, was to “ease the path for people to benefit [from religious knowledge] and to draw from it in the least time possible and with the most copious benefit, without preoccupying the masses with the means towards the end.” To make these works accessible, and in contrast to his Silsilatayn and his pamphlets on religious observances, Albānī uncharacteristically “distinguished” his Taqrīb by omitting the isnāds in many of these works and issued both “sound” and “weak” versions of each

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609 Hereafter Taqrīb. This, however, was not the same work he edited in prison. See, for example, Sadīḥān, al-imām al-Albānī, 52.
610 See, for example, Hādī, Ḥayāt al-‘allāma al-Albānī, 27.
611 Albānī, Silsilat al-ahādīth al-sahīha, 6:8.
612 Zakī al-Dīn ‘Abd al-'Azīm al-Mundhirī, Mukhtaṣar Šaḥīḥ Muslim, ed. Muḥammad Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Albānī, sixth edition (Beirut, al-Maktab al-İslāmî, 1987). Mundhirī’s work is not, however, the first in this series on which Albānī worked. In various places he refers to his Sunan Abī Dāwūd as the first work in the series but that was first published only posthumously in 2002. The publishers of his Sunan Abī Dāwūd mention that Albānī provided a precise date for the beginning of his Taqrīb in the inside jacket of the first folder in the series as “the year of my first hijra (1368), the end of Ṣafar (1369) [1949].” See Albānī, Šaḥīḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd, 3 volumes (Kuwait: Mu'assasat Gharās, 2002), 1: 4. Albānī also began another project titled Šaḥīḥ al-sīra al-nabawiyya (The Correct [Version of] the Life of the Prophet), which he did not complete. The Amman-based al-Maktaba al-İslamiyya posthumously published Albānī’s edition of Ibn Kathīr’s Life of the Prophet, titled Šaḥīḥ al-sīra al-nabawiyya, in 2000. Based on Albānī’s forward about his methodology, it seems that the approach was similar to his Taqrīb, particularly his omission of the chains of transmission, relying only on the most complete variant of the ḥadīth, and cited only the final transmitter of the report. Significant differences include his occasional abridgment and paraphrase of Ibn Kathīr’s language and his consultation of different references from those used by Ibn Kathīr. See Albānī, Šaḥīḥ al-sīra al-nabawiyya (Amman: al-Maktaba al-İslamiyya, 2000), 7.
ḥadīth compendium, with the exception of the Ṣaḥīḥayn.613 This presentation style, he hoped, would appeal to the sensibilities of “the educated youth who have not studied Islamic disciplines and who have become accustomed through their contemporary studies to acquire knowledge in an abridged manner, without complication or vagueness.”614

For many of his contemporaries, particularly ḥadīth scholars and established ‘ulamā’, however, these stylistic features, coupled with the mammoth size of the project,615 represented an audacious challenge to the status of the ḥadīth compendia and the scholarly culture in which they were produced.616 Then there was the issue of Albānī’s qualifications for performing such a task. As Joel Blecher explains in the context of the Mamluk period, scholars “typically undertook a commentary of a major

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613 Interestingly, Albānī did not produce a “sound” and “weak” version of the Ṣaḥīḥayn but rather only his own abridgment (mukhtaṣar) of those works, explaining that “the scholars have accepted them and that they are free of weak and unacceptable reports.” Mundhirī, Muktaṣar Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 6. As we saw, his principal interest in producing abridgments of those works is to mimic the textual production of pre-modern ḥadīth scholars. However, there is the larger issue of Albānī’s complicated relationship with the Ṣaḥīḥayn, one that Jonathan Brown has examined in his Canonization, where he writes that, like Ibn Taymiyya, Albānī “openly undermined any iconic status for the two works beyond their convenience as authoritative references in debate” while, on the other hand, expressing “extreme respect for al-Bukhārī and Muslim.” This is evident, for example, in Albānī’s aforementioned quote, and one that Brown cites as well. Indeed, Albānī continued to use the phrase “on the condition of Muslim/Bukhārī” in his Silsilatayn series, republished in book form in the 1980’s, and cited Mu’allimī in describing Bukhārī’s works as containing “the peak of soundness.” At the same time, he also used the following critical language, “we all know that both Bukhārī and Muslim did not gather in their books everything that they considered sound.” (Muḥammad al-Jilānī, al-Durar fī masā’il al-muṣṭalāḥ wa-l-athar: masā’il Abī al-andidates al-Miṣřī al-Ma’rābī (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥāzm), 64). Brown thus accurately dismisses Albānī’s praise of the two works as “empty homage” citing the fact that Albānī deemed about two dozen narrations from Muslim weak, and explains that Albānī “mirror[ed] the rhetorical duplicity with which the canon was employed in the classical period.” Moreover, Brown explains that Albānī’s “reliance on well-established criticisms of the Ṣaḥīḥayn does, however, clarify the seeming contradiction between such critiques and his condemnation of ‘Westernized’ Modernist scholars who reject ḥadīths that ‘the umma has accepted with consensus’: he did not feel that he himself was actually criticizing any of al-Bukhārī’s or Muslim’s ḥadīths.” Brown, The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, 326-327.

614 Mundhirī, Muktaṣar Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 6.

615 By the end of Albānī’s life, the Taqrīb project comprised dozens of editions of ḥadīth collections varying in completeness, which included his evaluations of tens of thousands of ḥadīth reports.

616 Perhaps the most substantial attack on Albānī for his work on the Taqrīb is Maḥmūd Sa’īd Mamdūḥ’s al-Ta’rīf bi-awhām man qassama al-sunan ilā saḥīḥ wa-da’īf, 6 volumes (Dubai: Dār al-Buhūth li-l-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya wa-ḥiyā’ al-Turāth 2000). For one list of nineteen refutations of Albānī’s work in deeming reports “sound” and “weak,” see ‘Ayzarī, Juhūd, 287-289.
*ḥadīth* compilation near the end of their life, after they had studied abroad and accumulated a great number of reading licenses…” and had written in related disciplines.\(^{617}\) Instead, Albānī, an autodidact, began his scholarly career with this project and saw it as his defining work. This, of course, accounted for his impressive ability to produce commentaries – albeit with varying degrees of completeness – on the major ḥadīth compendia, in contrast to pre-modern scholars who might have made a name for themselves with a commentary on one work, typically either Bukhārī or Muslim.

Although, as Jonathan Brown correctly notes, Albānī did display a duplicity in praising the privileged place of the Ṣaḥīḥayn explicitly while, at the same time, critiquing narrations in the compendia, the following discussion will suggest that the *Taqrīb* series had another, more immediate, objective for Albānī: to challenge the new institutional framework within which ḥadīth compendia were used and taught. Namely, Albānī took issue with what Brown calls the “trump card” uses of the ḥadīth compendia, particularly the Ṣaḥīḥayn, wherein scholars sought to defeat their opponents in polemical disputes by merely citing which compendium mentions a report without discussing its soundness. For Albānī it was precisely the evaluation of a report’s soundness, and not only citing where it may be found, that was the chief task of the mukharrij, the ‘ḥadīth tracer,’ and was what distinguished his work from mere editing (*tahqīq*).\(^{618}\) Echoing his criticisms of *taqlīd* in the context of madhhab-based jurisprudence, Albānī wrote in other works during this period that not mentioning the report’s soundness amounts to “fraud and deception against readers” since the lay masses, who do not know the difference between

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\(^{618}\) Albānī, *Ghāyat al-marām*, 4.
takhrīj and tahqīq, assume erroneously that just because “a great scholar of ḥadīth cites a report, that report is sound.” As we will see, it was in this sphere of his ḥadīth work – through his example of reassessing these compendia and outlining his scholarly methodology – that Albānī provided the tools for casting his prototypical mukharrij as a mujtahid capable of shaping and shepherding the transmission of religious knowledge.

To appreciate Albānī’s efforts with respect to the ḥadīth compendia, and both what they meant to him and to his many opponents, it is worth situating them within the context of the changes in religious education during this time. Between the beginning of Albānī’s Taqrīb in 1949 and the release of its first installment in 1969 the so-called “great transformation” saw the locus of religious learning move from the traditional study circles to western-styled institutes and universities. For his part, Albānī struggled unsuccessfully to establish his place within these tectonic changes. He was marginalized because of his doubly damaged pedigree – his lack of traditional scholarly credentials and, with his recent expulsion from Saudi Arabia, the lack of an academic career. As part of his attempt to carve a place for himself, he took aim at the new spaces within which religious knowledge was being transmitted: religious studies departments at universities. It was the faculty as these universities, along with their academic culture, who were the unstated targets of his Taqrīb series and other writings during his second...
extended stay in Syria. He wrote that “the good opinion of a writer and his knowledge, especially if he has university degrees and wide fame” prevented lay Muslims from insisting on verifying the soundness of ḥadīth reports. Thus, Albānī continued,

[The masses] are ignorant of the fact that even if his university degree is in the very discipline of ḥadīth science, this does not mean that he approaches [the subject] with knowledge of how to deem reports sound and weak, the science of criticizing narrators of reports, scrutinizing the chains of transmission and the content, and knowledge of the blemishes. Absolutely not! For this requires specialization with a great degree of effort, and lengthy practice, a quiet and patient believing soul devoted to research in the books of the sunna as well as the transmissions of its reports, and the biographies of its transmitters, both published and in manuscript [form], and study of the criticisms of the imāms – both earlier and later ones – regarding both the chains of transmission and the content, comparing their statements and choosing the most preferable among them...and other [skills] not known or acquired through the award of a doctorate, particularly if it is in a discipline other than ḥadīth science.622

Increasingly, Albānī began to emphasize the idea that mastery of ḥadīth science is more than a mere study of narrators in an isnād or even a rejection of tawātur. Specifically, he cited his method of takhrīj – perhaps the single scholarly pursuit that defined Albānī’s career and reputation until this point – as a specialized skill far more nuanced than “tracing a report in the footnotes of a book and citing which book of sunna it came from.”623 He likewise explained on a number of occasions – presumably to refute those who, in following the Salafī rejection of tawātur, would simply deem a report sound on the basis of its isnād – that “the soundness of all of the narrators [in an isnād] does not mean that the ḥadīth is sound.”624 Rather, echoing the principles of earlier ḥadīth commentators, he stressed that there are conditions for a report’s evaluation (taqwīm). Examples of such ancillary

622 Albānī, Ghāyat al-marām, 4-5.
623 Ibid., 4.
624 See ‘Ayzarī, Juhūd, 185 for a discussion of Albānī’s insistence on this principle; Albānī, Tamām al-minna, 26.
information, as Albānī explained, include other narrations of the same report – “witnesses” (shawāhid)⁶²⁵ that might identify a particular blemish (‘illa) or conversely might contribute information to “strengthen” its soundness; the opinions of various ḥadīth scholars and biographers concerning the reputations of transmitters within biographical dictionaries; and, Albānī’s most novel and controversial contribution, the technical terminology of the field (muṣṭalāḥ al-ḥadīth) and what Albānī considered its uses and misuses by both pre-modern and contemporary scholars.

It was this comprehensive approach to ḥadīth, which his students called ‘ilm al-ismād (the study of the isnād), that Albānī is credited with introducing at the IUM.⁶²⁶ With the loss of his university position to further develop this approach, he thus turned to the ḥadīth commentary as his new medium of instruction. In light of Muhammad Qasim Zaman’s observation that “the commentary is not only a mark of an ongoing tradition; it also has facets of change inscribed in it,”⁶²⁷ the successive installments of the Taqrīb may be understood not only as catalogues of Albānī’s evaluations of reports but also as textbooks for presenting his alternative ḥadīth methodology.

⁶²⁵ Shawāhid (“witnesses”) refers to other narrations of a report which, through comparison with the original one an individual is studying, might further elucidate the authenticity of the report by revealing new factors such as a different version of the content, or the appearance of a particularly weak or strong narrator. See C. Guillot, “Shawāhid,” EI².

⁶²⁶ See, for example, Qaryūf, Tarjama mūjaza, 11-12; Shaybānī, Hayāt al-Albānī, 61-62, where he explains that Albānī would assign Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim for the first-year students and Sunan Abī Dāwūd for the second-years, and would write down a ḥadīth with its isnād and, alongside biographical dictionaries, would give students a “ḥadīth-based practical study” (dirāsa ḥadīthiya ‘amaliyya). Muḥammad Amīn al-Misrī (d. 1977), who took over the course and followed Albānī’s approach, also assigned students the task of editing ūzād manuscripts.

One noteworthy aspect of Albānī’s efforts to insert himself into this new academic space was the language he used in these works. It was in the context of his Taqrīb, for example, that he began to speak for the first time of a manhaj ‘ilmī (a “scholarly methodology”) of ḥadīth criticism, with takhrīj at its core, and cited the lack of such a methodology as his weapon against university professors. Ever conscientious about terms, in his writings he referred to students not only by the traditional term ṭullāb al-‘ilm (“students of religious knowledge”) but also as al-bāḥithūn ‘an al-ḥaqq (“truth-seekers”) which he sometimes shortened to al-bāḥithūn (“seekers” or “researchers”). Likewise, it was in the context of his emphasis on methodology that Albānī began to encourage the performance of ijtihād, in contrast to his earlier writings where he only counseled ittībā’

628 See, for example, his criticism of Būṭī in Albānī, Dhīfā’ ‘an al-ḥadīth al-nabawī, i; and idem, Silsilat al-ahādīth al-ṣaḥīha, 7 volumes (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 1995-2002), 4: ii. In prior decades, he used the term manhaj but typically as a part of his introduction to his pamphlets, which included a section titled “manhajī fī al-kitāb” (“my methodology in this book”) where it was essentially interchangeable with “amalī fī al-kitāb.” While he might mention takhrīj there as one of his organizing and stylistic principles, to my knowledge he does not begin using the phrase manhaj ‘ilmī (“scholarly methodology”) with reference to ḥadīth until the 1960’s, a phrase with obvious influence from the academic sphere. For example, in his Ṣifat ẓalāt al-nabī he writes in the introduction to the fifth edition (1969) that he described the book’s “precise scholarly methodology” (manhaj ‘ilmī daqiq) in 1951, but in that section he does not describe his scholarly methodology with the word manhaj. Rather, the word appears in the work’s original introduction twice, the first time as the book’s approach (manhaj al-kitāb), where the word connotes “arrangement” (in that section he explains that he separated the text into the body and footnotes), and as “a method I have assigned to myself,” where he referred to his avoidance of taqlīd. In neither context does the word seem to connote a scholarly methodology in the way in which he used it later. It is worth noting also that where he did allude to a methodological approach during his early years, for example that of ḥadīth scholars, he used the term madhhab (madhhab al-muḥaddithūn) rather than manhaj. See, Albānī, Ṣifat ẓalāt al-nabī, 34, 43, 45.

629 Albānī, Silsilat al-ahādīth al-ṣaḥīha, 7: 385.
630 Albānī, Ẓāliḥ al-Targhib wa-l-tarhib, 3 volumes, third edition (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 2000), 1: 86. His use of these terms seems also to be occasioned by their use by Būṭī and Abū Ghudda in both their attacks on Albānī, as well as general jargon, such as Būṭī, al-Lā madḥhabīyya, 18; Ṣafar Aḥmad ‘Uthmānī, Qawā’id fī ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, third edition (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, 1972), 6. Likewise, the Azhar University had a committee that dealt with “Methodologies of the Disciplines of Exegesis and Ḥadīth” (la‘īnāt al-manāḥīj fī ‘ulūm al-tafsīr wa-l-ḥadīth), which seemed to be concerned with guiding instruction of these disciplines at religious institutes. See Ahmad Shākir, al-Bā’ith al-ḥathīth sharh Ikhtisār ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth li-l-ḥāfiz Ibn Kathīr, ed. Muhammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī and ‘Alī al-Ḥalabī, 2 volumes (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 1996), 1: 67 for his discussion of his membership of this committee in 1955.
(“following [the sunna]”) as we saw. In a lecture in 1972, for example, after warning students to not “adopt any of the principles and views presented as the ijtiḥāḍ of [professors and Islamists], who are not mujtahids,” he advised that “the educated Muslim youth…all be mujtahid imāms and verifying jurists.”

By “believ[ing] in every ḥadīth established from the Prophet” and understanding how to determine a report’s soundness,” he explained, “They will fulfill, in actions and in knowledge, the principle that states: ‘There is no God but God is a method of life’ (manhaj al-ḥayāt) and ‘sovereignty belongs to God Almighty alone.’

Much like the tendency Zaman describes among contemporary scholars, these and earlier remarks suggest that Albānī saw ijtiḥāḍ as a “collective venture” rather than as the activity of individual jurists. Responding to the unprecedented changes in both the scale and disciplinary contexts of religious instruction at universities, Albānī began to cast ijtiḥāḍ as the responsibility of a new vanguard informed by the principles of ḥadīth science rather than madḥhab-jurisprudence.

In this chapter, we will examine Albānī’s articulation of his methodology during his second extended stay in Syria (1963-1981), particularly in his Taqrīb. Specifically, we will seek to understand the controversy sparked by his campaign to present his methodology as a framework for ijtiḥāḍ in light of Salafism’s position at the time. In

631 See chapter 2.
632 Albānī, al-Ḥadīth ḥujja bi-nafsihi, 90-91
633 Ibid., 93.
634 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 92.
635 Further evidence of this blending of disciplines is Albānī’s assertion, in response to the dismissal of ḥadīth scholars as mere pharmacists while the jurists are the doctors, that “the pharmacist must himself also be the doctor. [Not] that the pharmacists are the ḥadīth scholars and the jurists are the doctors. No, the truth is that whoever works in [the discipline] of ḥadīth science should also be a jurist (faqīh) since jurisprudence helps him understand whether an additional transmission [of a report] is acceptable or not.” See Jīlānī, al-Durar, 18.
contrast to Albānī’s early years in Syria, the arrival of the Ba’th in 1963 signaled a death-blow to Islamic groups in that country as well as the simultaneous empowerment of a traditional-leaning cadre of university professors – the perfect storm that placed Albānī in perhaps the most vulnerable physical and professional position of his life. Without either the social base he enjoyed in Syria during his early period there, or the professional context he cultivated in Saudi Arabia, Albānī now struggled not only to advance his ḥadīth methodology but also to wrest the transmission of religious learning from the tight grip of the pro-madhhab academy. In this light, this chapter will argue that his Taqrīb series served both functions, equally controversial, of abridging the ḥadīth compendia for the masses – fulfilling Albānī’s aspiration to produce mukhtasār works in the style of his scholarly forebears – as well as to explain his scholarly methodology for university students as an alternative to their academic training, thereby claiming his authoritative credentials and molding them into mukharrij-mujtahids in his image. By stylistically introducing these ideas through an academic framework and substantively challenging the basis of that institution, as well as of the religion, Albānī struck a new chord with a broad array of pro-madhhab and ḥadīth-oriented scholars, particularly university professors, in both questioning their ability to interpret the divine will and, in the process, displaying unprecedented hubris in arbitrating the authenticity of the religion’s foundation and its earliest commentators. After a brief overview of the new historical context in Syria and some of the criticism Albānī faced for this approach, we will explore the main aspects of this methodological intervention.
In a New Syria

Although, as we have seen, he had no shortage of enemies in prior decades, opposition to Albānī intensified following his return to Syria, especially from 1970 onwards, as his students recount. At one point Albānī even complained that “one of the great calamities of the present age is that a Muslim is prevented from pursuing knowledge by wasting so much of his time defending himself.” Indeed, while many of these attacks were targeted at Albānī and took a decidedly personal tone, they had as much to do with the rising prominence of Islamic groups in the region during and immediately prior to this period. One barometer, albeit superficial, of Salafism’s presence in popular discourse is the pamphlet war that grew between its adherents and opponents. A number of authors, some of whom explicitly defended Albānī, blamed the “madhhab partisanship” (al-ta’ṣṣub al-madhhabī) of the newly-formed nation states and the scholars they patronized – a practice, they claimed, the Ottoman Empire initiated – for not only sowing confusion concerning practice among Muslims but also for corrupting the original understanding of the religion.

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637 Albānī, Kasf al-niqāb, 3.
638 Among the most famous and earliest of these are Muḥammad Sulṭān al-Ma’sūmī al-Khujandī’s 1938 pamphlet Hadiyyat al-sulṭān ilā Muslimay bilād al-Yābān, which was published for the first time in 1948, the same year that Albānī first went to Saudi Arabia on ḥajj and met the author, who gave him a copy. This was then re-published by Albānī’s students along with a subtitle, Hal al-Muslim mulzam bi-ittibā’ madhhab mu’ayyan min al-madhāhib al-arba’; Būṭ’s first edition of al-Lā-madhāhibiyya was a refutation of this pamphlet (the second edition includes an account of his debate with Albānī) and, in turn, Albānī’s students came to his defense, with Muḥammad ʿĪd al-ʿAbbāsī’s pamphlet, Bidʿat al-ta’ṣṣub al-madhhabī (Amman: al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, 1970). Some of the pamphlets written in opposition to Salafism include Muḥammad Ḥāmid’s, Luzūm ittibā’ madhāhib al-a’ima hasm li-l-fawqā lā al-ḍīniyya (Hama: Maktabat Dār al-Da’wa, 1970); ʿAbd al-Bayāninī, al-Ijtihād wa-l-mujtahidīn, wa-ḍarūrat al-ʿamal bi-madhāhib al-a’ima al-arba’ wa-khaṭṭar al-lā madhhabīyya al-dālla (Aleppo: Maktabat al-Shabāb al-Muslim, 1969); Abū Ḥāmid Ibn Marzūq, Barā’at al-Asr’arīyyīn min ʿaqā’id al-mukhālifīn, 2 volumes (Damascus: Matba’at al-ʿIlm, 1967).
639 For one example, see ʿAbbāsī, Bidʿat al-ta’ṣṣub al-madhhabī, 64-77.
While this Salafī critique of the madhhab was certainly not new, it gained a new impetus with the legal and institutional shifts that took place during the second half of the twentieth century. Newly-independent countries such as Egypt, Syria and the Gulf states began designing their legal codes based on a hybrid of European and traditional Islamic laws, thereby institutionalizing madhhab-based jurisprudence, and making emulation of the salaf less likely. Salafīs saw personal status laws as the “last sphere of applying [Islamic law]” and, in at least one case – perhaps as a desperate last resort – ironically even called for the establishment of a committee to derive laws from “all of the madhhab of Islamic jurisprudence,” reassuring that this would be done “not in a blind way (shakl ‘ashwā’ī) as some do, but rather through the love of and preference for the proof-text.”

Mirroring these political developments, the universities in these countries, particularly their faculties of sharī‘a, began offering courses on comparative law and the evolution of Islamic jurisprudence in which the madhhab took center stage, seeking, as Robert Hefner explains, to “strike a balance between conservationalism and relevance.” In response, likening this process to the debate concerning the “closing of the gate of ijtihād,” a number of these Salafī writers attacked professors for their perpetuation of taqlīd by assigning students their own study aids and reference manuals.

640 Ḍā‘ūr, Bid’at al-ta‘ṣṣub al-madhhabī, 73. Here it is interesting to note that in his rebuttal against this work, Būṭī alleges that it was ghost-written by Albānī, Maḥmūd Mahdī al-İstanbülü, and Khayr al-Dīn Wānlī, which, Būṭī claims, İstanbülü “admitted…in a private session.” Indeed, the 350 page work is a direct rebuttal of Būṭī’s al-Lā-madhhabiyya and Būṭī features there as an explicit target. Whatever the reality behind the work’s authorship, it remains one of the few detailed theoretical publications outlining Salafī “legal reform,” as it claims, and the possibility that a directive came from on high by Albānī to establish such a committee would be interesting and not entirely surprising. Būṭī, al-Lā-madhhabiyya, 155.
based on their *madhhab*-based jurisprudence. Albānī himself wrote a number of “ḥadīth-based scholarly” reviews of university study aids in *al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī*, and republished some in book form during these years in part to “help [students] increase their interest in studying the noble ḥadīth in a practical way, thereby reviving what might have been destroyed of this great discipline through its confinement by professors to a purely theoretical discipline.” In his capacity as a member of the IUM’s Higher Council in 1975 he implored faculty members concerning the “the [scholarly] way” of ḥadīth that must be consulted to attain “knowledge concerning the truth that God Almighty ordained for His servants.”

Although the possibility of applying this new relevant jurisprudence ceased in Syria with the Ba’thist coup of 1963, the academic environment and the disciplinary focus in which it emerged ironically were strengthened. Moreover, with the migration of Muslim Brothers from the country and the government’s hostility towards those who remained (a relationship that culminated in the bloody 1982 showdown in Hama that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Muslim Brothers), these departments now drew

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642 See, for example, ‘Abbāsī, *Bid’at al-ta’assub al-madhhabī*, 77-79, in which ‘Abbāsī accuses Būṭī of “locking the gate of discussion and understanding, and preventing people from scrutinizing the legal proof-texts” while knowing that the students will only read what he writes, and will study comparative law. “This study [of comparative law] will unfortunately only lead students to great confusion, since their teachers cannot recommend one position over another….and suffice in just transmitting to them different statements and conflicting proofs.” Albānī was also especially critical of Būṭī’s alleged statement that “Muslims are no longer in need of any intellectual studies,” presumably referring to those written by Albānī’s followers. See Dhahābī, *Mukhtasār al-‘Uliw*, 65.

643 Albānī, *Difā’ an al-ḥadīth al-nabawī*, i. Although his most explicit critiques were reserved for Būṭī, likely because of the latter’s equally explicit attacks on Salafism as we will see, Albānī published a number of book reviews as early as his 1953 edition of Sayyid Sābiq’s *Fiqh al-sunna* titled *Tamām al-minna fī al-ta’līq ‘alā Fiqh al-sunna*. We also saw his critical reviews of university textbooks that appeared in article form in *al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī*, which he prefaces as *Naqd* (critique). He continued to write these and publish some in book form in the 1960’s and 1970’s, most notably his review of Būṭī’s *Fiqh al-sīra*, titled *Difā’ an al-ḥadīth al-nabawī wa-l-sīra fī al-radd ‘alā jahālāt al-duktūr al-Būṭī fī kītābihi “Fiqh al-sīra”* (Damascus: Mu’assasat wa-Maktabat al-Khāfiqīn, 1976); and his review of Kattānī’s *Nuṣūṣ ḥadithiyya fī al-thaqāfa al-‘āmma* titled *Naqd Nuṣūṣ ḥadithiyya fī al-thaqāfa al-‘āmma: jam’ wa-ta’d jīf Muḥammad al-Muntaṣīr al-Kattānī, ustādh al-ḥadīth* (Damascus: Maṭba‘at al-Taraqqī, 1968).

from a new cadre of traditional scholars. Ironically, as Thomas Pierret explains, it was the very secularism of the Ba‘thist regime that, in terminating the hopes of these Islamists and reformists to implement their vision and by exiling many of its luminaries, empowered the traditional scholars in faculties of shari‘a.\textsuperscript{645} Contrasting this with the way religious instruction evolved in Egypt and Saudi Arabia – in the former, subsumed under the nationalist project of the state and in the latter under the guidance of the Wahhābī ‘ulamā’ – he writes that “in Ba‘thist Syria, the conservative clergy were allowed to play a prominent role in that process because the state did not want to be involved in it.”\textsuperscript{646}

These developments also signaled a new chapter in the Syrian Salafī experience. Before the arrival of the Ba‘th, Salafism had woven itself deeply into the fabric of society. In Pierret’s words, by the 1960’s “the Syrian Salafī trend had both the will and the means to challenge the traditionalist ulama’s domination of the religious field.” He cites celebrations of Ibn Taymiyya in 1960 sponsored by the Higher Council for the Protection of Arts, the naming of public schools after the country’s Salafī luminaries,\textsuperscript{647} and the 1956 refusal of the national radio to broadcast chants in honor of the Prophet.\textsuperscript{648} By the 1970’s, however, Pierret writes that “the handful of Salafī clerics who remained [in Syria] had neither the social and cultural capital of [Muṣṭafā] al-Sibā‘ī and his like nor the popular roots of the founding sheikhs of the Nahda,” and he mentions Albānī as one of the two leaders of the Salafī community in Syria at the time.\textsuperscript{649}

\textsuperscript{645} Pierret, \textit{Religion and State}, 36-38.
\textsuperscript{646} Ibid., 62. Emphasis Pierret’s.
\textsuperscript{647} Specifically, Jamal al-Din al-Qāsimī, Bahjat al-Bīţār and Ibn Taymiyya.
\textsuperscript{648} Pierret, \textit{Religion and State}, 105.
\textsuperscript{649} The other, incidentally also an Albanian watch repairer and primary school dropout, was ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Arnā’ūt (d. 2004), who became the main Salafī scholar in Syria when Albānī moved to Jordan in 1981. Ibid., 106.
Albānī’s abrupt return to an increasingly inhospitable Syria in the fall of 1963 ushered in a period of both personal hardship at home as well as growing fame abroad, the latter thanks to a new international network of students and supporters, especially Ibn Bāz, cultivated in Saudi Arabia. Deteriorating conditions in Syria forced Shāwīsh and al-Maktab al-Islāmī to move to Beirut in 1963, but Albānī was not able to leave the country for long stretches of time because of his large personal library and his growing family, with his marriage to his second wife and the recent birth of his sixth child, Muḥammad, in Saudi Arabia.650 His visits to Shāwīsh in the latter’s Beirut home and office to collaborate on manuscripts naturally became less frequent, and, due to Albānī’s distance and circumstances in Damascus, at certain points this led to delays with publications.651

Nonetheless, before the Syrian government finally placed Albānī under house arrest in the late 1970’s he enjoyed a period of some international travel, owing in part to his new network of students and admirers. When the Syrian and Jordanian governments allowed their citizens to travel to Jerusalem without passport control in 1965, he availed himself of the opportunity to make his first visit there and prayed at the Aqṣā Mosque and visited the Dome of the Rock. Likewise, in 1972 a Muslim student group invited him to participate at a conference in Granada, Spain and, in the same year he traveled to Qatar. In 1976 he visited Morocco for the first time.652 He also began to make a monthly trip to Jordan, where he would eventually settle in 1981, lecturing at homes and sharī‘a institutes there. Allegedly, it was during these trips to Jordan that he first articulated his

650 Albānī had a total of thirteen children and four wives by the end of his life, although he had no children from his last wife. His family, for example, was one of the reasons Albānī turned down an invitation to teach at the Jamia Salfia in Benares, India, founded by King Sa‘ūd (r. 1953-1964) in 1966, the other reason being the fighting between India and Pakistan at the time. Sadḥān, al-Imām al-Albānī, 23, 127.
651 For example, see Shāwīsh’s remarks about delays in publishing Albānī’s Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣaghīr in Albānī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣaghīr, 1: 5-6.
slogan of “al-taṣfiya wa-l-tarbiya” (purification and education), which would become the cornerstone of his teachings during the last two decades of his life.\textsuperscript{653}

With Albānī’s international appeal, however, there emerged an equally formidable international base of hostility. In contrast to prior periods, due both to the rising popularity of Islamic activism across the Islamic world and to Albānī’s profile, a number of traditional scholars saw Albānī’s views as representative of a broader antinomian agitation of the Salafī community, which they described as “strife” (fitna), “non-madhhabism” (lā-madhhabiyya), partisanship (taʿaṣṣub) and extremism (ghulūw).\textsuperscript{654} In their attacks, these critics not only attributed what they considered to be Albānī’s inconsistencies and errors to his lack of traditional credentials, but characterized him as seeking to institute taqlīd of his own approach, a depiction that might not have been entirely inaccurate as we will see.\textsuperscript{655} At the helm of these critics were Muḥammad Saʿīd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (d. 2013)\textsuperscript{656} and ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (d. 1997), both of whom emerged as prominent scholars in Syria and Saudi Arabia respectively.\textsuperscript{657}

\textsuperscript{653} Although by some accounts Albānī allegedly coined this phrase during a prior visit to Jordan in the early 1970’s, he admits that what distinguishes Salafism in Jordan is the fact that it “is founded upon two bases, ‘purification and education.’” This concept will be examined in the next chapter. See Albānī, “Ḥukm taʿaddud al-jamāʿat al-ḥizbiyya,” http://www.alalbany.net/3392 Accessed 30 September 2014; idem, al-Taṣfiya wa-l-tarbiya wa-hājat al-Muslimīn ilayhimā (Amman: al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, 2000), 3.

\textsuperscript{654} See for example Būṭī’s famous pamphlet, al-Lā-madhhabiyya and Bayānūnī’s al-Ijtihād wa-mujtahīdūn. Marzūq used the word taʿaṣṣub in chronicling the pre-modern development of the Ḥanbalī school and the term ghulūw to describe Ibn Abī Ya’la’s veneration of Ibn Ḥanbal’s circle in his Barāʿ at al-Ashʿariyyin, 1: 28, 37, 50.

\textsuperscript{655} See, for example, Aʿẓamī, al-Albānī: shudhūdhuhu wa-akhṭā’uhu, 1:5, where the publisher wrote that the book “describes the condition of Albānī and his group, who attack us for taqlīd of the imāms followed among the salaf…and require us to emulate their shaykh Albānī…”


\textsuperscript{657} Būṭī was especially pronounced in extending his attack on Albānī to that of the movement he represented. Especially his al-Lā-madhhabiyya and his al-Salafiyya: marḥala zamaniyya mubāraka lā madhhab Islāmī (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1988).
In his writings, Būṭī, who received his doctorate from the Azhar and later became an influential dean of the faculty of sharī‘a at Damascus University, took issue not only with the impulse of *ijtihād* among Albānī and his followers, but also with their calls to do away with the *madhhab*. Significantly, he, perhaps more explicitly and coherently than Albānī’s other critics, questioned the entire Salafi methodological framework and its claims to a distinct group identity. For Būṭī, who would become an important voice for the Ba‘thist regime – an association that would later cost him his life during the civil war in Syria – his refutations of Albānī extended beyond a dismissal of the latter’s scholarly credentials. Rather, he connected these to the destructive actions of his followers, whom he characterized as “not from Mars or from the Hereafter, but like us. The people of each city and neighborhood and village complain about them, and they are many because *shaykh* Nāṣir [al-Dīn al-Albānī] was able to raise awareness about them.”

Another prominent critic who appeared in this period was the Aleppian Azharite ḥadīth scholar ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (d. 1997). Known among his followers for being selective about his rebuttals against critics, Albānī spilled the most ink, and in the most passionate language, against Abū Ghudda, whom he described as a “tyrannical partisan” of the Ḥanafī *madhhab*, a “spy and informant” and even an unbeliever. Incidentally, Abū Ghudda was among a number of leading anti-Salafī ḥadīth scholars in

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658 This, for example, was the theme of Būṭī’s *al-Salafiyya*, especially as suggested by the subtitle, “A blessed historical period and not an Islamic school.”
659 One example of this was the Hama uprising. However, Pierret explains that the relationship between the high-ranking jurist and the government in Syria went beyond merely legitimating its policies – especially since, as he notes, the Ba‘th did not always seek Islamic legitimacy for them – but rather to carry out “protocol and public relations.” Pierret, *Religion and State*, 76-77.
Aleppo, none of whom received nearly as much attention from Albānī as he did. His hostility towards Abū Ghudda was especially charged owing to their close relationship since Albānī’s early days in Damascus, as well as Abū Ghudda’s avowed adherence to the Ḥanafī madhhab. Albānī quickly severed his relationship with him following the latter’s complaint to the Saudi authorities, allegedly behind Albānī’s back, concerning his takhrīj in his edition of the Ṭahāwiyya. Moreover, Albānī likely bore some degree of personal resentment towards Abū Ghudda who, unlike Albānī, secured a professorship teaching ḥadīth in Saudi Arabia, despite his Ḥanafī madhhab. Although it curiously never surfaced in Albānī’s writings about Abū Ghudda, it is worth noting that Abū Ghudda assumed leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Aleppo branch after the group split in the early 1960’s.

In his attempts to discredit Abū Ghudda’s ḥadīth qualifications, Albānī’s focus lay squarely on what he described as Abū Ghudda’s preference for following the Ḥanafī madhhab over sound reports. It was on this basis that he questioned Abū Ghudda’s credentials as a ḥadīth scholar. Indeed, as an ardent defender of the Ḥanafī madhhab,

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662 Pierret, Religion and State, 115-116. Among these were ‘Abd Allāh Sirāj al-Dīn, and Nūr al-Dīn ‘İtr. Interestingly, Pierret notes that this was not the case in Damascus, where, he writes, it was “not until the early twenty-first century [that] the Syrian capital witnes[ed] a dramatic upsurge in hadith studies among the mainstream religious elite.” Pierret goes on to explain that “This development…was directly related to the struggle against the spread of Salafism” and cites a number of practices, such as the public hearing (samā’) of Bukhārī and Muslim. These, however, as he explains, were very much in reaction to Albānī rather than influenced by him.

663 Albānī, Kashf al-niqāb, 9-10.

664 For a discussion of this incident, see chapter 6.

665 This resentment is very subtly implied, especially in Albānī, Sharḥ al-‘Aqīda al-Ṭahāwiyya, 49.

666 This aspect of Abū Ghudda’s biography was the principal reason for the attacks on him mounted by Shāwīsh, who remained a partisan of the Damascus branch. See Pierret, Religion and State, 107.

667 Indeed, while Abū Ghudda became head of the Muslim Brotherhood, this part of his biography never appears in Albānī’s critiques of him, which focused exclusively on the former’s adherence to the Ḥanafī madhhab.

668 For example, in the introduction to his Kashf al-niqāb, 9-10. Albānī included a lengthy anecdote about their early interactions in Damascus and how he witnessed Abū Ghudda recommending an alcoholic medication, even though “The Prophet described the [alcoholic] medication as poison.” According to Albānī, Abū Ghudda responded that perhaps the report is weak, to which Albānī replied that it must be
Abū Ghudda was repelled by what he and other pro-madhhab scholars saw as the defamation of the four eponymous heads of the legal schools, particularly Abū Ḥanīfa, in the claim made by Albānī and his predecessors that Ḥanafī jurisprudence “prefers analogical reasoning to [following] ḥadīth reports.”

Abū Ghudda drew especially on the Deobandi Madhhab-Traditionalist school and wrote enthusiastically about his “lengthy personal scholarly journey” to India and Pakistan in 1962, when he visited “shaykhs and scholars…and schools, institutes and universities, and met those scholars of these wide lands known for their knowledge and faith.” In addition to his own voluminous writings in defense of the Ḥanafī madhhab and explaining the principles of ḥadīth, an important product of Abū Ghudda’s interest in the Deobandi school was his central role in republishing many of their writings with Lebanese and Syrian publishing houses. His republication of these works through Arab publishing houses, some with new titles, from the second half of the twentieth century onwards no doubt gave them a wider distribution and, more immediately, new relevance as weapons against Salafī anti-madhhabism.

Faced with this new wave of enmity from an international cohort of scholars with both traditional and modern institutional associations, Albānī in this period began to frame his ideas as a scholarly methodology (manhaj) as a counterweight to these

sound since it is mentioned in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim. When, as Albānī described, Abū Ghudda was pressed further concerning whether he would follow the report or the madhhab, Albānī alleged that he chose the madhhab.  
670 Ibid., 7.  
671 This, for example, was the case with Zafar Ahmad al-ʿUthmānī’s 1930 work Iʿlā al-sunan, which Abū Ghudda republished in 1972 and renamed, with ʿUthmānī’s blessing, as Qawāʾid fī ʿulūm al-ḥadīth, in part as an example of “one of the best works” refuting “those who call themselves ‘the People of Hadith’ who claim that the Ḥanafī madhhab…contradicts the Prophetic hadith reports on many issues…and prefer analogical reasoning over hadith, and reject taqlīd of the imams,” ibid., 4. On Abū Ghudda and his reintroduction of these works, see Zaman, The Ulama in Contemporary Islam, 55-56.
affiliations, both of which he and many of his followers lacked. For example, in a 1972 lecture in Qatar he told students that he hoped to “provide for my brothers working in jurisprudence a precise scholarly method (*manhaj ʿilmī daqīq*) to help them, and to ease the way for them to determine the status of a ḥadīth report...”

Towards the end of his life, Albānī ironically used the same dogmatic tone to describe this approach of ḥadīth scholars that he spent his entire life criticizing in the context of *taqlīd* of the madhhabs. For example, he said that “it is not permissible to contradict Muslim scholars in any religious discipline if no other way (*nahw*) has been agreed upon, and we do not need another way [in this discipline],” and that “later scholars must submit to the efforts of earlier ones, to their discussions, independent reasoning and scholarly views, unless something becomes apparent to them which makes them differ from [earlier ones.]” In these comments, and in his voluminous writings evaluating the works of prior scholars in which he outlined this scholarly approach, Albānī sought to define a mode of association that not only rivaled those of modern institutions but also empowered his followers to continually challenge the products of those environments.

**Beyond *Takhrīj*: Towards a Methodology of Relative Soundness**

Albānī’s exposition of his ḥadīth methodology as a framework for *ijtihād* can be seen as complementary to his call for an epistemology of belief that we examined previously with respect to his critique of Islamists, which too first appeared when he returned to Syria. Both were efforts at claiming a monopoly on the transmission of

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religious knowledge and, by extension, the determination of religious truths within dramatically new climates of group and institutional association – what he and his students described as “partisanship” (ta’āṣṣub). In many ways, this reaction mirrored the response of Rashīd Riḍā and his immediate followers in reintroducing ḥadīth science during their time, which we examined earlier.674 In the case of Albānī’s attack on Islamist groups, whom he antagonized for claiming to represent Islam, he linked them to early Islamic theological sects to show how removed their beliefs were from “true” Islamic ones. He showcased the certainty of Salafī beliefs and practices through his takhrīj writings – his pamphlets and his Silsilatayn articles in which he identified the “correct” Islamic normative guidance from sound reports.

By contrast, this degree of certainty is ominously absent in his more technical explanations of how to determine the soundness of reports. Rather, in his Taqrīb and other editions of commentaries from this second period in Syria and onwards in which he sought to “bring the pure and clean sunna to the people,”675 his explanations for how he did so suggested that it is rare, if not impossible, for a report to be definitively determined as sound. Drawing on the work of earlier ḥadīth commentators, Albānī explained that there in fact exists a continuum of acceptable reports beyond the mere categorization of reports as “sound” or “weak,” what he called their “degrees” or “ranks” (marātib).676 Specifically, he saw the idea of ṣaḥīḥ li-ghayrihi (sound with the support of other sounds reports)677 as the crux of the discipline of ḥadīth science, “its most difficult subject.”678

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674 See chapter 2.
675 Albānī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Kalim al-ḥayyib, 6.
677 This is the idea that a report could be either “strengthened” or “weakened” through the discovery of other transmissions. Albānī equated this with ḥasan li-ghayrihi, with the exception that the latter has fewer paths of transmission.
678 Albānī, Irwā’ al-ghālīl, 1: 11.
successive editions of his *Taqrīb*, he elaborated on additional categories of soundness and what they suggested concerning the degree of a report’s authenticity. By demanding the wide consultation of a range of references to determine a report’s soundness, the underlying point (and one that directly served Albānī’s personal aims) was that the evaluation of a report’s soundness is a process that must continue indefinitely on the basis of newly-available information.

The potential for strengthening or weakening a report through “broadening” (*tawassu‘*) one’s familiarity with a greater number of transmissions was part of Albānī’s justification behind his *Taqrīb* project, citing the maxim that “religious knowledge does not accept rigidity.”679 Incidentally, he also cleverly used this expression to justify his own changing opinion of different reports – which his detractors cited as his inconsistency – as being due not to his lack of training as they suggested, but rather to his exposure to more transmissions through the publication of more ḥadīth compendia.680 Moreover since, as he explained, “human nature is to forget and err, regardless of whether one is an earlier or later scholar,” Albānī emphasized that anyone who comes later is naturally “more knowledgeable in the discipline” and may notice flaws in the work of prior scholars.681 Thus he encouraged “strong students” faced with the choice of either following the evaluation of a ḥadīth commentator or their own evidence pointing to different results to follow their own independent reasoning, particularly if that scholar did not mentioned the blemish or the chain of transmission.682

680 Ibid.
While neither Albānī’s presentation of this soundness continuum nor its conditions for determining the reliability of ḥadīth reports were entirely novel – in fact, as has been demonstrated, he did generally adhere to the precedents of earlier ḥadīth scholars683 – their gradual introduction into his framework during this period and his justification of his own work through them suggest that he saw these concepts as tools for undoing the institutional infrastructure of his contemporaries. Although the message of relativity embedded into his methodology differed from the kind of certainty he displayed in his other writings, both were consistent with his overall objective of determining what the Prophet actually said and expunging whatever he did not. A truly genuine takhrīj effort to determine this, in Albānī’s estimation, required the constant reconsideration of the work of others and reinterpretation of technical terminology based on one’s own exposure to new sources. It was precisely this evolutionary aspect of Albānī’s methodology that, because of its gradual appearance, was the very imprecision his detractors attributed to Albānī’s lack of proper training in the discipline.

In the following discussion, we will explore Albānī’s ḥadīth methodology, especially his emphasis on the continuum of acceptable ḥadīth reports and the conditions for determining soundness, as mechanisms for disrupting the centralization of religious learning within its new institutional context and, in the process, setting in motion the mechanism of ijtihād with himself as standard bearer. The discussion will be divided into the following three sections. First, we will outline Albānī’s argument for lexical precision, which served not only as his entryway into attacks on contemporaries and earlier scholars, but also as a springboard for determining a report’s soundness. Second,

683 See, for example, Amin, “Nāṣiruddīn al-Albānī.”
we will explore Albānī’s exposition of the conditions for deeming a report sound, as well as for strengthening it. Finally, we will close with an application of this methodology through his evaluation of the work of prior ḥadīth scholars as an essential part of the discipline. It was these three areas, as well as the thousands of pages that they inspired, that, to his opponents, represented Albānī’s egregious affront to the religion’s foundations while, to his students and admirers, represented Albānī’s unmatched erudition and scholarly stature.

Three works, which are also bookends of Albānī’s career, will serve as guiding references as we trace his methodological insights in his Taqrīb. The first is his set of fifteen principles of ḥadīth in the 1954 introduction to Sayyid Sābiq’s (d. 2000) Fiqh al-sunna, which he included there as a guidance for the latter’s revision of his work and which also represents his earliest overview of what he regarded as the most essential principles of ḥadīth. Moreover, it was in that introduction that he mentioned his intention of applying those principles in his Taqrīb. The second is Aḥmad Shākir’s, al-Bā’ith al-ḥathīth, a commentary on Ibn Kathīr’s Ikhtiṣār ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth, a reference on the principles of ḥadīth. This work seemed to have been a source of inspiration for Albānī as he crystalized his methodology, particularly in light of Shākir’s objective of refuting “some distinguished Muslims produced in Europe…who follow their Orientalist shaykhs…in claiming that ḥadīth reports have neither soundness nor basis.” As mentioned previously, Albānī allegedly carried around his meticulously-annotated copy

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684 Albānī, Tamām al-minna, 15-42. So insistent was Albānī on the indispensability of these principles that he republished his commentary in 1980 because “[Sābiq] did not benefit at all from what I wrote,” referring specifically his neglect of the “principles that every scholar must follow” in the introduction. Ibid., 5.
686 Ibid., 1:74.
of this book throughout his career, teaching it in Damascus from 1957 to 1958, and then at the IUM and finally in Jordan in the 1990’s. Albānī’s students, in turn, consider the book “among the greatest works” written on “the framework of the organized scholarly methodology [of ḥadīth science].” Albānī’s comments on this work, written over the course of his career and never intended for publication, thus provide an essential window into his thinking as his methodology took shape. The final work is a posthumously-published transcription of Albānī’s question-and-answer sessions with his students in Jordan during his final years, which represents both the single most comprehensive reference on his principles of ḥadīth and, with its late date, the culmination of his methodological vision.

I. (Re) Introducing Terminology: The Building Blocks of a Discipline

The terminology of ḥadīth (muṣṭalah al-ḥadīth) was the core of Albānī’s scholarly intervention, and it was his insistence that certain terms carried implications concerning a report’s soundness that lay at the heart of his reevaluations of prior scholars. It was also by asserting the centrality of the discipline’s technical terminology while, simultaneously, acknowledging that it took centuries for ḥadīth scholars to uniformly use them, that Albānī gracefully reevaluated the work of the ḥadīth codifiers without

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688 Ibid., 9-10.
689 Ibid., 39.
691 For a study of Albānī’s reevaluation of reports Muslim deemed sound on the basis of the former’s insistence on the implications for a report’s soundness that certain terms carry, see Amin, “Nāṣiruddīn al-Albānī.” Amin writes there that, in contrast to other scholars, “[Albānī] uses terminology as a decisive criterion for assessing the validity of transmissions.” Amin, “Nāṣiruddīn al-Albānī,” 160 (emphasis Amin’s).

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explicitly defaming them. When a student cornered Albānī into identifying the beginning of the codification of the technical terminology of ḥadīth – a question that, if not considered carefully, could marginalize leading ḥadīth compilers – Albānī deliberately avoided this question, answering instead:

As for when this technical terminology began, my answer [will rather address] what the most knowledgeable questioner would ask. Namely, concerning who of the scholars and memorizers have used this precise scholarly expression. Nawawī and Dhahabī come to mind… But as for the earlier scholars, it is difficult to ascribe to them [consistent] adherence to this precise scholarly ḥadīth terminology.692

Despite its centrality to his project, Albānī’s insistence on terminological precision and – more importantly – his explanation of what particular terms signified was something that took shape over the course of his career. For example, only one of his fifteen principles of ḥadīth in 1954 concerned ḥadīth terminology.693 It was because his understanding of these terms evolved over the decades that he produced other works on ḥadīth criticism – all the while not offering a comprehensive guide to the terms he used – that Albānī attracted a good deal of criticism, particularly from fellow ḥadīth scholars. A significant part of Abū Ghudda’s criticism of Albānī for his edition of the Ṭaḥāwiyya, for example, concerned the latter’s inconsistent use of expressions. While Abū Ghudda challenged some, such as “I do not know it” (lā a’rifuhu), for being merely vague (had Albānī not heard of that report or had he merely not heard of its transmission from a particular narrator?), it was other more presumptive-sounding ambiguities that seemed to have truly aggravated him and others. For example, Albānī’s expressions “sound, traced by Bukhārī” (ṣaḥīḥ, kharrajahu al-Bukhārī), “sound, related by Muslim” (ṣaḥīḥ, rawāhu

692 Jīlānī, al-Durar, 108.
693 The principle that “one may not use expressions such as “the [Prophet] said” (qāla) or “it is transmitted from him” (warada ‘anhu) or the like for weak reports,” which he bases on Nawawī’s view that “verifying ḥadīth scholars said that if a report is weak, one may not say: ‘the Prophet said, or did, or commanded, or forbade, or ruled, or any similar [verbs in the] command form.” Albānī, Tamām al-minna, 39.
Muslim), and “sound, agreed upon” (ṣaḥīḥ, muttafaq ‘alayhi) – all of which seem not only close in meaning, but strongly suggest Albānī’s assertion of his authority over Bukhārī and Muslim. Albānī recalled that the appearance of these and other terms without explanation led to “a great deal of discussion and debate among our beloved brothers and others over many years, and refutations from many people from different countries.”

Among his various lexical clarifications, and among those that informed his reclassification of sound and weak reports in ḥadīth compendia, was his account of the connotation of the word ‘an (“on the authority of [so-and-so]”). For Muslim, a mu‘an’an ḥadīth (a report whose transmission chain includes the word ‘an) did imply direct transmission of the report from one individual to another if their lifespans overlapped. Albānī, on the other hand, argued that the acceptability of a mu‘an’an report depended on who transmitted it and on the circumstances of that transmission – specifically, the proximity of the transmitter to the Prophet (whether a Successor, Companion, etc.) and his credibility. Far from mere semantics, it was this critical difference concerning the significance (or lack thereof) of the term ‘an that inspired Albānī’s exposition of the terminology of the field and, more immediately, informed his revision of Muslim’s reports. One controversial example of this is a report transmitted by a forger

694 Albānī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Targhīb wa-l-tarḥīb, 10; idem, Sharḥ al-‘Aqīda al-Ṭahāwiyya, 21-22.
695 Ibid., 22; idem, Sharḥ al-‘Aqīda al-Ṭahāwiyya, 21-22.
696 For a discussion of Muslim’s view of the mu‘an’an report, see ‘Alī al-Ḥalabī, Dirāsāt ‘ilmiyya fi Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim wa-huwa al-musammā Kashf al-ma‘ālim bi-abātīl kitāb Tanbīh al-Muslim (n.l.: Dār al-Hijra, 1994), 53-58, especially p. 57 where he criticized ‘Uthmānī in his Qawā'id for citing ‘an and anna as the evidence for both Bukhārī and Muslim for deeming the report munqaṭṭ (rather than limiting it to only Bukhārī’s opinion, as Ḥalabī would prefer). See also ‘Uthmānī, Qawā'id, 464.
697 See Amin, “Nāṣiruddīn al-Albānī,” 154; see also Shākir, al-Bā’ith al-hathīth, 1: 169, where he cited Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr in emphasizing that a mu‘an’an report may be accepted on the condition that the two transmitters actually met one another. In later years, Albānī distinguished between ‘an and anna, the latter
(mudallis), which Albānī permitted only if that transmitter explicitly clarified how he heard it.\(^{698}\)

The use of ‘an, alongside verbs of speech (qāla, “he said,” rawā, “he related”), were the most common reasons for Albānī’s intervention into the work of prior ḥadīth commentators. Not only was the word itself, particularly which indirect object accompanied it (lī, “to me” or la-nā, “to us”), indicative of how a report was transmitted to the narrator (thereby possibly elucidating its authenticity), but its appearance – whether in active or passive form – served as further evidence for Albānī of its reliability.\(^{699}\)

Another important area of Albānī’s lexicographical intervention, and one that most explicitly related to the soundness continuum, were the terms scholars used to classify reports. Implicit in this assertion of “degrees,” or the continuum of soundness as we have called it, was the limitation of any categorical determination of a report being definitively “sound” or “weak.”\(^{700}\) A useful reason for justifying his reevaluations, Albānī also cited the categorical labels of “sound” or “weak” as signs of scholars’ laxity in ḥadīth science because they suggested such scholars rushed to arbitrate without implying a “solid closeness” (qarāba waṭida) in which the transmitter actually heard a report, while the former is ambiguous concerning the relationship between the two transmitters. Jīlānī, *al-Durar*, 70-71.


\(^{699}\) This, for example, was part of Albānī’s reason for reassessing Mundhirī’s *al-Targhib wa-l-tarhib*. See Albānī, *Ḍa’īf al-Targhib wa-l-tarhib*, 2 volumes (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Maʿārif, 2000), 1:8. Albānī here clearly followed in the footsteps of Shākir, who included lengthy comments in his *al-Bā’ith al-ḥathīth* on lexical precision. For example, he wrote that that “nī in ḥaddathanī (“he related to me”) is stronger evidence of a report’s direct transmission from one individual to another than ḥaddathanā (“he related to us”). See Shākir, *al-Bā’ith al-ḥathīth*, 1: 337; Jīlānī, *al-Durar*, 200.

\(^{700}\) Of course, there were specific conditions under which Albānī did deem a report weak. For example, if the transmitter was entirely unknown (al-jahāla bi-l-rāwi) then he considered this a blemish, which made the report weak. See ‘Ayzarī, *Juhūd*, 132. However, here too we might assume that Albānī would have permitted the further revision of this evaluation by someone else if that person did discover information concerning a transmitter.
explaining their reasoning. Indeed, he went so far as to defend Aḥmad b. Hanbal’s alleged statement that “following a weak ḥadīth report is preferable to me over following independent reasoning (ra’y),” which Albānī explained as follows:

The distinction between ‘sound’ and ‘good’ was not known to scholars [in those days]. As we say: ṣaḥīḥ li-ghayrihi and ṣaḥīḥ li-dhātīhi, these are invented terms but they express the reality…what would the early scholars [before Bukhārī and Tirmidhī] have said? They would have said ‘sound ḥadīth’ and ‘weak ḥadīth’…but [their use of the term] ‘weak’ in the new terminology that appeared afterwards was divided into two categories…“weak” and “very weak.”

It was on this basis, as he explained, that some of the reports that appear in these works as “weak” were in fact not truly weak. As Albānī wrote, these weak reports “are not weak in the technical meaning of ‘weak’” but are, in fact, “sound” or “good.”

Besides these and other terms which Albānī endowed with technical meaning, he also seized on any kinds of lexical ambiguities as opportunities to reevaluate the work of prior scholars. For example, in introducing his edition of Suyūṭī’s al-Jāmī’ al-saghīr, he mentioned that in the manuscript version he consulted the letters ḥa’ (for ḥasan), ṣād (for ṣahīh) and dād (for da’īf) – each of them representing one of Suyūṭī’s “[evaluation] signs” (rumūz) – allegedly became muddled with the passage of time. Thus, his correction of these ambiguities served as Albānī’s justification for publishing his Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmī’ al-ṣaghīr.

701 See, for example, Albānī, Daīf al-Adab al-mufrad, 9; Shākir, al-Bā’ith al-hathīth, 1: 74, where Albānī criticized the practice of his contemporaries who deemed a report that contains a liar (kadhdhāb) “very weak” (da’īf jiddan) rather than mawdū’ (forged), thereby inhibiting any further investigation of the report. 702 Jīlānī, al-Durar, 250-251. 703 Ibid. 704 See, for example, Albānī, Tamām al-minna, 28. 705 In his Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmī’ al-ṣaghīr, Albānī went further and said that Suyūṭī “had no knowledge of this noble discipline.” Albānī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmī’ al-ṣaghīr, 15, 18.
II. Conditions of ‘Soundness’: between Transmission and Content

As implied by his meticulous concern for terminological precision, and based on Albānī’s other writings, his principle interest in defining the soundness of a report was to determine that the Prophet actually said it. Although this is, of course, presumably the main priority for anyone assessing a report, methodologically for Albānī it signified some degree of unpredictability in how he approached the evaluation of a report. On certain issues his positions were consistent with what one might expect given his personal views. For example, he rejected outright any report whose content was inspired by a mystical experience (dhawq or kashf), and, based on a principle he articulated in 1954, not only rejected any weak transmission of a report but also prohibited “strengthening” a report through multiple weak transmissions (i.e. the principle of tawātur).706

In many other respects, however, his positions concerning which transmitters and narrations to accept were rather surprising given what we know of his background, and differed in some respects from those of earlier ḥadīth scholars. An example of the former was his caution against rejecting a transmitter solely on the basis of his Shi‘ī leanings or manifested bid‘a, so long as he was considered a trustworthy memorizer.707 While admittedly an established view within ḥadīth science, it certainly does come as a surprise that Albānī upheld this position given his categorically hostile views of bid‘a that we have examined previously. He also did not reject a transmitter who had not reached the age of puberty (bulūgh), in contrast to a number of pre-modern ḥadīth commentators,

707 Albānī, Silsila al-ahādith al-ṣaḥīha, 1:752. He did, however, prohibit Isrā‘īliyyāt transmissions. See ibid., 1: 820. See also Jīlānī, al-Dur, 202, where Albānī explained that “we do not consider an innovator to be a sinner (fāsiq) but rather one who deviates on the basis of his ijtiḥād and this is not the same as a sinner. However, if it has been established that he has become a sinner through his innovation then we do not ascribe uprightness to him.”
since in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* Bukhārī included a report transmitted by ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr, an individual who had not reached puberty when he met the Prophet.  

Albānī was equally tentative concerning rejecting reports on the basis of “blemishes” in their chains of transmission. He did not, for example, immediately reject *munqati‘* reports (those missing a transmitter before a Successor) or *mursal* ones (missing a Companion transmitter), even though these are “categories of weakness,” as he wrote.  

Instead, barring his inability to find a *mursal* report in any source – a scenario that, while it would, indeed, make the report weak is also a scenario he called “very rare” Albānī emphasized that a report found with either of these “blemishes” could be potentially further “strengthened” so long as that additional transmission was from a narrator considered more trustworthy on the basis of his memorization and exposure to transmissions. Furthermore, contrary to the notion that Albānī limited himself to the examination of an *isnād* in determining soundness, he did consider a Qur’ānic verse a valid “witness” to strengthen a weak report, so long as the particular transmission of that report did not have a “strong weakness” in its *isnād*.

In these unexpected sets of stipulations concerning both the background of the narrator and the nature of the transmission, it is clear that the main priority for Albānī lay only with what can be determined about a narrator’s trustworthiness with regards to that particular report. An individual who holds errant personal or religious views may still be accepted if there is concrete evidence of his relationship to the source of the report.

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710 Ibid.
Similarly, a report may only be definitively rejected if there is no corroboratory evidence that attests to its possible soundness. The assessment of a report, in other words, can always be further revised by uncovering another dimension of its content or transmitters through greater exposure to new sources.

These principles could be understood in light of Albānī’s uncompromising quest to determine what the Prophet actually said – a quest driven by an emphasis on the context in which these factors appear together, rather than their uniform application. In other words, the implications concerning a report’s authenticity that any of these factors carried were relative to the additional information that could be ascertained about it and its other transmissions. This was the message behind his maxim that “the soundness of the transmitters does not mean the ḥadīth is sound.” It was also this point that informed his insistence on integrating discussions of a report’s other transmissions to determine its soundness.

One example of how Albānī intervened with his continuum of soundness was his insistence on accepting “additions [to a ḥadīth] by reliable narrators” (ziyādat al-thiqa). An established principle in ḥadīth science, Albānī strategically used it to justify his work and knowledge. In his explanations of the term, he restricted its acceptance to only those additions that did not contradict narrations of the most reliable transmitter for any given report. Here, again, he implied that it is only someone endowed with the proper training in ḥadīth science and the widest exposure to its sources who is truly capable of

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712 For an overview of the possible scenarios of ziyādat al-thiqa and the debate concerning their acceptance, see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, A Textbook of Ḥadīth Studies: Authenticity, Compilation, Classification and Criticism of Ḥadīth (Leicestershire, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2005), 132-138.
713 For Albānī’s views on this subject, see Jīlānī, al-Durar, 16-18, 50; ‘Ayzarī, Juhūd, 395; Shākir, al-Bā‘ith al-Ḥathīth, 1: 202.
determining whether and how a newly-discovered transmission may be factored into the evaluation of a report.

It was in these examples of how a report’s status can be continuously reevaluated – and his insistence that the conditions for that reevaluation must be mastered by a cadre of specialists – that he situated his notion of *ijtihād*, principally through his encouragement of revising the work of prior scholars, including his own.\(^7\) For example, writing on whether a narration from a Companion may be accepted if that Companion was not known to have been criticized by ḥadīth scholars, Albānī wrote that, “I would like to remind students that…the door of *ijithād* must remain open for everyone to make his contribution and to give his opinion, even if influenced by the views of others.”\(^7\)

### III. Correcting Earlier Ḥadīth Scholars and Molding a Mujtahid

Albānī encouraged the revision of his work and that of earlier scholars, although he warned that this must only be done by “very strong students.”\(^7\) However, on a number of occasions, famously with the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*, as Brown observes, Albānī explicitly clarified that his work was not meant as a defamation of the authors but only as a statement about the content of their work.\(^7\) Significantly (and strategically), Albānī typically justified both his *Taqrīb* project, as well as his editions of particular ḥadīth

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\(^7\) He made this point most explicitly in Jīlānī, *al-Durar*, 12-13. There and elsewhere he alluded to his own imperfection, saying that “it is part of human nature to err and forget,” thereby excusing his inconsistencies.

\(^7\) Jīlānī, *al-Durar*, 28-29.

\(^7\) Ibid., 12-13, 273.

\(^7\) Another example is Ibn Hibbān, of whom Albānī wrote, “my study does not focus on him as a person but rather on his book *al-Taqāṣīm wa-l-anwā*’ from which [I have selected] our book *Mawārid al-zam’ān*” Albānī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Mawārid al-zam’ān ilā zawā’id Ibn Ḥibbān*, 2 volumes (Riyadh: Dār al-Ṣumāʾī, 2002), 1:8.
compendia, by citing his predecessors who either reassessed the works of other scholars or deemed them untrustworthy.\footnote{For example, in the introduction to his edition of Suyūṭī’s al-Fatḥ al-Kabīr he justified his Taqrīb project by stating that “My models in this task are the leaders who came before who wrote Ṣaḥīḥ compendia, such as Bukhārī, Muslim, Ibn Khuzayma, Ibn Hibbān and others. And those who wrote Da’īja and Mawdū‘a works such as Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī, Shawkānī…may we be included in their group under the flag of the master human being, our prophet Muḥammad.” Albānī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣaghīr, 1:33. Likewise, his basis for critiquing the work of Suyūṭī is Munāwī’s comments about how his evaluations were not reliable. For Ibn Ḥibbān, he devoted dozens of pages of his introduction to citations from pre-modern ḥadīth scholars, as well as from his predecessor ʿAḥmad Shākir, concerning the unreliability of Ibn Hibbān’s Thiqāt.}

It was ultimately because “errors” did appear in these works, as his predecessors noted, that Albānī did not recognize the ijmā‘ (scholarly consensus) of prior ḥadīth scholars as binding – a position that put him at loggerheads not only with his usual array of critics but especially with ḥadīth scholars, including some of his own students.\footnote{See, for example, ‘Ayzarī, Juhūd, 182-183; ʿIlāmi, al-Durar, 56-57. Albānī clarified that the only ijmā‘ that must be accepted concerns all the essential aspects of the religion, and explained that whoever does not accept this ijmā‘ is considered an unbeliever or an apostate. However, he wrote further, this does not apply to ḥadīth because of “our well-known condition that no one may contradict the infallible text.” Muqbil b. Ḥādī al-Wādī́ī, on the other hand, held that if one of the early compilers deemed a report weak there is no need to reinvestigate it. See this discussion in ‘Ayzarī, Juhūd, 273.}

Indeed, he even criticized Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ on one occasion for prohibiting the assessment of ḥadīth reports about which earlier scholars had been silent and for allegedly claiming that the door of ijtihād had closed.\footnote{Albānī, Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd, 3 volumes (Kuwait: Mu’assasat Gharās, 2002), 1:17.} Nonetheless, despite his views on ijtihād and the clear connections between it and his own work, he rarely made this connection or claimed the title for himself – presumably since that was the basis of others’ attacks on him.\footnote{Būṭūfī was especially vocal in this regard, see for example his al-Lā‘-madhhabiyya, 17-19.}

One exception was in the introduction to his edition of Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān, a scholar whose evaluations Albānī deemed unreliable.\footnote{For one of his earliest statements of this, see Albānī, Tamām al-minna, 20-26.} After a lengthy exposition of the errors in Ibn Ḥibbān’s Thiqāt and the statements of earlier scholars concerning his laxity, he then engaged the hypothetical question of what one must do when one encounters

\footnote{For example, in the introduction to his edition of Suyūṭī’s al-Fatḥ al-Kabīr he justified his Taqrīb project by stating that “My models in this task are the leaders who came before who wrote Ṣaḥīḥ compendia, such as Bukhārī, Muslim, Ibn Khuzayma, Ibn Hibbān and others. And those who wrote Da’īja and Mawdū‘a works such as Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī, Shawkānī…may we be included in their group under the flag of the master human being, our prophet Muḥammad.” Albānī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣaghīr, 1:33. Likewise, his basis for critiquing the work of Suyūṭī is Munāwī’s comments about how his evaluations were not reliable. For Ibn Ḥibbān, he devoted dozens of pages of his introduction to citations from pre-modern ḥadīth scholars, as well as from his predecessor ʿAḥmad Shākir, concerning the unreliability of Ibn Hibbān’s Thiqāt.}
transmitters whom Ibn Ḥibbān deemed trustworthy. Albānī began his response by categorizing people into the following three types: 1) a mujtahid scholar, 2) a student who follows him (ṭālib muttabī’), and 3) an ignorant person who blindly follows scholars (jāhil muqallid). He defined each of these as follows:

The first [a mujtahid]: someone who strives through his independent reasoning concerning that upon which the people disagree, since it is through his abilities that the correct [position] can be known from error.

The second [a student who follows him]: follows whoever has been deemed reliable in his knowledge, piety and uprightness, and who is thereby recognized for being correct, such that he has insight into the religion and is not obstinate in claiming to have knowledge…

The third [an ignorant person who blindly follows scholars]: emulates the scholar (yuqallid al-ʿālim) and usually tries to be of the second category. If [he does not try to be of the second category], then he has no need for such a question concerning how sound and weak reports are arranged, as is obvious.

Albānī’s explanation suggests that the mujtahid is endowed with a kind of infallible potential to determine divine truths. This, of course, stands in marked contrast to the concept’s traditional iteration, epitomized through the maxim that “every mujtahid [both] errs and is correct.” Moreover, his new category of the muttabi’, which Albānī recasted as an alternative to the muqallid, essentially seems to be performing the same task (“following”) – a fact that Albānī admitted when he described the muqallid as “trying to be [a muttabi’].” Here, again, the difference seems to depend on whom they are following. Rather than scholarly credentials, the qualities of such a person should be “someone deemed reliable in his knowledge, piety and uprightness.” In a different context, Albānī explained that “there is no difference between a mujtahid and whoever follows a mujtahid (muttabīʿ al-mujtahid).” Both of them, he explained, “avoid whims, since following whims is disobedience (maʿṣiya) and sin (fīsq), since if a person deviates

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723 Albānī, Ṣaḥīḥ Mawārid al-zamʿān, 1:53-54.
724 Ibid.
725 Jīlānī, al-Durar, 204.
but intends to follow the guidance, as we have said previously, he is rewarded.” He then explained:

We do not require that every individual Muslim be a mujtahid or that he be a muttabi’. Rather, at the very least, “Ask those who possess the message if you do not know” (Q. 21:7). Whether you call such a person a muqallid or a mujtahid, these are matters of semantics (umūr iṣṭilāḥīyya). What we wish to emphasize is that when we Salafis say the muttabi’ is one who is dedicated to knowing the proof-text and following insight…[we mean that] whoever asks a scholar, that scholar can either err as a mujtahid or [as one who] follows whims. If it is the former, then there is no problem with such a muttabi’ [who follows him]. But if it is the latter, then God should help him and whoever gives him a legal opinion…

This exclusive claim to authenticity through his vision for ijtihād, as well as the ability of others to attain it by adopting his methodology, had a new resonance among Albānī’s followers. With his prolific publications applying this manhaj – intended as much to provide the service of presenting the sunna in its unadulterated form as it was to establish his own scholarly capital – Albānī was able to carve out a unique place for himself not only as an authority in this discipline but also as a venerated popular leader.

The latter point was certainly not lost on those whom this threatened – those who defended the continuity of the religion’s traditional institutions. In his multi-volume critique of Albānī’s Taqrīb, Maḥmūd Mamdūḥ wrote that he aimed in part to shed light on “a group that sanctifies people or goes to extremes in this and sides with a person, as if to raise him to a level of infallibility.” Likewise, Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A‘ẓāmī not only criticized Albānī for his “confusion concerning Bukhārī and Muslim and others,” but also noted that “there are some who claim that God Almighty chose him in this age to bring additional transmissions of ḥadīth reports…and that by doing so he has achieved that which no other verifiers before or after [him] have.” He furthermore dismissed the

726 Ibid.
727 Mamdūḥ, al-Ta‘rīf, 1: ii.
publication of the *Taqrīb* series by Albānī and al-Maktab al-Islāmī as nothing more than a ploy to bring them fame.\(^{729}\) Abū Ghudda mentioned how Albānī’s students distributed a number of his writings – in particular installments of his *Taqrīb* and writings that vilified Abū Ghudda as an enemy of the Salafī creed – to scholars in Saudi Arabia as well as students at “institutes and universities” across the country.\(^{730}\)

Whether actual or perceived, this kind of influence among the youth suggested that the refutations of Albānī that multiplied in this period were aimed not only at challenging his evaluations of ḥadīth reports but also, seeing the kind of potential for social and political unrest they could present, at discrediting the new order that Albānī tried to introduce. Būṭī made the strongest case against him in this regard, and wrote a number of refutations of Albānī that stood out from those of other critics in that they were also attacks on the movement he represented through his call for a manhaj. He wrote that “one’s access to the [ḥadīth compendia] does not make one a mujtahid.”\(^{731}\) While Būṭī admitted that following the sound ḥadīth is preferable, he cautioned that “this has conditions which must be known and observed, since not every ḥadīth report that a researcher notices that goes against the *ijtiḥād* of his *imām* means that the truth lies with whatever that researcher understands.”\(^{732}\)

\(^{729}\) Ibid., 40.
\(^{730}\) Abū Ghudda, *Kashf al-abāṭīl*, 13, 19, 39-44. These were Albānī’s new introduction to his *Tahāwiyya*, his edition of Mundhirī’s *Mukhtasar Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* in which Albānī wrote that the message that Jesus brought down was the “same as our Islamic law…and not the Gospels or Ḥanafī jurisprudence or the like,” and his *Ḥijāb al-mar’ā al-Muslima* as well as the pamphlet of ‘Abd al-Razzāq Ḥamza (d. 1972) *al-Muqābalat bayn al-hudā wa-l-dalāl* in which he criticized Abū Ghudda and Kawthārī for their adherence to the Ḥanafī *madhhab*. Abū Ghudda mentioned that students published this work in bulk and distributed it “as gifts.”
\(^{732}\) Ibid., 119.
In warning against Albānī’s destructive message, Būṭī dismissed any claim to his group’s identity or method and, likewise, sought to reassert the importance of the madhhab. He compared “everyone gathered in the desert of non-madhhabism” to the scenarios of engineers ignoring the principles of their discipline and patients refusing to follow the guidance of doctors, all of which, in Būṭī’s words, would lead to “destructive chaos for edifices, land and offspring.”\textsuperscript{733} Citing the jurisprudential manuals of the madhhabs, Būṭī explained that “we have today a complete jurisprudence that applies to all of people’s affairs” and that “the only method known to Muslims is that of the principles of jurisprudence (uṣūl al-fiqh)…”\textsuperscript{734}

Moreover, he argued that the term “Salafism” refers only to a period in history and not to any kind of movement.\textsuperscript{735} He thus criticized those who gave “a new technical meaning…foreign to the history of Islamic law and Islamic thought” to the word “Salafism,” whose method he dismissed as nothing more than a haphazard “collection of ijtihād efforts and views.”\textsuperscript{736} While he admitted that the early Muslims do represent a “golden age,” Būṭī rejected any association of an independent legal or intellectual tradition with the salaf, writing:

As is known to all scholars and researchers, this method was never any kind of constitution or specific guidance to any group of Muslims, to ‘Salafis’ or to others. It is furthermore known that half of the Salafi age had passed [i.e. during the time of the Companions and Successors] without this method having any kind of common terminology or [unique] compilation or agreement upon it.\textsuperscript{737}

Although, as Pierret notes, when Albānī left Syria in 1980 it was in the context of harsh government pressure on Islamic groups in general rather than an “an anti-

\textsuperscript{733} Ibid., 121-123.
\textsuperscript{734} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{735} This was the objective of his work al-Salafiyya. See Būṭī, al-Salafiyya, 12.
\textsuperscript{736} Ibid., 13, 256.
\textsuperscript{737} Ibid., 19.
Salafi policy,” it is clear that Albānī’s message – while explicitly confined to the sphere of religious instruction – was, at least in the imaginations of local governments and the scholars they patronized, not entirely divorced from the kinds of social and political implications they most feared.738 By calling for a new methodology to interpret the divine will and claiming to present the “pure” sunna through it, Albānī decisively distanced himself from the mainstream institutions of religious guidance and, at the same time, sealed his own position as a leader of a transregional movement. As we will see in the next chapter, Albānī’s methodology differed in its political message from the efforts of other Islamists by calling for a change in religious rather than political framework – a campaign that seemed moderate to the secular governments while threatening the ambitions of his Islamist counterparts. With the increasing prominence, and sometimes violence, of groups claiming to act on behalf of Islam from 1979 onwards, and his own difficult personal conditions in Syria, the challenge during the last two decades of Albānī’s life as he set up his first stable base of operations in Amman was to remain unwavering in his commitment to a Salafī “method” while being careful about how and where he applied it – a balancing act that we will explore next.

738 Pierret, Religion and State, 107.


“It is incumbent upon Muslims – the rulers and the ruled, the preachers and those preached to – to believe with us that there is no other way to realize the security and justice we call to or to established God’s rule on earth except by calling to the sunna and following it, and educating Muslims according to it. Not according to earthly and man-made positive laws, personal views, or the methods of political parties. All of this leads to the further division of the community and its distance from the desired aim…I thank God for allowing me to call to the sunna for about sixty years through writing, editing, teaching, and reviving much of what had been destroyed of it through negligence and ignorance. Indeed, the reality of the Islamic world, through its blessed scholarly revival, attests to this. I hope that [this revival] may be joined with the correct Salafi Islamic education drawn from the [work] of the virtuous scholars who have invited others to this blessed call.” – Albānī, Amman, 1993.739

When Albānī left Syria for Jordan – a hijra, as he called it – he described his departure in 1980 as follows:

God Almighty in His wisdom gives everything a reason, and every matter a finite period, and the fate of everything is good. Among these is that I migrated along with my family from Damascus to Amman at the beginning of Ramadan in 1400H [1980], and I set out to build a home for myself there, where I might seek shelter so long as I live. God eased this for me with his blessings after much toil and sickness afflicted me due to the effort I exerted in setting a foundation and building [my home], and I still suffer from it.740

The toil that Albānī experienced while building his physical home on Shahrazād street in Ḥayy al-Ḥamalān, southeast of Amman, might well have also applied to his life’s trajectory since his father threw him out of the house in his youth. After an unsuccessful bid to move to Saudi Arabia and facing increasing pressure on Islamic groups by the Ba‘thist government in Syria, he finally succeeded in building both a home and a base for implementing his vision in Amman. Indeed, while pockets of Salafism had existed in Jordan since the 1950’s,

739 Albānī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Adab al-mufrad, 1: 9-10.
740 Shaybānī, Ḥayāt al-Albānī, 76.
Quintan Wicktorowicz notes that Albānī’s definitive arrival in 1981 “precipitated an explosion of Salafi activism” in the country.741

Although Albānī eventually found peace in Jordan, where he spent the last twenty years of his life, the road there was far from well-paved. It was not long after his initial arrival from Damascus in 1980, and after only three sessions of his class on Nawawī’s *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn*, that the Jordanian secret police raided his home in search of audio cassettes they suspected of being sources of radicalization.742 Thus, after less than a year in Jordan he returned to Damascus on the night of 20 August 1981, “under very distressful circumstances, and I implored God Almighty to turn the evil decree and enemy plotting away from me.”743

After two nights in Damascus, God answered his prayers and Albānī arrived at his next destination, Beirut, which at the time was in the midst of its civil war. Arriving “with fear of danger,” he stayed for some time with Shāwīsh. Aside from the war, it was a doubly tumultuous period, with the passing of his brother, Muḥammad Nājī Abū Aḥmad, “the best of my brothers, and the most devoted among them to me, and the most fervent among them in heeding my call.”744 With conditions deteriorating in Lebanon (and himself almost caught in the crossfire when his car was shelled several years earlier in January 1979),745 Albānī resettled for the fourth time in a year to Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, to stay with a student there.746

742 Hādī, *Ḥayāt al-ʾallāma al-Albānī*, 41.
Meanwhile, Ibn Bāz and Albānī’s students intervened on his behalf with King Hussein of Jordan (d. 1999) to grant Albānī asylum there. Muḥammad Shaqra (b. 1934) proved a key player in this regard, with his longtime residence in Jordan and his personal connections to the royal family as their advisor on religious affairs. It would be the first of many times that Shaqra came to Albānī’s aid, which included hosting Albānī in his home and defending him in the context of the latter’s infamous “Palestinian fatwā” for which he received widespread hostility. King Hussein finally agreed, and Albānī was readmitted in 1981.

While a number of these difficult experiences, such as his near-death experience in Beirut, were circumstantial, others – particularly the government pressures he faced to leave Jordan and Syria – were clearly targeted attacks on him. These were just as much reactions by these governments to a new political climate in the Middle East as they were to Albānī’s as-yet undefined position within it. Islamism began to overshadow nationalism as the region’s new political discourse. Although, as we saw in previous chapters, Arab governments had for decades been progressively clamping down on Islamist groups, around the time of Albānī’s departure from Syria a series of events took place in various countries, which were the work of distinct groups claiming to act in the name of the religion. In February 1979, the Iranian Revolution brought Ayatollah

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749 “Tarjamat al-shaykh Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Shaqra bi-qalam waladihi al-shaykh ‘Āṣim,” [www.said.net](http://www.said.net/Doat/ehsan/89.htm) Accessed 20 January 2015. Albānī’s position on this issue was that Muslims residing in Israel who find that they cannot perform their religious observances there must perform *hijra* to another country where they can, just as the Prophet performed *hijra* from Mecca when he was similarly oppressed and outnumbered. For a translation and discussion of the *fatwā* see Alan Verskin, *Oppressed in the Land? Fatwās on Muslims Living under Non-Muslim Rule from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2013), pp. 151-152.
Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989) to power. It was followed several months later by Juhaymān al-‘Utaybī’s (d. 1979) violent takeover of the Great Mosque in Mecca in November and, in 1981, the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat by a member of the group al-Jihād. Further east, the Afghan “jihād,” which began in 1979, saw successive waves of Islamic activists returning to their home countries fresh from the front lines in the fight against the atheist Soviet power, and invigorated with new ideas about the duty of jihād and the establishment of an Islamic society.

These events, all taking place in rapid succession, created a new sense of unease for Arab governments. Besides the sense of uncertainty that haunted its counterparts in the region, the Jordanian monarchy had its own internal security concerns, having just emerged from a tumultuous period of fighting between the PLO and the Jordanian authorities in the late 1960’s and 1970’s. These experiences, which resulted in the infamous civil war from 1970-1971 and subsequent ouster of the PLO – a period known as “Black September” – informed what Wiktorowicz describes as the “survival imperative” of the Jordanian monarchy’s approach to domestic politics. Beyond its borders, Jordan stood on equally tenuous ground as a new regional power emerged in its neighborhood: the Islamic Republic of Iran. Uncertain of the implications of this development, the Jordanian government decided to move closer to Iraq and aided a number of its initiatives, including providing support for and training Islamist fighters seeking to overthrow the Asad regime between 1979 and 1982 – a policy that King

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750 For details on these events, see Philip Robins, *A History of Jordan* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 124-130.

Hussein publically lamented in 1985. Given Albānī’s stature, and potential for inspiring Islamic activism, the Jordanian government was likely on high alert for any kind of domestic unrest when he arrived in 1980.

Although Albānī was neither directly associated with such Islamic movements nor as yet involved in the Palestinian issue, he nonetheless remained an unknown entity as far as the political implications of his religious teachings were concerned. The takeover of the Great Mosque in Mecca in particular brought scrutiny of Albānī’s teachings since it was orchestrated by an offshoot of al-Jamā’a al-Salafiyya al-Muḥtasiba, a Medina-based group committed to adherence to sound ḥadīth reports. Not only were such connections difficult to avoid, but Albānī’s teachings and influence gained further reach with their distribution through a new medium—cassette tapes. In light of Khomeini’s recent success with the same technology, it is possible that Albānī’s audio-recorded series, Silsilat al-hudā wa-l-nūr (The Series of Guidance and Light), was a subject of interest for the Jordanian authorities when they raided his home. Indeed, when he arrived in Jordan, Albānī was far from anonymous. Wiktorowicz, for example, describes how his first lecture in the country—an unannounced speech on a rooftop that attracted close to

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752 Robins, *A History of Jordan*, 152. Robins mentions that “a major sign of the precipitate decline in relations between Jordan and Syria was the killing of a leading Syrian Islamist in Amman in summer 1980, and the mutual mobilization on their common border later that year.”

753 For Albānī’s connections to this group see Hegghammer and Lacroix, “Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia.” Surprisingly, although ‘Utaybī never mentioned Albānī by name (he did mention Shinqīṭī, for example), his ḥadīth-oriented rhetoric was remarkably similar to Albānī’s. See, for example, ‘Utaybī’s discussion of the method of prophecy (minhāj al-nubūwwa) and the “science of the technical terminology of ḥadīth” in *Rasā’il Juhaymān al-‘Utaybī, qāʾid al-muqtahimīn lī-l-Masjid al-Harām bi-Makka* (wathāʾiq lam tunshar ba’īd), ed. Riḍāt Sayyid Aḥmad (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1988), 66, 122. For Albānī’s condemnations of Juhaymān’s group see his, *Silsilat al-ahādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa*, 4:43; 5: 278, where he categorized Juhaymān’s group alongside the Aḥmādīs as Messianists (al-muddaʾīn lī-l-mahdawiyya) and faulted the former not only for “spilling a great deal of Muslim blood,” but also for rejecting the sound ḥadīth reports affirming the arrival of the Mahdī at the end of days.
600 people who crowded neighboring streets – prompted the government to forbid Albānī to give public addresses.\textsuperscript{754}

Albānī had hitherto avoided direct involvement in political matters, but this changed when he arrived in Jordan. While his scholarly efforts, aimed at purging Islamic thought and practice of adherence to the madhhab and to weak ḥadīth reports, were intended to apply to all aspects of a Muslim’s life, two new factors that coincided with his move to Jordan pushed him to comment more explicitly on social and political developments. The first was his reputation, which acquired both unprecedented fame and hostility, the latter from governments and the scholars they patronized. The second was the rising tendency of Islamic activism in the Middle East – particularly the new violent off-shoot of Salafi-Jihādism that grew out of the Afghanistan experience, a number of whose leaders established a hub in the Jordanian city of Zarqa not far from where Albānī lived. Both of these developments led Albānī to refine his conception of a Salafi manhaj. As we will see, after his move to Jordan he expanded the application of his manhaj beyond a methodology in ḥadīth science – an affiliation he previously needed to claim his scholarly credentials – into a general orientation for his followers to engage with all matters of life, including social and political events – a framework they needed to sustain their safety and credibility, especially in Jordan. Particularly effective in this task was the new slogan he adopted for his mission, “purification and education” (al-tasfiya wa-l-tarbiya), which he explained as follows:

By ‘purification’ I mean cleansing Islam from everything insidious and dirty, and the path towards this is purifying the sunna of anything forged or weak that has entered it, and then explaining the Qur’ān in the light of this sound sunna and how the pious predecessors followed it with their ideas and understandings. The only way to achieve this latter part is to study ḥadīth science, [and] the criticisms of the

\textsuperscript{754} Wiktorowicz, “The Salafi Movement in Jordan,” 222; idem, The Management of Islamic Activism, 121.
transmitters. I do not mean by this that we must simply stop at the explanations of the pious predecessors, but rather to demand [the adherence to] their method in our explanations, and in unifying [our] direction and prohibiting divisions… The purification that I seek extends to Islamic studies and Islamic thoughts. We must distance ourselves from anything that goes against the sound method. Likewise, Islamic thoughts must be purified of any insidious filth that has infiltrated the ideas of contemporary Muslims by way of western studies, particularly philosophy and education and the arts…

As for ‘education’ I mean the education of the [younger] generation according to the sound Islamic creed derived from the Qur’ān and the sunna. I specifically want to mention the education of children to perform prayers…without [only] lecturing [to them] at length about the benefits of prayer as some do. It is also necessary to mention the material benefits [of education]…here we should not forget to teach Islamic law. What I envision is that the education of this subject should be founded upon complete submission to the rule of God and trust in His wisdom.

Although he first coined the phrase “purification and education” when visiting Amman in the 1970’s, Albānī saw it as representative of his work in Jordan, calling the two words (“purification” and “education”) “the two pillars of Salafism in Jordan.” Moreover, far from a call to a-politicism as some have suggested, this slogan served as a directive to his followers on how to engage with political developments. Indeed, as we will see in a number of his writings from this period, Albānī used this slogan as a kind of all-purpose alternative to the visions offered by both the Islamist parties and Salafi-Jihādīs. Ironically, this slogan calling for a reassessment of the foundations of the faith –

757 This challenges the current scholarship on Albānī and his followers, which tends to dismiss them as an apolitical cohort that prefers the exclusive pursuit of scholarship and teaching. Joas Wagemakers, for example, equates “quietist” with “apolitical” and elsewhere defines it as follows: “Quietists focus on the propagation of their message (da’wa) through lessons, sermons and other missionary activities and stay away from politics and violence, which they leave to the ruler.” See Joas Wagemakers, “A Terrorist Organization that Never Was: The Jordanian ‘Bay’at al-Imam’ Group,” Middle East Journal, Vol. 68, No. 1, Winter 2014, 59-75, at: 64; idem, A Quietist Jihadi, 9. Quintan Wiktorowicz has popularized the term “purist,” which he borrows from the International Crisis Group. He explains the term in the context to the present group of Salafis as follows: “they emphasize a focus on nonviolent methods of propagation, purification and education. They view politics as a diversion that encourages deviancy.” See Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” at: 208. The term is vague, insofar as it does not say anything about this group’s unique approach, and is not entirely accurate, as this chapter will show, since I argue that these groups do engage with political issues, albeit they do not overtly acknowledge that these issues are political. For a reconsideration of the “quietist” label in the context of Albānī and his followers, see Olidort, “The Politics of ‘Quietist’ Salafism.”
a natural extension of his controversial scholarly ideas as they had evolved until that point – appeared as a kind of voice of moderation within the political realm as it coincidentally fit with the aim of local governments in how they approached the challenges of these new Islamic activists. After a brief overview of Albānī’s new stature within the Salafī leadership and his reputation in Jordan, this chapter will then explore how Albānī entered the major political debates, particularly with Islamists and Jihādīs, as well as how his critiques of them and of developments in the region helped shape his vision of Salafism and its “method.”

The “Ḥadīth Scholar of the Age” and His Devotees in Jordan

By the time of his arrival in Jordan, Albānī had gained a reputation not only for his erudition in ḥadīth but also for his defense of the Salafī creed, which he worked so hard to cultivate. Not only did the Salafī-Wahhābī establishment now recognize him for his efforts in these areas, but even Islamists – whom he continued to attack for their political activism – expressed reverence for his scholarship. One example of the latter was Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, who praised Albānī in his Ḩaqaqīyat al-dāʾiyya, particularly for the latter’s separation of the “sound” and “weak” reports in Albānī’s edition of Suyūṭī’s al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ, as “a service to the Book and to students of ḥadīth,” and his Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-daʿīfa as an “indispensable” reference for his readers. 758 Of course, Albānī’s life-long champion Ibn Bāz too celebrated his knowledge of ḥadīth with comments such as “I do not know anyone under the dome of stars more knowledgeable in ḥadīth in this

age than Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī.”

When Albānī and Ibn Bāz coincidentally both died in 1999, their adepts enshrined them as the leading lights of Salafism.

Muḥammad b. Ṣāliḥ al-ʻUthaymīn (d. 2001), who only met Albānī on a few occasions, described him as “very dedicated to following the sunna and fighting innovation, whether in creed or actions,” and called him “the ḥadīth scholar of the age” (muḥaddith al-ʻaṣr).

Several months before Albānī’s death, Saudi Arabia formally restored his reputation in January 1999 by awarding him the King Faysal Prize for Islamic Studies for his “service to the Prophetic hadith” – long-awaited recognition after his abrupt departure from the country decades earlier.

This international stature, particularly the strong links to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states that it helped cement, proved fruitful when Albānī moved to Jordan. By that time, he had broken relations with Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh and the latter’s al-Maktab al-Islāmī over ownership rights, and began publishing his new works with the Amman-based al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, operated by Ṣuhrī Niẓām Sakkijhā (d. 2009). Albānī also republished his earlier writings with the Saudi Arabia-based Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif and his ḥadīth compendia under the auspices of Gulf ministries of education, particularly in Kuwait.

Wiktorowicz notes that Albānī received an astonishing $50,000 to $60,000

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759 See ‘Alī, Muhammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, 33. For a list of some of these statements about Albānī by twenty-three leading Salafi and Islamist scholars, see ibid., 32-39.

760 For a discussion likening Albānī to Ibn Bāz see, for example, Sadḥān, al-Imām al-Albānī, 255-265.

761 Ibid., 32-33.


763 A good number of the installments of Albānī’s Taqrīb series were commissioned by various Gulf organizations, particularly the Ministry of Education and Islamic Affairs in Kuwait, whom Albānī thanks in the introduction to his Mukhtasar Šahīḥ Muslim, and the Office of Arabic Education for the Gulf States, which, according to one account, not only oversaw the publication of Albānī’s Šahīḥ/Ḍa‘if Ibn Māja but was even responsible for omitting the isnāds in that work. Indeed, during this period he spends an increasing amount of time in Gulf countries, as evidenced by his Kuwaiti and Emirati fatwā series and his 1972 lecture in Doha titled “Manzilat al-sunna fī al-Islam,” and it is thanks to Kuwaiti publishing houses
for these books – serving not only as a substantial source of personal revenue for Albānī but also, according to Wiktorowicz, as mechanisms for him and his supporters in Jordan and the Gulf to promote their credibility in the face of violent groups.\footnote{For a list of 48 of Albānī’s most famous students around the world, see ‘Awda, Qaṭf al-thimār, 51-62. It is perhaps noteworthy that for all his criticism of university degrees and education that we saw in the previous chapter, Albānī nonetheless mentored university theses as well.}

Although by this time Albānī had mentored numerous students – particularly many who would become leading Salafī scholars in the twenty-first century\footnote{This, for example, was the case with Albānī’s al-Tahdīr min fitnat al-ghulūw fi al-takfir, ed. `Alī al-Ḥalabī (Cairo: Dar al-Minhāj, 2005). Besides his students, Albānī’s daughter, Anīsa, took after her father and completed a number of his ḥadīth ‘traces’ in his ḥadīth writings. See, for example, Albānī, Silsilat al-ḥadīth al-sahīḥa, 6:8. It is noteworthy that Albānī seemed to have encouraged his daughters to become scholars of Islamic disciplines as well. Anīsa’s sister, Ḥassāna, for example, authored the following work on Qur’ānic recitation: Ḥassāna al-Albānī, al-Dalīl ilā ta’līm Kitāb Allāh al-Jalīl (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2004).} – his adherents in Jordan were unique in a number of respects. Dubbed “Albānī-ists” (albāniyyūn),\footnote{The prevalence of this practice, and the disturbance it caused among other Muslims, is evident in Abū Ghudda’s rebuttal against Albānī in which he explained that the Sermon of Necessity is only required for the opening of the Friday prayers. See ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, Khuṭbat al-ḥāja laysat sunna fī mustahall al-kutub wa-l-mu’allafāt (Beirut: Maktab al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Islāmiyya, 1999).} these students regard Albānī as their primary teacher – an association unknown to traditional Islamic scholarship, where students typically have teachers in different disciplines. As further gestures of adherence to him, they often use the cognomen “al-Atharī” (“scripturalist”) and open their lectures and writings with the Sermon of Necessity.\footnote{See Wiktorowicz, “The Salafi Movement in Jordan,” 222.}

When writing became increasingly difficult towards the end of Albānī’s life, his students helped him edit and publish his later treatises.\footnote{Another important aspect of this group is its demographic composition. The individuals in this circle, considered the “second wave” of the Salafī movement in Jordan, all hail from Transjordan. Moreover, a number of these individuals had}
previously been associated with Islamist and militant groups. Given the backgrounds of these students, and the rise in prominence of Jihādism in Jordan – particularly the emergence and activities of the group “Bay’at al-Imām,” and the growing influence of its leader Abū Muḥammad al-Maqrīzī (b. 1959) in Zarqa in the early 1990’s – it is the contexts of Jihādism and regional political issues that become central to Albānī’s teachings during these final years of his life. Faced with these issues, Albānī took a position of caution and moderation, a view that his followers inherited after his death.

The following discussions will shed light on how Albānī established this legacy by invoking his scholarly emphasis on method within the political realm.

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770 Bāsim al-Jawābra, a professor of Islamic creed at the University of Jordan, explained that he used to belong to a takfīrī group in Jordan in his youth until Albānī persuaded him to join his ranks. Sadhān, al-Imām al-Albānī, 157-158. In an interview with the author, Jawābra confided that he had previously belonged to the Fedayeen. Interview with Bāsim al-Jawābra, May 2012. Mashhūr b. Ḥasan Āl Salmān, who, along with ‘Ālī al-Halabī, would become regarded as the leaders of the group after Albānī’s death, previously left the Muslim Brotherhood to join Albānī’s circle. See Wiktorowicz, “The Salafi Movement in Jordan,” 230.

771 In 1996 members of this group were arrested for alleged conspiracies against the Jordanian monarchy. See ibid., 223.

772 On this group, and on Abū Muḥammad al-Maqrīzī, see the work of Joas Wagemakers, especially, A Quietist Jihādi; idem, “A Terrorist Organization that Never Was.” Notwithstanding these central concerns, Albānī did continue to attract refutations of his scholarly work, and acquired new opponents during this period as well, particularly as he republished his pamphlets on religious observances. The most prominent of his scholarly critics in Jordan during this period and after Albānī’s death is Ḥasan al-Saqqaṭ (b. ca. 1960), who claims the status of a sayyīd and is a disciple of the Ghumārī brothers and Kawthārī, both of whom Albānī attacked in his earlier years. Although Saqqāf published a number of works refuting Albānī’s scholarly views and decrying his influence on Salafism, Albānī barely acknowledged the former, referring to him as al-talīmī (the student), and did not seem to bother addressing his criticisms, only dismissing his scholarly credentials in passing in the introductions to the new editions of his works. An audio recording that has circulated on YouTube features Saqqāf calling Albānī on the telephone and when Albānī picks up and recognizes Saqqāf, he tells him that his time is sensitive and hangs up. For Saqqāf’s writings, see his al-Salafiyya al-Wahhabiyya: afkāruhā al-asāsiyya wa-judhārushā al-tārikhiyya, third edition (Beirut: Dār al-Mīzān, 2009); idem, Shaḥīṣ šīfāt šallāt al-nabī, second edition (Amman: Dār al-Imām al-Nawawī, 2000); idem, Tanāqūdāt al-Albānī al-wāḍīhiyy fī-mā waqa’a a la-hu fi tašbih al-aḥādīth wa-ta’ād ‘iḥāb min akhṭā’ wa-ghalaqāt (Amman: Dār al-Imām al-Nawawī, 1991). For more on Saqqāf, see his website, “al-Munazzihūn min ahl al-ḥaḏith,” http://www.monazh.com/portal/showthread.php?t=54 Accessed 2 February 2015. For an example of how Saqqāf uses his lineage and claim to sayyid status as a marker of his credentials, see the opening section of his Shaḥīṣ šīfāt šallāt al-nabī on his nasab (genealogy). For examples of Albānī’s refutations of him (including the aforementioned audio recording) see “Mukālīma nādira bayn al-imām al-Albānī wa-l-Saqqaṭ,” Youtube. posted by “alaykum bi-sunnatī,” 19 April 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1OiKiQISek Accessed 2 February 2015; Albānī, Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa, 7: 20, 56, 479.
Creed Revisited: Albānī and Salafī-Jihādism

The relationship between actions and belief (īmān) lies at the heart of the Jihādī worldview, and is the principle fault line between Jihādīs and other Salafī groups today. The idea that actions and speech are expressions of one’s belief is based on the positions of Ibn Ḥanbal and his followers, who held that belief is affirmed “in the heart, on the tongue and in actions” – one’s actions, in other words, are expressions of one’s intentions and beliefs. It was Ibn Ḥanbal’s views that Ibn Taymiyya and, later, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb revived in claiming that one’s belief could be nullified by one’s actions. The concept of takfīr reasserted itself into the political discourse of the twentieth century through the writings of the radical Egyptian ideologue Sayyid Quṭb, who described his Egyptian society as being in a state of pre-Islamic ignorance (jāhiliyya) on the basis of its permissiveness with respect to Western customs, thus making those who live there unbelievers. His followers, known to detractors as Quṭbists, as well as Jihādīs, in turn, borrowed this formulation of takfīr in questioning the status of other Muslims on the basis of whether they enforce Islamic laws.

Albānī’s views on the subject were, as Wagemakers aptly describes them, “un-Salafī” since he “assigned a less important role in faith to acts than to belief in the heart and speech.” It was not only because his views on the question of takfīr departed from

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774 This section until the end of the chapter is reproduced verbatim from Olidort, “The Politics of ‘Quietist’ Salafism,” 15-21, with additions and edits.
776 For the Ḥanbālī view, as well as variations on this expression and comparison with the views of other early Islamic groups on the question of belief, see L. Gardet, “Īmān,” EF; See also Toshihiko Isutzu, The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology: A Semantic Analysis of Īmān and Islām (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2006).
its traditional articulation by earlier Salafī scholars – thereby putting in question his own Salafī status – but also because of the ways in which Jihādīs used it to justify their violent actions, that *takfīr* occupied much of Albānī’s later teachings. In fact, it was the subject of his last extant piece of writing – a forward to a student’s book on the subject, which Albānī was not able to finish due to his urgent hospitalization prior to his death. There, he wrote that “the unbelief for which one is removed from the community is the unbelief of the heart, which sometimes appears in speech…and occasionally through actions, such as the haughtiness of not submitting to the divine law.”

He then attacked “extremists” for excommunicating governments simply on the basis of their not implementing the divine law, without first investigating “whether or not that action reflects what is in their hearts.” In other words, rather than deem actions expressions of one’s faith in all cases as his Jihādī counterparts did, Albānī instead held that actions do not always correspond to a person’s intentions and beliefs. A person could, for example, commit sins on the basis of negligence or even laziness.

Albānī’s position on the subject first appeared in a pamphlet *Hukm tārik al-ṣalāt* (The Ruling Concerning One Who Neglects Prayer) in which he argued that one who does not pray, whether deliberately or accidentally, has “committed an act of unbelief” but is not considered an unbeliever. In other words, while there is no question that the person has transgressed, he remains a believer by virtue of his having pronounced the Islamic attestation of faith. This pamphlet, and Albānī’s views concerning belief, came to light in an Umm al-Qura University dissertation, *Ẓāhirat al-Irjā’ fi al-fikr al-Islāmī* (The

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778 Hādī, *Muḥaddith al-‘aṣr*, 75-77.
779 Ibid.
Manifestation of Murji’ism in Islamic Thought).⁷⁸¹ Although its author, Safar al-Ḥāwālī (b. 1950), was not himself a Jihādī, as a leader of the Saudi Ṣaḥwa (Awakening) Movement in 1991 during the First Gulf War, he and his works, and this one in particular, became influential in Jihādī circles.⁷⁸² The last section of Ḥāwālī’s dissertation singles out Albānī and his treatise, and identifies him as a modern-day adherent of Murji’ism because of his dissociation of acts from belief.⁷⁸³ Beyond Jihādī groups, Albānī’s position on belief was so unexpected that it even caused rifts among his followers after his death, leading some to also describe him as a Murji’ī.⁷⁸⁴

Albānī’s views on takfīr, in which he departed from both the traditional Salafi view of the concept as well as his own uncompromising position on the connection between creed and sound ḥadīth reports, seemed to have been principally driven by the new realities created by Jihādī groups, as well as his sense of responsibility in responding to them. In his criticisms of Jihādīs, Albānī pointed to their “excessiveness in excommunication,” which he attributed to a lack of a correct method. His 1996 treatise on the subject, al-Taḥdhīr min fitnat al-ghulūw fī al-takfīr (A Warning Against the Discord of Excessiveness in Excommunication), addressed the issue of excommunicating Muslim rulers who do not rule on the basis of what God has revealed. In Jihādī parlance, this constitutes a violation of God’s rulership (ḥākimiyya), in which the only acceptable source of legislation is God’s rule. Just as with his pamphlet on neglecting prayer, Albānī

⁷⁸¹ Safar al-Ḥāwālī, Zāhirat al-irqāʾ fī al-fikr al-Islāmī (Cairo: Dār al-Kalima, 1999). For a discussion of Ḥāwālī’s attack on Albānī in the context of takfīr, see Lav, Radical Islam, pp.107-19; Joas Wagemakers, “‘Seceders’ and ‘Postponers’?”
⁷⁸² For more on this movement, see Lacroix, Awakening Islam.
⁷⁸³ Ḥāwālī, Zāhirat al-irqāʾ, 361,450ff. For an overview of the concept of irjā’, see G. Newby “Deferral,” Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān; for an examination of the Jihādī usages of the label of irjā’, see Wagemakers “‘Seceders’ and ‘Postponers’?”
⁷⁸⁴ See Wagemakers, “Contesting Religious Authority,” 114.
explained that even though governments may commit “actions of unbelief” by applying man-made laws rather than divine ones, this should not be taken as a genuine reflection of their “belief in the heart” – the sole arbiter of one’s status as a believer. Following from his separation of actions from beliefs, he based this argument on the proposition that acts of unbelief can exist independently of what he called a “total unbelief,” the latter being a factor that would remove a Muslim from the community.  

According to this rationale, he attacked Jihādīs for their criticisms of secular governments for ruling on the basis of non-Islamic laws, arguing that the Jihādīs’ excommunication of these governments must be based on an explicit admission by those wielding political power that they forbid practicing Islamic law. Albānī explains, these rulers justify their actions by explicitly rejecting the legitimacy of divine laws, they should indeed be considered unbelievers. However, absent this condition – the sole criterion that would corroborate the assumption that their actions reflect their intentions with respect to belief – no determination can be made about their non-Muslim status. Albānī then concluded by highlighting a contradiction in the Jihādīs’ worldview, challenging them for “judg[ing][rulers] to be unbelievers on the basis of their living under the exact same system under which you live! And yet you call them apostates.”

Distinguishing these Jihādī groups from Salafis, Albānī refused to call them “Salafī-Jihādīs,” and, instead, preferred the label “Takfīrīs,” which pointed to their modus operandi of rushing to excommunicate others. Returning to his emphasis on adhering to the method of the salaf, he highlighted the fact that simply calling to the Qur’ān and

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785 Albānī, Fitnat al-takfīr, 61-62.
786 Ibid., 64-65.
787 Ibid., 64-65.
sunna is not enough for one to be a Salafī; rather, one must be of “sound, complete and upright method.” As further evidence of how the approach of Jihādīs differed from that of the salaf, and mimicking his strategy of marginalizing Kawtharī and those holding deviant theological beliefs, Albānī linked Jihādīs with “Khārijīs,” a reference to the early Islamic sect that, due to its excesses in excommunication and violent ways, broke with the mainstay of the early Islamic community by assassinating one of its leaders, the caliph ’Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 661). In the context of his disputes with Jihādīs, as with other Islamist groups, Albānī’s conception of a Salafī method thus became a tool for isolating errant Islamic practice and providing definition and structure to his own group. “Muslims may not stop at simply understanding the Qur’ān and sunna through tools of understanding, such as language,” Albani wrote, “but they must refer to what the Prophet [Muhammad’s] Companions did.”

Albānī also invoked his slogan of “purification and education” in his attacks on Islamists and Jihādīs, writing in the same pamphlet that,

It is incumbent upon all Muslims, especially those who are interested in establishing Islamic rule, to begin where the Prophet Muḥammad began, with two light words, ‘purification and education’…[we say this] because we know the established principles that these extremists who have nothing but the excommunication of rulers fail to follow….The truth is that in recent years, these [Takfīrīs] have committed great discord in the Great Mosque of Mecca, then in Egypt, killing Sadat, and recently in Syria, and now in Egypt and Algeria…What everyone sees is the shedding of the blood of many innocent Muslims because of this discord, and the onset of many tribulations.”

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788 Ibid., 64.
789 Ibid., 55.
790 Ibid., 72.
A “Purified” Political Order: Applying Manhaj to Regional Developments

Far from being limited to Jihādīs, “purification and education” and the insistence on correctly adhering to the Salafī method served as a framework within which Albānī articulated his many, and often seemingly contradictory, political positions. Why, for example, did he forbid Palestinians to engage in jihād against Israel but supported the principle (albeit with reservations about its implementation) in the context of Afghanistan? These ideas, coupled with his earlier condemnations of their lack of concern for creed, also became Albānī’s main argument against Islamist groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr, during his final years. He summarized his opposition to them with the pithy expression, “the ends do not justify the means.” Thus Albānī’s approach to political engagement was indeed unusual for being perhaps the only signal amid the noises of Islamic movements – all of which called for mobilizing to achieve political change – that counseled deferring concrete political objectives in favor of refining the channels through which that change was being sought. In fact, it was in his very emphasis on method, or means, rather than explicit political aims that Albānī succeeded in gracefully giving his scholarly methodology relevance beyond religious observances and scholarship while maintaining his conceptual consistency. After his death, as is evident in the recent developments of the Arab Spring, it is this emphasis on means rather than ends that serves his followers so well in helping them retain their constituencies, in contrast to Islamist parties and Jihādīs who often sacrificed traditional Islamic principles to expediently achieve their political ends.791

791 For an examination of this view, see Oliodort, “The Politics of ‘Quietist’ Salafism.” The one exception among these groups that continues to gain recruits is, of course, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). As I see it, one explanation of ISIS’s departure from this pattern can be explained by the fact that it is a kind of hybrid Islamist-Salafi- group: it not only seeks concrete political aims, but insists that what it strives to achieve is based on the methods and approaches of the Prophet and his followers, exemplified for
“Purification and education” called for “purifying the (Islamic) creed of whatever false and ruinous beliefs, corruptions, and forms of polytheism entered it, and purifying the *sunna* of everything than entered it that is foreign to it.” Likewise, the program aimed to “purify the law of the views and innovations that entered it and which contradict the sound texts.” Once these initial steps were achieved, the third phase consists of “educating oneself first, then those around him second, according to what has been established as correct from the Prophet Muhammad.”

Rather than a submissive call to political restraint, “purification and education” was in fact intended as the foundation for building an Islamic state and society. “When we examine the experiences of Islamic groups that have been around for about a century, and their ideas and practices, we find that many of them have neither benefitted nor given any benefit, despite their clamor and noise, in their aim of (establishing) an Islamic government,” Albānī wrote. In his treatise on the subject, Albānī offered “purification and education” as an alternative to the Islamist parties’ rush to form Islamic states. “When we call for establishing an Islamic state, this state must have a clear constitution with clear laws. Upon which legal school should such a constitution be founded? And according to which legal school should this legal constitution be explained?!” He instructed that “without these two introductory steps (of purification and education) it is impossible, in my opinion, to build a pillar of Islam or Islamic government or an Islamic

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Albānī summarized his program with the following motto: “Build an Islamic state in your hearts, and it shall be built for you on your land” – a phrase ironically attributed to the former Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, Ḥasan al-Hudaybī (d. 1973), but one that Albānī described as “a summary of all that I have said…and which in my opinion is like a divine inspiration.”

Critical of the Islamists for their lax approach to religious instruction, Albānī instead called upon religious scholars to institute this program. He wrote that, “It is incumbent upon the scholars to guide the education of the new Muslim youth in light of what has been established in the Qurʾān and the sunna, and it is not permissible to call people according to the teachings and errors they have inherited, some of them being decidedly false.”

Albānī’s program held political implications for the Palestinian question, and the jihād causes in Algeria and Afghanistan. When asked whether Palestinians in the West Bank should leave their land to escape repression, Albānī replied that “It is obligatory for them to leave a land in which they have no power to expel the unbeliever, for a land in which they are able to establish the Islamic observances.” In support of this position – which, he clarified, applied not only to Palestinians but to oppressed Muslims in all lands facing such conditions – he explained that “Mecca is greater than Palestine, yet nonetheless Muslims migrated from there and, moreover, at their helm was our Prophet Muḩammad and his Companions who migrated to Ethiopia, a land of unbelief, when they

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795 Ibid., 31; see also Sadhān, al-Imām al-Albānī, 249.
796 Albānī, al-Tasfiya wa-l-tarbiya, 33.
797 Ibid., 29-30.
798 See Verskin, Oppressed, pp. 151-152.
saw they could not practice their religion.” The underlying logic here seemed to be the prioritization of upholding Islamic observances over the nationalist and political sensibilities of Arab Muslims. Albānī’s views were thus met with harsh criticisms from his Arab contemporaries.

Albānī also condemned waging jihād in Algeria during the country’s civil war on the grounds that the fighters had poor chances of success. Once again looking to the example of the Prophet, Albānī asked rhetorically, “Did the Prophet wage jihād in Mecca,” alluding to the early period when the Muslim community was outnumbered and fled to Medina rather than fight their oppressors in Mecca.

Albānī was more ambiguous on the subject of waging jihād against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Although he nominally prohibited non-Afghans from waging jihād against the Soviets in Afghanistan due to the lack of proper religious intention, he defended the principle of jihād under such circumstances. Citing the classical distinction between farḍ al-kifāya (jihād waged by a select group on behalf of the whole community), and farḍ al-‘ayn (that waged by every member of the community in defensive circumstances), Albānī explained that in theory everyone must participate in the jihād against unbelievers who oppress Muslims. In this context, Albānī explained, jihād is justified for its defensive purposes, and “no one may delay performing this obligation.” He cited the case of the anti-religious Soviet forces fighting Muslims as a prime example of this obligatory defensive jihād. However, as a prerequisite Muslims must first conduct their own

799 Sadhān, al-Imām al-Albānī, 284.
800 For one example, see Būṭī’s response, cited in Verskin, Oppressed, 153-155.
“internal jihād,” affirming within themselves that they are indeed fighting on behalf of God and not on behalf of any other cause. “The issue is not only of Afghanistan…but is also in Palestine as well. But the unfortunate reality is that despite the clear legal obligation of jihād waged by the entire community, they are not able to do so either through their governments or their people. This is so because Muslims have forgotten about their personal jihād to which the Prophet referred, ‘the fighter is one who exerts his energy towards God.’”

Albānī also regarded secular political institutions and political programs with suspicion because of their lack of the proper foundations and method. He criticized elections and parliaments, writing that “every Muslim raised with a sound Islamic upbringing knows that elections and parliaments are not Islamic systems. But many who have had an Islamic upbringing mistakenly believe that the parliament is like the Islamic (concept of) consultation, and this is most certainly not the case…and so we can say that the parliament is not founded upon the Qurʾān and the sunna.”

Elsewhere he condemned Muslim participation in Arab parliaments because “the ends do not justify the means,’ (and the idea of) entering parliament to achieve reform is fiction….since most of those in parliament are not Islamic (in their ways).”

Writing on political reform, Albānī explained that “we view it as essential to begin with ‘purification and education’ together, rather than beginning with political

matters. Those who are preoccupied with politics may very well have devastatingly ruinous beliefs, and their Islamic ways may be far from the divine law.”\textsuperscript{805} Therefore, as he explained elsewhere, “reform is not achieved through creating political parties and creating divisions…since the Qur’ān and the \textit{sunna} prohibit creating divisions.”\textsuperscript{806} Besides their un-Islamic origins, Islamic political parties, in Albānī’s view, fell short of achieving their aims. Moreover, as he explained, “as we have seen in the last half-century, political parties do not bring about religious welfare but rather…divide Muslims and drive them away from Islamic traits.”\textsuperscript{807}

The Next Generation: Albānī’s Students in Jordan

Although, with a few exceptions, Albānī’s disciples inherited his legacy of opposition to either violence or direct political action, the exact connotations of his teachings on the matter are still very much contested and their applications by his diverse followers likely reflect both a commitment to Albānī’s approach as well as a careful navigation of their the local circumstances. So, for example, the more absolutist “quietists” – the Madkhalīs in Saudi Arabia, who counsel strict obedience to the local government – have integrated Albānī’s teachings with the local concerns over internal unrest in the Saudi monarchy, the custodians of their Salafī tradition. Albānī’s Jordanian followers, likewise, have continued to develop his teachings in the context of their own situation in their country. As one of these individuals explained, their wary approach to politics is connected to the unique character of Jordan, “a land of the middle” (\textit{ard al-}

\textsuperscript{805} Shaybānī, \textit{Ḥayāt al-Albānī}, 378.
\textsuperscript{807} Ibid.
wasat) – the word “middle” referring both to Jordan’s geographic location in the “middle” of the region’s conflicts as well as to its moderate political orientation.\textsuperscript{808}

A brief glimpse at the ideas of his disciples in Jordan, the country of his death and the hub for his legacy today, helps us better appreciate how Albānī’s final campaign of “purification and education,” as well as his scholarly legacy, served as blueprints for applying his idea of method.\textsuperscript{809} Because of both their aforementioned backgrounds as well as their commitment to Albānī, the members of this group – comprised mainly of university professors and mosque preachers – have gained a reputation for their avowedly anti-Jihādī and, in some cases highly pro-monarchical, rhetoric. So prominent is the issue of violence and political stability in Jordan that when asked about what the word manhaj meant to him, Akram Ziyāda, a mosque preacher and one of Albānī’s later students, immediately replied that “our manhaj is not like that of Osama bin Laden.”\textsuperscript{810}

Like Albānī, the members of this group dissociate from Jihādīs – whom they also call “Takfīris,” “extremists,” and “terrorists” – and assert that Jihādīs have corrupted the Salafī identity and method.\textsuperscript{811} They define Salafism as “the method of belief, safety, and security,” a phrase with a particular rhythm in Arabic (manhaj al-īmān wa-l-amm wa-l-amān). Conscious of the antagonism they face from Jihādīs, who describe them as Murjī’īs, they address their writings not specifically to Jihādī leaders but to journalists and academic experts on Islam in order to fulfill their teacher’s instructions regarding the “education” about the correct Islam while demonstrating their wide literacy.

\textsuperscript{808} Interview with Yūsuf al-Shāwīsh, May 2012.
\textsuperscript{809} For a more thorough treatments of this community, see Olidort, “The Politics of ‘Quietist’ Salafism,” and Wagemakers, “Contesting Religious Authority.”
\textsuperscript{810} Interview with Akram Ziyāda, May 2012.
\textsuperscript{811} See, for example, the 2004 conference hosted by Albānī’s students, published as al-\textit{Taṭarruf wa-l-ghulāw wa-l-irhāb: asbābuhu, mazāhiruhu, ilājuhu}, Silsilat al-Nadawāt al-‘Ilmiyya, Markaz al-Imām al-Albānī li-l-Dirāsāt al-Manhajiyya wa-l-Abhāth al-‘Ilmiyya (Amman: al-Dār al-Athariyya, 2004), 15.
‘Alī al-Ḥalabī (b. 1960), widely regarded as one of the two leading figures of this community and one of Albānī’s top students, has authored works defining Salafism, in particular in the Jordanian context. In these writings, he seems especially interested in demonstrating Salafism as both central to Islamic history as well as to Jordanian society. Writing on the depiction of Salafism in the media, Ḥalabī clarifies that “Salafism does not permit terrorism or the killing of innocent civilians,” adding that after 9/11 “Salafism has appeared in many media outlets in a negative, erroneous, and disorganized way.”

In a different work on the history of Salafism in Jordan, Ḥalabī links the emergence of his Salafī community there with the “acts of violence and terrorism in Iraq and Pakistan... and the killing of Muslims...all of which go against the core of Islam.” He explains that his group “saw it as (our) obligation to serve as a front against these evil movements that Islam opposes.” In an effort to distance his own group from Jihādīs, Ḥalabī explains that “we Salafīs have a legal, clear and correct position with respect to these big events, derived from our scholarly examinations and from our methodological principles.” He adds that “(Salafism) is not only a call to jihād,” showing that Jihādīs do not rely on established methods for waging jihād.

Although this is not the place for a full appraisal of the intellectual production of Albānī’s disciples, it serves as one example of how Albānī’s scholarly legacy during the final decades of his life served as an unrivalled referent for this and other groups in addressing the social and political challenges in their midst. The need to engage with

814 This is the subject of my next project, which examines the legacy of Albānī from the perspective of his Jordanian students.
developments in the political sphere became ever more urgent for these communities, as it had been during Albānī’s lifetime, following the events of September 11, 2001, when their scholarly orientation came under scrutiny in the context of the unprecedented scale and successes of Jihādī groups. While of course he could not have predicted this course for his lifetime, in many ways Albānī’s death in October 1999 – just as the Middle East entered a new phase of political unrest that would eventually escalate into the events of the Arab Spring – aligned with the evolution of his scholarly efforts. This confluence of political and personal factors produced a kind of Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde portrait of Albānī: a force of moderation in the political realm on the one hand, while a model of iconoclasm in the religious one.

815 Pierret too makes this point in the Syrian context, where, he explains, “The attacks of 11 September 2001 significantly aggravated the situation, with the Salafists thereafter identified as a global and soon a local threat, because jihadi networks were involved in various incidents from 2004 onwards. Although most of the followers of ‘scholarly Salafism’ (al-salafiyya al-ʾilmīyya) were unrelated to violent groups, they were frequently arrested, and their Ramadan outdoor prayer was banned. Al-Arnaʿūt died in 2004 under quasi-house arrest and without leaving a successor. The situation was similar in Aleppo, whose would-be Salafi scholars migrated to the Gulf.” Pierret, Religion and State, 108.
Conclusion

“We are leaderless after the death of our teacher [Albānī]” – Muḥammad Mūsā Āl Naṣr.816

“One of the pious ones among us in Syria saw a vision shortly before the death of shaykh Ibn Bāz. He saw two stars in the sky headed for the earth. The first reached the earth and the second remained nearby. As for the first…it made a terrifying sound which frightened people and made them ask one another what had happened. Then the man awoke and asked someone to interpret it, and the interpreter said: this matter will shake up society and will have a profound impact, and it will be followed by the second star…Shortly thereafter, news came of shaykh Ibn Bāz’s death and then shaykh Albānī died a short time afterwards, and he is represented by the second star.” – Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Shaqra.817

Having chronicled the life Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, we are left with the task of interpreting his legacy as a scholar and as a leader of Salafism. Concerning the former, we might ask where precisely does Albānī stand within the Islamic scholarly tradition in the modern period? Given his lack of pedigree and formal training, does it even make sense to call Albānī a scholar, or, rather, should we think of him as merely someone who was passionate about his heritage and, thanks to a number of lucky breaks, succeeded in making a living and a public image for himself by publishing in a range of topics and media over a career of sixty years? If the latter, is there any way to assess his the quality of his prolific output – are his writings and lectures the oevre of a figure in a particular school of thought shared by others or are these merely the disconnected ramblings of someone with a personal axe to grind, and who happened to have read a wide array of religious texts and some secular works? If his writings are representative of a school of thought, what role can we ascribe to Albānī in its development?

It is safe to say, based on his background and his statements, that Albānī was both not a traditional scholar and, moreover, consistently distanced himself from traditional scholarly circles and institutions ever since his break with his father. We can also safely

816 Interview with Muḥammad Mūsā Āl Naṣr, May 2012.
say that not only did Albānī identify with a particular intellectual tradition – that of Salafism – but was, moreover, one of its most articulate and vocal advocates. As we saw in the preceding chapters, he was perhaps its most conceptually and methodologically consistent spokesperson in the twentieth century. This dissertation sought to demonstrate that it was precisely through his insistence on his movement’s methodological rigor – first in scholarship, then in everyday life – that Albānī made his mark on the Salafī tradition, and it is arguably by doing so that he gave it a currency beyond the scholarly domain. While few, if any, of Albānī’s adepts have likely gone through all nine volumes of his *Irwā’ al-ghalīl*, much less every installment of his *Taqrīb* series or every ḥadīth criticism in his *Silsilatayn*, an equal few have any doubt that he was, from their perspective, the only individual to reassess all of the canonical Sunnī ḥadīth compendia and to point out how laxity in ḥadīth science misled Muslim society for generations in their performance of religious observances and in their understanding of creed.

Of course, for those less-scholastic or less-ḥadīth-minded (among both Salafīs and non-Salafīs, as we have seen) Albānī became much more of a symbol representing the great dedication of Salafism to preserving the Prophet’s sunna rather than an ideologue in the mold of someone like Quṭb. In other words, unlike Quṭb, his fame rested primarily on his scholarly approach rather than for his positions – his works being exemplars of the Salafī canon because of their claim to disciplinary rigor rather than the conclusions he reached in them. This might have had to do with either the very technical nature of ḥadīth science, which kept the uninitiated at arm’s length, or possibly with the controversial nature of his legal opinions, many of which departed from the perceived mainstay of Salafism. There is a sense, then, of a kind of respectful distance implied by the epithets
al-imām (the leader) and al-‘allāma (the great scholar) – the idea that some are willing to overlook, or perhaps brush under the rug, Albānī’s views on the ḥijāb or his prohibition of Palestinians engaging in jihād against Israel, and instead recognize him for his scholarship and his dedication to the sunna, which, in their view, no one could match.

Indeed, one could safely say that were it not for his explicit dedication to manhaj and his more technical writings and editions, Albānī could very well have become marginalized – perhaps appearing on a list of local Salafī teachers in Damascus or in Medina. Not only did his scholarship account for his Salafī stardom, but also for his wide reach into Islamic scholarship and practice. For example, someone interested in the reception of Bukhārī in the modern period would invariably stumble upon Albānī’s Mukhtaṣar Šahīḥ al-Bukhārī, and, likewise, someone interested in learning about Ibn Abī al-‘Izz would encounter Albānī’s editions of his Sharḥ al-‘Aqīda al-Ṭahāwiyya. In this sense, rather than Quṭb, it might make more sense to compare Albānī to Khomeini, who remains a referent not only for understanding the Iranian Revolution and the doctrine of velayat-i faqīh but also of Twelver Shī‘ī jurisprudence.

And yet, in certain circles Albānī’s scholarship contributed to something more substantive than mere stardom. Indeed, one gets the sense that among certain other Salafīs, particularly those who studied with him, Albānī seems to have ironically inspired a kind of Albānī madhhab. We had a brief opportunity to see aspects of this among his Jordanian students, who are not only referred to derisively as “Albānī-ists” but who themselves see Albānī as their only teacher – this in contrast to traditional Islamic scholarship in which students often claim to have studied religious disciplines with different teachers. Moreover, Albānī’s students, have adopted a number of practices
Albānī deemed obligatory, such as beginning all of their classes and books with the Sermon of Necessity. In Jordan, members of this circle established the Imām al-Albānī Center for Research and and Scholarly Studies, and for a number of years held conferences and a periodical (al-Aṣāla).\textsuperscript{818}

Albānī’s biography has also become its own genre, with dozens of taped interviews and published accounts laden with hagiographical motifs and styles, some of which we have already encountered in this dissertation. The author of one laudatory biography on Albānī as “ḥadīth scholar of the age” even framed his project as part of the discipline of biographical dictionaries.\textsuperscript{819} A number of individuals have emerged as Albānī’s scions in different parts of the Middle East, notably the Egyptian Abū Ishāq al-Ḥuwaynī and the Syrian ‘Adnān al-‘Ar‘ūr. Ḥuwaynī and ‘Ar‘ūr continue to give lectures on his life, often inserting some anecdote about Albānī’s behavior or comment in a particular context, ostensibly cited to hint to readers that they had some insider knowledge of the man. ‘Iṣām Mūsā Hādī – the author of two biographies on Albānī who claimed to have had long personal sessions and telephone conversations with him – established a reputation on the basis of these intimate interactions. Others still continue to strategically excerpt short clips on hot-button issues such as his views of the Muslim Brotherhood or the Aḥmadīs from his audio-recorded classes in Syria and Jordan and post these on YouTube in connection with some contemporary event.

\textsuperscript{818} Due to an internal dispute among the group’s leadership some years ago, much of the group’s formal activities, including their periodical, have ceased. Despite the loss of a central node, the “center’s” leaders remain active, holding classes in mosques and homes throughout Amman and Zarqa, and each moderates his his own website. Interview with ‘Alī al-Ḥalabī, May 2012.

\textsuperscript{819} Sadāḥān, al-Imām al-Albānī, 8.
These references to Albānī may, of course, be examples of mere opportunism on the part of these individuals, and on one level they certainly are. However, they are also evidence of the kind of resonance his message has today. It is here that we can begin to understand the second aspect of Albānī’s legacy mentioned at the beginning of this section – his role as one of the towering leaders of the Salafī movement, perhaps the most successful Sunnī popular movement today. How similar, or different, were his credentials and message as a scholar from those of a leader? Did he even see himself as a leader or his followers as a distinct group? Based on the sources consulted for this study, Albānī did not appear to have ever explicitly claimed leadership of the Salafī movement. Indeed, doing so would have been imprudent, as this could have brought further scrutiny on him and his followers. There are, however, countless examples since his earliest writings of Albānī exhorting some distinct group, whether worshippers during the Islamic high holidays in Damascus in his pamphlets on prayers, “educated youth” in his columns for *al-Tamaddun al-Isāmī*, university students in his lectures in Qatar and Syria in the 1970’s, or even “[re]searchers” (*al-bāḥithūn*) in his *Taqrib* series.

Since Salafīs continue to shape-shift as they navigate the turbulent changes in political structures and religious authority in the Middle East today, little can be said with absolute certainty concerning the direction of the Salafī movement with which they associate. The aftermath of the Arab Spring, in particular the escalation of the Syrian conflict, have brought all kinds of Salafīs out of the woodwork and have produced unexpected patterns of behavior. Egypt’s “quietist” al-Da’wa al-Salafiyya became the sponsor of the most prominent Salafī political party in Egypt today, the al-Nour Party. Others have taken up arms to join the fighting in Syria, such as the Lebanese Aḥmad al-
Assîr, who led a battalion into al-Quṣayr in April 2013. And, in the wake of the actions of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the voice of moderation in Jordan, for example, is represented by the Salafi-Jihâdî ideologue Abû Muḥammad al-Maqdisî, who attempted to negotiate a prisoner swap with ISIS on behalf of the Jordanian government.

Is there any connection between these various strains of Salafism with the subject of this dissertation, the individual who most clearly and consistently defined Salafism in the twentieth century? More precisely, can we locate Albānî’s influence within the prominence and dynamism of the Salafî groups that we see today? A true understanding of Albānî’s appeal lies well beyond the social media posts of his lectures. Rather, one must look into the deep recesses of how these groups identify in relation to their changing environment and the rationale behind their actions. It is this latter point, their modus operandi, that Albānî, quite literally and directly, emphasized and helped define through his promotion of a distinct Salafî manhaj. The perceived threats that drove Albānî mirrored those that propelled his intellectual forebears in Damascus during the late-Ottoman period, and even as early as the People of Ḥadîth during Ibn Ḥanbal’s time – specifically, political developments that aimed to marginalize a particular religious tradition and its custodians, whether materially or doctrinally. When Albānî began teaching, it was the first time in Islamic history that the classical institution preserving the practice and understanding of Islam, the caliphate, disappeared and was replaced by foreign political structures and contexts of governance. With no clear target of reform, and with the levers of religious authority backed by seemingly non-Islamic institutions, Albānî introduced a new set of objectives: to change the means rather than the ends. The

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“political,” in his view, ceased to have relevance for Muslims, who required guidance on how to engage with their everyday affairs. As the political context of the Middle East evolved in the twentieth century, in particular with the rise of Islamists and Salafī-Jihādīs – both of whom sought specific political aims – Albānī’s message of adhering to a manhaj gained new relevance as a far more authentic basis of association. Today, more than fifteen years following Albānī’s death, it is this concept of manhaj that guides Salafī groups around the world. It is also the insistence on following a manhaj that accounts for the credibility and thus coherence of their message in both the “political” and “scholarly” arenas – a phenomenon that challenges us to reconsider the relationship between the two as we continue following the course of Salafism after Albānī.
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