BETWEEN ŞÛFĪ REFORMISM AND MODERNIST RATIONALISM—A REAPPRAISAL OF THE ORIGINS OF THE SALAFIYYA FROM THE DAMASCENE ANGLE

BY

ITZCHAK WEISMANN

Haifa

Two basic assumptions have dominated the scholarly presentation of the origins of modern Islamic reform trends in the Arab world since its shaping in the years following the First World War.¹ One is that modern Arab Islamic reform originated in Egypt with the “Modernism” of Jamal al-Din al-Afghānī and Muhammad ʿAbduh; the other that the modernist trend, in the Arab world and elsewhere, constituted a sharp departure from the rigid tradition of medieval Islam. Both assumptions, however, reflect essentially the subjective viewpoint of the Salafi trend of the 1920s and 1930s, with whom Western scholars had most contact and on whose writings they principally relied. The Salafiyya, under the leadership of Rashid Rida and his influential journal al-Manār, cherished the ideal of a return to the religious and political way of the forefathers (the salaf). Their purpose was to dissociate contemporary Islam from its latter-day tradition, both scholarly and mystic, presenting it as the cause of the decline of Muslim civilization and as an impediment to the adoption of useful Western innovations. This basically Salafi view was reproduced in the Western scholarly contention that Islam, after its formative period, refused to further adapt itself to new conditions or revise its outlook. As against the

inner synthesis that gave Islam its initial drive, and was revived for
the last time by Ghazālī in the eleventh century, its subsequent
decline was explained as a result of the compromise that devel-
oped between the religious scholars (‘ulamā’), who became blind
adherents of traditional learning, and the mystics (Ṣūfīs), who
plunged into theosophical meditations and ecstatic popular ritu-
als. In this way, Western scholars could adopt the Salafiyya’s por-
trayal of itself as heir to the movements that arose against this
compromise, first the pre-modern puritanical Wahhābiyya and
then, under Western political and cultural pressure, the rationalist
Islamic Modernism.

Yet these dominant assumptions in the Western scholarship on
modern Islam, which were never unequivocally adopted even by
those who first proposed them, have been increasingly challenged
by subsequent research. Detailed monographs which have been
written on Islamic thinkers and movements of later centuries on
the basis of their own writings have amply demonstrated that,
alongside the growing compromise between ‘ilm and tasawwuf af-
fter the days of Ghazālī, there was also a thriving tradition of their
synthesis which continued down to modern times. This tradition
can be defined as the reformist middle way, between the two ex-
tremes of the ‘ulamā’ who did not concern themselves with both
learning and the mystic path on the one hand, and to the Šūfīs
who neglected the religious Law (shari‘a) on the other hand. It was
broad enough to include the differing personal inclinations of
these men of religion, as well as the different outlooks that they
expressed as a result of the particular circumstances in which each
of them lived and worked. To this reformist tradition belonged
even the two central figures whom the Salafis depicted as the pro-
totypes of the contradiction between ‘ilm and tasawwuf—Ibn Tay-
mīyya, from whose call to follow the path of the forefathers they
derived their name, and Ibn ‘Arabi, whom they vehemently re-
dected. As to the Salafi trend itself, Western scholars soon realized
that its ideas and activities after the First World War constitute
only the second stage of its development.\(^2\) Recent research has

\(^2\) See especially Albert Hourani, Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939
further demonstrated that the Salafiyya was not a mere offshoot of
the Modernist trend in Cairo, but rather a separate trend that
emerged among the reformist-minded ‘ulamā’ in the Arab prov-
inces of the late Ottoman Empire.³

Damascus played a pivotal role in the emergence and dissemina-
tion of the ideas of this original trend of the Salafiyya. An impor-
tant center of the reformist tradition in latter-day Islam, in the first
half of the nineteenth century it actually surpassed Cairo as the
major locus of learning in the Arab lands. This reflected the rela-
tive independence of its men of religion under Ottoman rule,
reinvigorated by the awakening brought to the city in the 1820s by
Shaykh Khālid within the framework of the Naqshbandi order, as
against the increasing subjugation of their Egyptian counterparts
by the centralizing regime of Muḥammad ‘Alī. With the initiation
of Western-inspired reforms in the empire in the second half of
the nineteenth century, the reformist-minded ‘ulamā’ of Dam-
ascus, now under the leadership of the celebrated Amīr ‘Abd al-
Qādir al-Jazā’īrī, at first endeavored to cope with the new realities
through a reinterpretation of Ibn ‘Arabī’s legacy. It was from
among this group of ‘ulamā’ that the Salafiyya was to emerge to-
ward the end of the century.

The present article concentrates on this first-generation Salafī
trend in Damascus. It first seeks to trace the emergence of the new
emphasis on the return to the way of the forefathers among the
city’s ‘ulamā’. Then it proceeds to examine the forces that shaped
the reformist outlook of its main proponents, especially in ‘Abd al-
Qādir’s Akbarī circle—i.e. the followers of al-Shaykh al-Akbar, Ibn
‘Arabī—and to analyze the circumstances that led them to turn to
the seemingly opposing teachings of Ibn Taymiyya. It concludes
with a reconsideration of the relationship between the Salafiyya of
Damascus and the contemporary Islamic Modernism of Afghānī
and ‘Abduh, which is so often regarded as its progenitor.

³ David Dean Commins, Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Otto-
man Syria (Oxford, 1990); Antonino Pellitteri, Il Riformismo Musulmano in Siria
(1870–1920) (Napoli, 1987); Joseph H. Escovitz, “He was the Muhammad ‘Abduh
of Syria’ A Study of Ṭāhir al-Jazā’īrī and his influence,” IJMES 18 (1986), pp. 293–
310.
The Emergence of the Salafi Trend in Damascus

In developing a special interest in the teachings of Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya, the reformist-minded ‘ulamā’ of late Ottoman Damascus were probably inspired by their counterparts in Iraq. Prominent among these was Nu‘mān Khayr al-Dīn al-Alūsī of Baghdad, who under the influence of Siddiq Hasan Khān, the leader of the Indian Ahl al-Ḥadith movement, completed a lengthy book in 1880 in defense of Ibn Taymiyya’s views. Two years later, Alūsī spent a few weeks in Damascus, while on his way to Istanbul, meeting local colleagues and discussing with them his new convictions. The Damascene ‘ulamā’ did not depend, however, upon the writings of Hasan Khān or Alūsī, as two direct channels were open to them to become acquainted with the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya. On the one hand, Damascus was a principal center in the Ottoman Empire, and indeed in the entire Muslim World, of the Ḥanbali school, in whose expositions the theological opinions and legal rulings of Ibn Taymiyya were interwoven. On the other hand, as Ibn Taymiyya spent most of his life in this city, many manuscripts of his books were preserved in the endowment libraries of its main mosques. These local sources played a decisive role in shaping the two principal reformist branches that gradually combined to form the Salafi trend of Damascus. One branch, the more traditional, tended to rely on Ibn Taymiyya’s thought in its quest to adapt traditional law and theology to the new circumstances of the modernizing state. The other branch, being more innovative, saw in his work, in addition, an integral role in the wider scheme to revive the local Arabic heritage.

One of the first expressions of a renewed interest in the work of Ibn Taymiyya among the reformist ‘ulamā’ of Damascus appears in an essay that was evidently composed in the early 1880s by a member of the leading Hanbali family in the city, Muhammad al-Shaṭṭī. The essay, which circulated in manuscript form and was published only posthumously, was designed to show the full compatibility

---

4 Commins, pp. 24–25.
5 Muḥammad Bahjat al-ʿAthārī, Aʿlām al-ʿIrāq (Cairo, 1345H), p. 61.
between the state laws and the shari‘a commandments. The state laws that Shaṭṭī thus set out to defend were those promulgated in the Ottoman Empire since the inauguration of the Tanzimat regime. Yet beyond the justification of the already existing reforms, the essay elucidated in an unprecedently clear and direct way the question of the relation between religion and state in Islam. Relying on Muslim orthodox political thought, on the one hand, and on the social theory of Ibn Khaldūn, on the other, Shaṭṭī clarified that there is a close affinity between the government and divine law.6 In accordance with Ibn Taymiyya’s legal rulings, he further stressed the duties of the ruler toward his subjects, first and foremost among them to appoint the most competent persons to state positions and to consult the ‘ulama‘ in local affairs.7

In order to justify his reliance on Ibn Taymiyya, Shaṭṭī introduced this essay with a discussion on ijtihād. He stated that there were many mujtahidūn in the first three centuries of Islam, and that even after the crystallization of the legal schools (madhāhib) there were still legists, such as Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya, who possessed all the requirements to practice it.8 Nonetheless, in spite of Shaṭṭī’s tendency to thereby extend the existing sources for legal rulings, his aim in this essay was not to adopt ijtihād, as his model would require,9 but on the contrary, to preserve the opposite principle of taqlid, the blind imitation of past authorities. He argued that in order to cope with the pressures of the modernizing state, it would be preferable to follow a ruling of any competent ‘ālim than to act without taqlid at all.10

The last step toward rejecting taqlid altogether, and adopting ijtihād in accordance with the teaching of Ibn Taymiyya, was taken shortly thereafter by one of Muḥammad al-Shaṭṭī’s most outstanding colleagues, ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bītār. Bītār was indeed the

---

7 Ibid., pp. 15–16.
8 Ibid., pp. 3–6.
10 Shaṭṭī, pp. 36–38.
founder of the more traditional branch of the reform trend that was to become the Salafiyya of Damascus. Rashid Rida himself described him, many years later, as “the renewer of the forefather’s way in Syria” (mujaddid madhhab al-salaf fi al-Sham).\footnote{[Rashid Rida], “Jamâl al-Dîn al-Qâsimi,” \textit{al-Manâr}, 17 (1914), p. 558.} All the biographers of Bitâr further emphasize that this was the turning point in his life, leading him to abandon the religious legacy of his time, in which he was raised and in whose framework he had operated until then. Their statement was based on the description of his grandson and heir, Muhammâd Bahjat al-Bitâr, who wrote that he followed the customary method of unquestioning approval (taslim) until after the age of fifty, when God inspired him (alhama-hu) to rely solely on the Qur’an and the Prophet’s example (sunna) and not to accept any opinion or legal ruling without proof. Bitâr’s turn to the new path occurred, then, in 1885 or 1886, when he reached the age of fifty, according to the Muslim calendar.\footnote{Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar, “Tarjamat al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Razzâq al-Bitor,” \textit{al-Manâr}, 21 (1919), pp. 318–19; ‘Abd al-Razzâq al-Bitâr, \textit{Hilyat al-Bashar fi Ta’rikh al-Qarn al-Thalith ‘Ashar} (3 Vols., Damascus, 1380–1383H/1961–1963), pp. 11–12.}

The more that Bitâr’s new reformist conviction deepened, the more his preaching for it among the religious circles in Damascus intensified. He urged the ‘ulama’ not to accept the opinions of their predecessors without considering their reasoning, and subsequently mounted an attack upon the widespread belief in the power of the dead to intercede with God, or to miraculously fulfill wishes. This new conviction must have aroused opposition among the orthodox ‘ulama’ and Sufi sheikhs, though for a decade there is no evidence in our sources of any action taken against Bitâr or his colleagues. It was only at the beginning of 1896 that their rivals succeeded in implicating them with the authorities in the so-called mujtahidûn incident.\footnote{On the mujtahidûn incident, see Zafir al-Qâsimi, \textit{Jamâl al-Dîn al-Qâsimi wa-‘Asruhu} (Damascus, 1965), pp. 43–69; and its analysis in Commins, pp. 50–55.} Summoned to the provincial court, they were accused of considering themselves as mujtahidûn, meeting to read Prophetic traditions (hadith) and asking for proof of the rulings of the legists (fugahâ’). The interrogation was harshly conducted under conservative pressure by the local mufti, but thanks...
to the intervention of the Ottoman qādī they were soon released. The mujtahidūn incident enables us, for the first time, to identify the religious men of Damascus who became inclined to follow Bitār in adopting the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya. Most outstanding among them were Ahmād al-Jazā‘īrī, the brother of the Amir ‘Abd al-Qādir, and the younger Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, who soon distinguished himself as the main exponent of the Salafī ideas in Damascus.

The more innovative branch of the reform trend that was to become the Salafiyā also emerged in the mid-1880s. The most prominent figure in this branch was Tāhir al-Jazā‘īrī, who began his career as the principal educational assistant of the well-known reformist governor Midhāt Pasha in 1878-1880. In his capacity as the general superintendent of education in Syria, Jazā‘īrī attached much importance to the gathering of endowed collections of manuscripts from the city’s mosques in a central library that would better preserve them. For this purpose he established the Zāhiriyā Library, later on the core of Syria’s national library, obliging the recalcitrant administrators of these endowments, with the help of the authorities, to hand over their collections. After the dismissal of his patron, Jazā‘īrī was increasingly attacked by the conservative religious men of Damascus, who finally succeeded in obtaining an imperial decree ordering the abolition of his post. Their victory was achieved in 1885 or 1886. These were the years when Tāhir al-Jazā‘īrī, like ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bītār, began to stress the model of

---


17 Commins, pp. 166–67, n. 9.
Ibn Taymiyya. His biographers, among whom the most important were his two devoted disciples, Muhammad Kurd 'Ali, the admirer of modern civilization, and Muhammad Sa'id al-Bani, the more religiously inclined, inform us that since his youth, Jaza'iri had been immersed in the reading of Ibn Taymiyya's works and that he tried to distribute them clandestinely and cheaply, regarding them as a means in the struggle against the innovations that were attached to the shari'a. Both biographers related his ruses to the fact that most of his contemporaries rejected these writings and considered those who praised them as being themselves innovators. Their descriptions clarify that Jaza'iri's interest in the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya was particularly awakened after 1885, when his engagement in cataloguing the rare collections of manuscripts that he had gathered in the Zahiriyah Library enabled him to discover and make copies of Ibn Taymiyya's long-forgotten works. For Jaza'iri, however, the study of the manuscripts of the "Shaykh al-Islam" was only a part of his larger interest in the revival of the Islamic-Arabic heritage. For the rest of his life, Jaza'iri dedicated himself to the study of Arab manuscripts, in search of which he traveled much in the Arab world and subsequently also in Europe. In 1898, his expertise was recognized when he was re-appointed to an official post as supervisor of public libraries in Syria.

In the first decade of his activity, Tahir al-Jaza'iri could hardly find partners among the 'ulamâ' of Damascus in his new reformist way. His main companion during those years was Salim al-Bukhari who, like him, is reported to have shown keen interest in the rare manuscripts that were preserved in the city, and particularly in the writings of Ibn Taymiyya and his school. Bukhari followed Jaza'iri in combining the rejection of the orthodox tradition with the revival of the Arabic heritage. His turn to Ibn Taymiyya's legacy must have also occurred around 1885. Later in the decade, Bukhari achieved an even better position than Jaza'iri from which to spread the new reformist conviction, as he was appointed to the

---

post of mufti of the fifth Ottoman army in Syria. As the officer in charge of exempting religious students from duty, he could exert much influence on the younger generation in this sphere. His frequent travels with the army, especially to Istanbul and the Hijaz, and his meetings with ‘ulamā’ who were visiting Damascus from other lands, gave Bukhārī additional ample opportunity to forge acquaintances and discuss his reformist views.20 It was only during the 1890s that Jaza’irī himself began to acquire a large number of students of his own from among the younger generation of the Damascene ‘ulamā’.

The Śūfi Reformist Legacy

The above description of ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bītār’s turning to the principles that were to form the foundation of the Salafi trend in Damascus is lacking in two vital respects. On the one hand, it overlooks Bitār’s reformist upbringing and activity until the mid-1880s, and on the other hand, it makes no reference to the historical circumstances that led him to adopt a new reformist path at that particular time. Both shortcomings derive from the Salafi viewpoint of his main biographer, Muḥammad Bahjat al-Bītār, which was initially acquired from his grandfather and his associates in Damascus, but was later substantially modified under the influence of Rashīd Riḍā and his school in Cairo.21 Both are representative, therefore, of the later-Salafi outlook on the origins of the modern reform trends in Islam and are clearly echoed in the Western research. According to this subjective point of view, Bahjat tended to represent a bipolar reality between the loyalty to the sources and the spirit of investigation of the Salafiyya, adopted by ‘Abd al-Razzāq after his fiftieth year, and the rigidity (jumūd) that was prevalent in the learning of the religious scholars, including himself, up to that time. He thus could avoid attaching any

importance to the fact that his grandfather was molded in the circle of 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā'īrī and was immersed in the theosophy of Ibn 'Arabi. In addition, Bahjat's claim that 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Bitār's adoption of the way of the forefathers in 1885 or 1886 was the turning point of his life reflects his inability to comprehend that the new reformist conviction germinated in his grandfather only gradually, as a reaction to the changes that had taken place in Damascus in the previous years, in particular during the first half of the 1880s. This period coincided with 'Abd al-Ḥamīd II's consolidation of his regime over the Ottoman Empire. A critical analysis of the emergence of the Salafiyya in Damascus, therefore, must first turn to an examination of 'Abd al-Qādir's Akbarī thought and its appeal in Damascus during the late Tanzimat period, and second, to the new circumstances that prevailed in the city under the reign of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd.

As the head of the resistance movement to the French occupation of Algeria, 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’īrī has received much attention from Western scholars, including the religious aspects of his life.22 'Abd al-Qādir was born and raised in a leading maraboutic Qādirī family in West Algeria.23 He visited Damascus for the first time in 1825–1826, while accompanying his father on a pilgrimage journey, and had the opportunity to meet the Sufi reformist Shaykh Khālid of the Naqshbandiyya, who was generating a religious awakening in the city at that time.24 The crucial period in 'Abd al-Qādir's spiritual development, however, was delayed until his years of captivity in France. During this period he was able to realize, for the first time, the magnitude of the achievements of modern science and the rationalistic approach underlying it. He


also went through a grave spiritual crisis that resulted in strong mystic experiences, making him a follower of Ibn ʿArabi. After his release, ʿAbd al-Qādīr chose Damascus as his place of residence in exile. Here he spent the last part of his life, 1855–1883, enjoying enormous prestige as well as lavish stipends. He was accepted as the undisputed head of the Algerian community that had settled in the city a few years before him and developed close ties with the local religious and commercial elite. ʿAbd al-Qādīr completed his mystical training in Mecca in 1862 under the guidance of Shaykh Muhammad al-Fāsī in the Madānī branch of the Shādhiliyya. He reached illumination on Mount Hirā’, in the cave where the Prophet himself used to spend his time in seclusion before receiving the message, and completed it with a second term of seclusion at the Prophet’s grave in Medina. On his return to Damascus, ʿAbd al-Qādīr continued to engage in the learning and instruction of Ibn ʿArabi’s writings, with special emphasis on his magnum opus “The Meccan Revelations” (Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya). After his death, he was buried, according to his expressed wish, beside his spiritual master at the Sālihiyya cemetery.

ʿAbd al-Qādīr’s main contribution to the Akbarī tradition lay in his redefinition of the relationship between mysticism and reason in Islam. In his two basically rationalist essays, composed under the impression of the achievements of Western science already before his arrival in Damascus, ʿAbd al-Qādīr sought to demonstrate before the French rationalists and their Muslim admirers that man as individual and human society at large cannot reach perfection by

---

reason alone and therefore must accept the guidance of the Prophets. On the other hand, he was anxious to persuade the Muslims themselves, on the basis of the fundamental harmony of all religions and the universality of science, to abandon the practice of blind imitation of past authorities (taqlīd), which they increasingly adopted in latter-day generations, and to make use of their own reason, as did the Europeans.31 'Abd al-Qādir's collection of spiritual experiences after settling in Damascus, which is entirely stamped in the theosophy of Ibn 'Arabi, indicates his urgent sense of mission,32 derived from his realization of European supremacy over the Muslim world. To preserve the Muslim faith in the face of the rationalist challenge of the West, 'Abd al-Qādir urged his co-religionists to approach the West and master the practical sciences that lay at the base of its power.33 On the other hand, he warned them to completely remove rationalism from the religious sciences, lest it would lead, like it had done in Europe, to disbelief.34

'Abd al-Qādir's modern interpretation of the Akbari theosophy was enthusiastically adopted by an important group of Damascene 'ulamā', who were disappointed with the results of the early Tanzimat reforms (1839–1856).35 More particularly, they opposed the conduct of their upper-class colleagues, who took control of the city's leadership and diverted the reforms to their own advantage. The sons of these local trend 'ulamā', together with their counterparts from Algeria, constituted the main component in 'Abd al-Qādir's elitist Akbari circle. 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Bītār was the leading figure in this young group. He joined Jaza'iri's circle at the

---

32 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jaza'iri, Kitāb al-Mawāqif fi al-Wa'z wal-Irshād (3 vols., Cairo, 1911), 1, pp. 142–43.
33 See, for example, ibid., p. 86.
34 Ibid., p. 236.
age of nineteen and remained his most faithful disciple for almost thirty years. Bitār was attached to ʿAbd al-Qādir to such an extent that his colleagues nicknamed him “his second in his own lifetime”. He learned IbnʿArabi’s theosophy with him, as well as public affairs, since the amir used to turn over to Bitār various cases which were brought before him for settlement.36 As ʿAbd al-Qādir died in 1883, a mere two or three years before Bitār turned to the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya, it is highly improbable that the amir’s influence upon him vanished in such a short time. On the contrary, it remained through the end of his life, securing a measure of continuity in his way.

The other ʿulamāʾ who were involved in the mujtahidūn incident of 1896 as adherents of the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya, as well as Muḥammad al-Shaṭṭī, were also shaped in the Akbari circle of ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jazaʾīrī, or under its influence. This is most evident with the amir’s younger brother, Ahmad al-Jazaʾīrī, who regarded himself as his heir to the leadership of the Algerian community in Damascus and to the family branch of the Qādirī order. This claim was put forth in the book that Ahmad published in 1885, two years after his brother’s death.37 It was formed as an interpretation of a saying attributed to ʿAlī, that religious knowledge is One and only the ignorant divide it, and was designed to demonstrate that he followed ʿAbd al-Qādir in his understanding of IbnʿArabi. Yet, Ahmad’s emphasis in this book was on the practical and moral side of Ṣūfism, rather than on its theosophy. This emphasis derived from his feeling that under the increasing pace of modernization, the Muslims were beginning to shun their religion. He severely criticized both the orthodox ʿulamāʾ for introducing reason to the religious sciences and the popular Ṣūfī shaykhs for betraying spiritual life in favor of worldly concerns.38 Against them, Jazaʾīrī set the model of the pious forefathers (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ) who, according to the Ḥanbalī belief, avoided rational deliberations on

36 Bitār, Hilyat al-Bashar, pp. 9–11.
37 Ahmad al-Jazaʾīrī, Nāṭr al-Durr wa-Bastūḥū fī Bayān Kawn al-ʿIlm Nuqta (Beirut, 1324H), Ibid., pp. 4–18.
38 Ibid., pp. 85–118.
the meanings of the Qurʾān, preferring instead to meticulously fulfill its commandments.⁵⁹

Ṣūfism still held a central place in the upbringing of the principal representative of the younger generation among the Damascene reformist ‘ulamāʾ, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī. As the mouthpiece of the emerging Salafijya in Damascus, his writings also clarify the essence of the new attitude that this trend adopted toward Ṣūfism while turning to the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya. Qāsimī was a disciple of Muḥammad al-Khānī, Bītār’s most intimate companion in the Akbarī circle of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazāʾirī and the local shaykh of the Naqshbandī-Khālidī order.⁴⁰ Therefore, he not only learned Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings with Khānī but also received from him the Naqshbandī path, and for a while participated in its ḏihkr ceremonies. Nevertheless, Qāsimī lost his interest in the Ṣūfī path at an early age,⁴¹ probably as a result of the general spread of the rationalistic attitude among his generation. In his numerous subsequent writings, Qāsimī rarely discussed Ṣūfism and, in the few cases in which he did so, he followed Ibn Taymiyya in vehemently attacking the shaykhs of the popular orders, describing them in the most emphatic words as electric wires that generate spiritual madness and melancholy among the people.⁴² He also denounced practices that were attached to Ṣūfism, such as asceticism, self-mortification, and especially the visiting of saints’ tombs in pursuance of their intercession with God.⁴³

Nevertheless, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī’s biography and writings make it evident that he did not reject Ṣūfism as such. His abandonment of the Naqshbandī path did not prevent Qāsimī from maintaining his deep reverence toward Muḥammad al-Khānī, nor from simultaneously becoming a close associate of Ahmad al-Jazāʾirī, the principal heir of ‘Abd al-Qādir in the family branch of the

⁶² Ibid., p. 353.
⁶³ Ibid., p. 351.
Qādiriya.\textsuperscript{44} The Salafiyya’s ambivalent approach toward Sūfism is most clearly presented in Qāsimi’s discussion of Ibn ‘Arabī and his thought. On the one hand, he unequivocally defended the Shaykh al-Akbar and did not hesitate to reproach even Ibn Taymiyya himself for declaring him a heretic. Qāsimi claimed that although Ibn ‘Arabī’s allegorical exegesis (ta’wil) appears to be heretic (ilhād), his theology and jurisprudence are acceptable and therefore exonerate him from being regarded as such. His own recommendation was to view his mystical writings as too complicated to be approached by the uninitiated.\textsuperscript{45} On the other hand, the attempt to present Ibn ‘Arabī’s eminence as resting on theology and jurisprudence rather than on Sūfism is a clear indication that Qāsimi no longer regarded the Akbarī theosophy as an adequate basis for the reform of Islam. His esteem of his scholarship was nonetheless genuine, since Ibn ‘Arabī was much influenced by the Zāhirī legal school which, like the Ḥanbalīs, adopted a literal exegesis of the sources and consequently advocated, and himself claimed to practice, āijtihād.\textsuperscript{46} Thus, Qāsimi could count Ibn ‘Arabī along with the principal ulamā’ that the Salafis came to rely on—Ibn Taymiyya, his disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and Ghazālī—as the thinkers that were most often attacked out of blind fanaticism and blamed out of prejudice, while in reality they were only seeking the truth!\textsuperscript{47}

Tāhir al-Jazā’īrī, the prominent figure among the ulamā’ of the more innovative branch of the Salafiyya in Damascus, showed less interest in Sūfism than Bītār and his colleagues. Yet, like them, he was raised under the influence of ‘Abd al-Qādir’s Akbarī circle. His father, Shālih al-Jazā’īrī, an outstanding ‘ālim who held the newly created post of Mālikī muftī in the city, was also an adherent of the

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 30.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., pp. 273–74.
Khalwatiyya Raḥmāniyya, the principal reformist Ṣūfī order among the Algerian community. Tahir received his initial education from his father, completing it after his death with another outstanding ‘ālim and close associate of ‘Abd al-Qādir, ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Ghunaymī. However, unlike the other young ‘ulamā’ in the amir’s circle, he enrolled in the first official school in Damascus, at the Jaqmaqiyya college, shortly after its inauguration in 1860. It was this more general education that shaped Jaza’iri’s special reformist outlook. The study of the elements of modern science at the school created in him a sense of openness toward the Western spirit of investigation, which his contemporaries normally lacked. Furthermore, the acquisition of the Turkish language enabled Tahir to contact Ottoman educationalists who worked in Syria and through them to learn also of European cultural and political conceptions that were already circulating in the capital. In this way, he became acquainted with the ideas of the Young Ottoman movement and, through one of its activists, was able to attract the attention of Midhat Pasha. More than a decade later he established contacts also with the Young Turk association. The unique education of Jaza’iri lay behind his difficulties in finding partners for his reformist path. Salīm al-Bukhārī, his main associate, was the son of a Kurdish officer stationed in Damascus, and only the influence of a maternal uncle turned him toward the religious course. Like Jaza’iri, Bukhārī attended the Jaqmaqiyya school and completed his education with the former’s father and subsequently with Ghunaymī. Also like him, he became interested in politics, and as the fifth army muftī he had an even closer affiliation to the

---


49 Ghunaymī was, on the other hand, the closest disciple and associate of ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bitār’s father, Hasan al-Bitār; on him, see Bitār, Hilyat al-Bashar, pp. 867–72.

50 Ibid., p. 829.

51 Kurd ‘Alī, Kunūz al-Ajdād, pp. 5–6; Bānī, Tanwīr al-Baṣāʿir, pp. 73–75.


53 Bānī, Tanwīr al-Baṣāʿir, pp. 128–29; see also Gross, pp. 462–64.
Young Turk association. Thus, though there is no evidence that Bukhari was ever directly attracted to Sufism, it is clear that he was shaped by the same reformist circle of the late Tanzimat period.54

With the expansion of the official school system in Damascus during the 1890s, Tahir al-Jaza’iri began to acquire a growing number of disciples of his own among the younger generation. Many of these students were sons of religious families who found in his study circles a complement to their official education. With him, they could adopt religious values that were compatible with scientific thought, discuss Western political ideas, and learn of their own Arab legacy. Jaza’iri, however, did not confine himself to the educated elite. He extended his efforts to spread his reformist outlook to wider circles and did not exclude even shaykhs of popular Sufi orders. He would join their dhikr ceremonies, pretending to take an interest in the path while actually attracting them to books that treated Sufism in accordance with his own views. In this way, Jaza’iri sought to curb the irrational beliefs and practices that were prevalent among these shaykhs and their disciples. Among the Sufi books which he recommended was “The book of tasawwuf that combines the sharī‘a with the haqīqa and binds the roots of the Law to the tariqa” of the fifteenth century Shadhili mystic, Ibn Zarrūq.55 The title itself suggests that like Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, Tahir al-Jaza’iri did not reject Sufism as such, but only its popular manifestations.

Damascus Under the Reign of 'Abd al-Ḥamid II

Sultan 'Abd al-Ḥamid II, like his predecessors, strove to modernize his empire in order to make its government more efficient and to repel the European attack. Materially, therefore, his policy can be regarded as the continuation and culmination of the reform effort that had been undertaken in the Ottoman Empire since the reign of Sultan Mahmūd II at the beginning of the century, and

especially through the late Tanzimat period. This modernization was most conspicuous in Syria which, in view of the Ottoman losses in Europe and Africa in the first years after 'Abd al-Hamid’s ascension to the throne, was seen by him to be of the utmost importance. The projects that were carried out under his rule in this province exceeded those of all the previous reform regimes taken together, and included investment in public works, renovation of cities, building of roads and railways, and extension of official education. These projects considerably raised the standard of living of the local population, which generally reciprocated by showing much sympathy toward the Sultan. They mostly benefited the upper strata of society in the cities, which began to adopt, albeit superficially, a Western mode of thinking and way of life.

Yet, the principles that underlay 'Abd al-Hamid II’s rule were diametrically opposed to those advocated by the statesmen of the late Tanzimat period. 'Abd al-Hamid established a centralist autocracy, basing it on the demand for complete obedience to the Sultan as the khalifa of the Muslims and on patronizing the Sufi orders as a direct channel to the common people. The main propaganda instrument in his Islamic policy was Shaykh Abû al-Hudâ al-Šayyâdî of the popular Rifa’îyya order, whom the Sultan invited to Istanbul and accorded with high honors and lavish funds. These measures of 'Abd al-Hamîd constituted a reaction to the decentralist principles that guided Fu’âd Pasha and ‘Ali Pasha, the leading bureaucrats of the late Tanzimat reforms who, under the inspiration of Western political ideas, attempted to divert the subjects’ sense of loyalty from the ruler to the state and to create a new Ottoman citizenship based on territorial rather than confessional grounds. 'Abd al-Ḥamîd’s policy was directed, in this respect too,

---

57 For a general description of the Hamidian period in Syria, see Gross, pp. 259 to the end.
mainly toward the province of Syria. Its establishment under the Wilâyât law of 1864 greatly enhanced the common sense of identity of the local population, especially among its emerging middle class. The new Sultan took countermeasures, which culminated in the dismantling of the province in the late 1880s, aimed at the suppression of such tendencies of particularism. Abû al-Hudâ himself was a native of Syria, and his numerous books were intended for dissemination primarily in that country.\(^5\)

Sultan 'Abd al-Hamîd II's support, however, was not confined to Shaykh Abû al-Hudâ al-Šayyâdî or his Rifâ'î order. It was extended to many other Sûfî shaykhs, as well as religious men in general, throughout the Ottoman Empire, who were willing to serve his ends. This Islamic policy brought in its wake the transfer of the religious leadership in the various Ottoman provinces from the hands of the reformist 'ulamâ', who basically supported the principles of the late Tanzimat period, to their rivals who, in the name of Muslim orthodoxy, advocated complete obedience to the Sultan—Caliph. In Damascus, these were the 'ulamâ' of 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Jazâ'iri's circle, who lost the upper hand in the city to the rivaling orthodox trend. This loss occurred during the first half of the 1880s. 'Abd al-Qâdir himself might have tried to adapt in his later years to Istanbul's new attitude,\(^6\) but many of his associates and disciples refused to follow such a course. This is most clearly evident in the case of Mahmûd Hamza, the Hanafî muftî of Damascus during most of the late Tanzimat period who, following a serious controversy with the governor of the province in 1883, decided to shut himself up in his home. His status in the city was too established, however, to allow the Ottoman authorities to dismiss him. Hence, the ordinances of the provincial council, in which he was ex officio a member, were regularly brought to him for approval, and the local notables also used to assemble weekly at his house for deliberation.\(^6\) It was only after Hamza's death in 1887 that the


\(^{60}\) See 'Abd al-Qâdir's correspondence with Abû al-Hudâ al-Šayyâdî in Jazâ'iri, Tuhfat al-Za'îr, pp. 799–802.

post of the Ḥanafi muftī was transferred to an ʿālim who was identified with the orthodox camp, Muḥammad al-Manini. As Bitār testified, the appointment raised a great commotion (idṭirāb ʿazīm) in Damascus, and the controversy about it did not subside even after its affirmation by the Shaykh al-İslām in Istanbul. It was Maninī who conducted the harsh interrogation against Bitār's circle in the mujahidūn incident of 1896.

Muḥammad al-Manini could not generate the respect and awe that his predecessor in the office of the Ḥanafi muftī of Damascus had enjoyed. Moreover, as Qāsimī’s account of the incident implies, Maninī was an instrument in the hands of more powerful religious men. These, like Abū al-Hudā al-Şayyādī in Istanbul, were mainly Ṣūfī shaykhs who held no official posts but were nonetheless patronized by the state. The reformist ‘ulamā’ singled out three such shaykhs, who chose to embrace the new official orthodoxy and distinguished themselves as ardent enemies of the emerging Salafiyya. One of them was Asʿad al-Şāhib, a nephew of Shaykh Khālid, in the Khālīdī branch of the Naqshbandiyya. The other two were Ṣāliḥ al-Munayyir, who served as the local deputy of Abū al-Hudā al-Şayyādī in the Rifāʿīyya, and his brother, Ārif al-Munayyir, who shifted his allegiance around the turn of the century to the more modernized Syrian protégé of ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd II, Ahmad ʿIzzat al-ʿAbid, then partly superseding Abū al-Hudā as the main Islamic propagandist of the Sultan.

Asʿad al-Şāhib visited Istanbul in 1880 and succeeded in securing his father’s position, fifteen years after his death, as the shaykh of the Naqshbandī–Khālidī order in the prestigious and well-endowed Sulaymānīyya Lodge. Șāhib conducted the dhikr ceremonies in this mosque, but did not engage in spreading the order or

with ʿAbd al-Qādir and his interest in Ibn ʿArabi’s teachings, see Bitār, Hilyat al-Bashar, pp. 1469–72, and Jazaʿīrī, ibid., pp. 840–41.

Bitār, Hilyat al-Bashar, p. 1185.


in authorizing deputies. Moreover, our sources give the clear impression that he was a Sufi of the popular type, who was concerned with his interests in this world rather than in a spiritual quest. This did not prevent him from claiming to be the head of the Khālidiyā in general, and in Damascus in particular. Sāhib’s arguments were directed specifically against his local rival in the order, Muhammad al-Khānī who, as mentioned above, was a disciple of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī and a teacher of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī. His more general pretensions drove him to compose a lengthy defense against the attack that was mounted upon the principal rites of his order by none other than the founder of the Salafi trend in Iraq, Nu’mān Khayr al-Dīn al-Alūṣī.66

In the following years, Sāhib proved to be the most adamant adversary of ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bītār and his colleagues in the more traditional branch of the emerging Salafiyya. We do not know if he was among the instigators of the mujtahidūn incident, but he is specifically mentioned in some subsequent attempts of the orthodox to implicate them with the authorities. The most serious attempt occurred in 1906, following Qāsimī’s publication of the collection of epistles that included Ibn ‘Arabi’s advocacy of ijtihād and rejection of taqlīd. Failing to convince the governor of the danger to the Muslim faith inherent in this collection, Sāhib reported to Istanbul that Bītār was delivering information to Egypt with the intention of promoting the separation of Syria from the Ottoman Empire. The governor was ordered to investigate the matter, but obviously found no evidence in support of such a claim.68 It was only under the military rule of Jamāl Pasha during the First World War, which he did not hesitate to support either, that Sāhib could see the destruction of his rivals.

The more sophisticated Munayyir brothers were also the arch-


66 As‘ad al-Sāhib, Nūr al-Hidāya wal-Irfān ft Sirr al-Rābiya wal-Tawajjuh wa-Khām al-Khwājakān (Cairo, 1311H).

67 See note 50.

enemies of the more innovative branch of the emerging Salafiyah of Damascus, which was headed by Tāhir al-Jazā’irī. Šālih al-Munayyir studied with the leading reformist ‘ulamā’ of the late Tanzimat period and subsequently joined the Welfare Society under the direction of Jazā’irī and assisted him in inaugurating the Zāhiriyya Library. In 1882, however, Šālih decided to change direction. He followed As‘ad al-Ṣāhir to Istanbul and returned with a new teaching post in the principal mosque of Damascus, the Umayyad Mosque. Thereafter, Šālih frequently visited the Ottoman capital, forging connections with its notables and receiving decorations and stipends in the name of the Sultan. Most importantly, he contacted Shaykh Abū al-Hudā al-Ṣayyādī and became his principal deputy in the Rifāʿi order in Damascus.69 Šālih’s more traditionally educated brother, ‘Ārif al-Munayyir, belonged to the Rifāʿiyya as well, and probably followed his course, as he was appointed to the educational council of the province.70 ‘Ārif was also a prolific writer, though none of the twenty-five known titles of his books, some of them designed specifically to refute works of Qāsimī, have been published.71 Nevertheless, we do possess the manuscripts of two of his essays, which he succeeded in presenting to the Sultan while on a stay in Istanbul at the turn of the century. The first was a defense of the Hijaz railway project,72 a testimony to the connection that ‘Ārif forged with Ahmad ‘Izzat al-‘Ābid, its main protagonist; the second was a collection of forty Prophetic traditions in favour of the duty to absolutely obey the Caliph, largely modeled on the example of Abū al-Hudā’s Islamic propaganda.73 The principal aim of Munayyir in the first essay was to prove that there is no contradiction between religion and mun-

dane affairs, and thus to vindicate modernization. In the second essay he draws on Ibn 'Arabi's teaching to argue that obedience to 'Abd al-Hamid was tantamount to obedience to God and his apostle, and that opposition to him was opposition to them.

Unlike As'ad al-Šāhib, we have no information about the actual struggle of the Munayyir brothers against the Salafis. Nevertheless, Muhammad Kurd 'Alī, Tāhir al-Jazā’irī's close disciple and biographer, informs us that his teacher detested them more than any other religious men in Damascus. Tāhir’s bitterness toward the Munayyirs derived, undoubtedly, from his disappointment in their betrayal of the reformist cause. Kurd 'Alī further related this detestation to their endeavors to distance the young generation from learning in order to avoid competition for the religious positions and rich endowments of the city. Against them, Jazā’irī began to urge the religious students to learn a profession, so that as 'ulamā' they would not depend on the rulers and the wealthy and thus would be able to defend their religion and honor, as demanded by their vocation.74

It was the conduct of the orthodox 'ulamā' and Şufi shaykhs in Damascus that turned some of their reformist counterparts toward the new principles that gradually crystallized as the teachings of the Salafīyya. Both the traditional 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Bīṭār and the more innovative Tāhir al-Jazā’irī regarded these conservatives as unworthy persons, who had gained the upper hand not because of their learning and piety, but due to their readiness to harness orthodoxy in the service of the autocratic rule for their own selfish ends. Such opportunism seemed to the emerging Salafis not merely as harming their own interests, but as a real threat to the integrity of Islam and its ability to adapt itself to modernization. The teachings of Taqī al-Dīn Ahmad ibn Taymiyya supplied them with an Islamic foundation for their struggle against these state-patronized 'ulamā'.

Like the Salafis, Ibn Taymiyya lived in a period of utter pressure exerted upon the Muslim domains, the devastating Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century. He unequivocally supported the

74 Kurd 'Ali, Kunūz al-Ajdād, p. 17; see also Bānī, Tanwīr al-Ḍāṣā’ir, pp. 80–81.
Mamlûk rulers although he also stressed their duty to govern with justice, especially by appointing the most competent individuals to official posts and by consulting their subjects in public affairs. On the other hand, Ibn Taymiyya vigorously reproached the submissive obedience of the official ‘ulamâ’ and Šûfî shaykhs of his time for betraying their vocation to counsel the rulers, and severely criticized their sciences and mystic practices as the established orthodoxy that justified their conduct and obstructed reform. In their place, he conceived of a new integration between the legal tradition (naql), theological reasoning (‘aql) and mystical illumination (kashf) on the basis of the Qurʾān and the Sunna, with due consideration of rational analogy (qiyyās) and the social interest (maslahã). This actual ijtihâd was, in his opinion, the exemplary path of the forefathers (al-salaf). Like the orthodox religious men of the nineteenth century, the offended office-holders of Ibn Taymiyya’s time responded to his reformist zeal by instigating the rulers against him, often leading to his imprisonment.\textsuperscript{75}

Thus, the two principles that ‘Abd al-Razzâq al-Bîtâr’s biographers defined as the cornerstone of his new reformist path were drawn from Ibn Taymiyya’s teachings to defy the orthodox belief, as it was expounded by the state-patronized ‘ulamâ’ and Šûfî shaykhs of the Ḥamidian era. The return to the Qurʾān and the Sunna and the rational approach toward their implementation were designed, above all, to weaken the hold of the ijmâ‘, the general consensus on which rested the authority of the conventional knowledge of the ‘ulamâ’ and the popular practices of the Šûfîs. In its stead, Bîtâr was gradually inclined, again in the footstept of Ibn Taymiyya, toward the practice of ijtihâd, as the basis for adapting the traditional legal rulings and theological formulations to meet modern needs, and toward a purified form of Šûfism, as a means to preserve the spirituality and morality of Islam in the modern world. The more politically-minded Ṭâhir al-Jazâ’irî also relied on Ibn Taymiyya’s teachings in his resistance to the autocratic rule of Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamîd II himself. In this respect, he could not only draw on Ibn Taymiyya’s appeal to the

\textsuperscript{75} Henri Laoust, “Ibn Taymiyya,” pp. 951–53.
rulers regarding their duties toward their subjects, as a countermeasure to 'Abd al-Hamid's claim for unreserved obedience, but also on his general tendency to make use of reason in religious matters, as a means to awaken Muslim society from its ignorance, which the Sultan fostered to assure such obedience under the cover of orthodoxy.

The struggle of the reformist 'ulamā' of Damascus against the official orthodoxy of the Hamidian regime, however, was devoid of that uncompromising fervor that so characterized Ibn Taymiyya. Nor was the ability of the state-patronized religious men to harass them so severe, as their failure in the mujtahidūn incident plainly demonstrated. Nevertheless, the position of the emerging Salafīs began to seriously deteriorate in 1902, following two essentially political events that occurred outside of Syria. In Paris, the Young Turks convened their first congress, indicating the renewal of their activities against 'Abd al-Hamīd,76 while in Arabia, 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Saʿūd, the founder of the modern Saudi state, took control of Riyadh, thus raising Ottoman apprehension about a revival of the Wahhābī menace.77 That same year in Damascus, the authorities conducted searches in the houses of Jazā'iri and his colleagues, suspecting that they were corresponding with the Young Turks,78 and the orthodox published the most virulent attack against Bitār and Qāsimī, accusing them of adopting Wahhābism. The author of this polemic was the Akbarī Ḥanbalī Muṣṭafā al-Shāṭṭī, another member of the reformist circles who chose to change sides under the Hamidian regime.79 The intensified persecution led Jazā'īrī to escape to Egypt in 1907,80 where he could join many of his disciples that had left Syria during the previous years and act in the relatively free atmosphere there.81 Bitār and Qāsimī, who pre-

78 Ma'īn, p. 454.
80 Qāsimī, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī wa-'Asruhu, pp. 437–38.
81 Bāni, Tanwīr al-Bašā'ir, pp. 112–15.
ferred to remain behind, still had to incur the severest hardships under the regime of the Committee of Union and Progress.

It was the increasing persecution after 1902 that brought the two branches of the reformist ‘ulamā’ together and helped in the final shaping of the Salafi trend of Damascus. A particularly strong association was forged in those years between Tāhir al-Jazā’īrī and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī who, more than the elderly ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bītar, was prone to absorb modern political and cultural ideas. Jazā’īrī’s impact on Qāsimī became crucial at that time and seems to have eclipsed even that of Bītar. Through Jazā’īrī, he also became acquainted with young graduates of the state schools, who in 1906 were organized for the first time in a national framework in the Arab Renaissance Society.82

Our sources do not specify when the modern adherents of Ibn Taymiyya began to call themselves Salafīs and whether it was in Syria or elsewhere. In my opinion, this happened after 1902, when the accusations of their opponents drove them to emphasize that their way was different from that of the Wahhābis. In any case, after the revolution of 1908, when Qāsimī began to openly correspond with his colleagues in Iraq and the Hijaz in search of Ibn Taymiyya’s manuscripts for publication, the use of this name seemed to them already self-evident.83

The Modernist Connection

Islamic Modernism began to spread from Egypt at the same turning point of the first half of the 1880s under the influence of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ‘Abduh. ‘Abduh lived at that time as an exile in Beirut for his part in the ’Urābī uprising and in 1884 joined Afghānī in Paris for the publication of their famous journal al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqā, which many Syrians read.84 Yet

---

82 Qāsimī, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī wa-‘Aṣruhu, pp. 92–96, 468–70.
83 Letters from Mahmūd Shukrī al-Alūsī, Nu’mān Khayr al-Dīn’s heir in Baghdad, to Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, in my private collection; see also the letter in Qāsimī, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī wa-‘Aṣruhu, pp. 585–89.
84 For a succinct analysis of al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqā and its impact, see Hourani, pp. 109–10.
the ideas of the two, at least during this period, seem to be incompatible with the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya, on which the Salafis of Damascus, and of other Arab cities under direct Ottoman rule, ultimately relied. This incompatibility is particularly evidenced by Afghānī, the Iranian Shi‘ite, who made rational philosophy the center of his thought. Afghānī’s principal aim, to which he dedicated most of his efforts, was the political unification of the Muslim world and the repulsion of the Western attack on its territory. From these two bases he derived his outlook concerning the religious reform required by Islam in the modern world. This outlook reveals some similarities to the Salafi principles, but the differences are no less important. Afghānī preached a return to the ideal of the forefathers, the salaf, but mainly in order to revive their political and military successes from the time of the Prophet and his first successors (al-khulafā‘ al-rāshidūn). He also supported the idea of ijtihād, which he could derive from Shi‘ite tradition, but for him it was a means to a new rational and even scientific interpretation of the Qur‘ān and the Sunna. The appeal of Afghānī and ‘Abduh, who in those years was under his overwhelming influence, lay therefore in their political activism and rationalistic bent rather than in their call to religious reform.

However, after ‘Abduh’s return to Beirut at the end of 1884, a change in his views became evident. This change brought him nearer to the Salafi ideas and eventually alienated him from Afghānī. ‘Abduh was invited in 1885 by the local reformist Welfare Society to teach at its secondary school, the Madrasa al-Sultāniyya. There he initiated a new program comprised of such subjects as logic, history and composition, as well as morals. But his success was frustrated by the orthodox, who managed to take control of the school and led him to resign. His subsequent detailed memorandums to the Shaykh al-Islām concerning reforms in the administration and content of religious education in the Ottoman Empire probably went unanswered. Simultaneously, ‘Abduh became

acquainted with some of the leading Damascene reformers, including 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Bītār, and a correspondence between them ensued. Sharing their sense of plight at the hands of the state-patronized 'ulamā' of the Ḥamīdīan regime, 'Abduh reached the conclusion that the key to the revival of the Muslim peoples lay not in external political activities, as Afghānī believed, but rather in a long-range internal reform based on proper education. It was at the same time that Afghānī decided to appeal to Sultan 'Abd al-Ḥamīd II in order to advance his pan-Islamic scheme.

Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s contribution to the thought of the emerging Salafiyya of Damascus can be gauged from the main essay that originated from this period of exile, his Risālat al-Tawhīd. In this essay, ‘Abduh remained loyal to Afghānī’s view on the essential harmony between reason and revelation; yet unlike him, he based it not on the Muslim philosophy that Sunni scholarship rejected, but rather on its theology. ‘Abduh relied principally on the main trend of Islamic orthodoxy, as formulated by Ghazālī in his broad merging of the religious sciences. He was also influenced by the Muʿtazila, the trend that sought to defend the principles of Islam against Greek philosophy by its own logical methods. Absorbing the Muʿtazilite apologetic tendency, which remained a typical trait of his thinking through the end of his life, he tried to prove that this harmony was the essence of Islam and the source of its greatness.

‘Abduh’s reliance on the Sunni sources facilitated the adoption of the strong rationalistic approach underlying Modernism among the more traditional reformist circles of Damascus. Ṭāhir al-Jazā’īrī, who acquired a similar approach through his studies in

---

87 Ḍītār visited Beirut in April 1886, but he received a letter from ‘Abduh already in the previous year; see Muhammad ‘Abd al-Jawād al-Qayāṭ, Naṣḥat al-Bashām fī Rihlat al-Shām (Beirut, 1401/1981), p. 154 and his letter on p. 200.


89 Muhammad ‘Abduh, Risālat al-Tawhīd (many editions); see also its concise summary and analysis in Hourani, pp. 145–46.
the state schools and his subsequent acquaintance with the ideas of the Young Ottomans, was less dependent upon such formula-
tions. He himself probably did not meet Muhammad 'Abduh at all, but Salim al-Bukhâri, who did, expressed appreciation for his scholarship and views.90 In the eyes of 'Abd al-Razzâq al-Bîtâr and his associates, however, 'Abduh's rationalist approach seemed to be merely a completion of the path delineated for them during the late Tanzimat period by 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Jazâ'îrî. They parti-
cularly embraced his argument that it was possible to prove through reason not only the existence of God, as 'Abd al-Qâdir had claimed, but also to realize many of His attributes and to distinguish between good and evil. This extension of the logical faculty presented them with a new basis for adapting Islam to the accelerating pace of modernization in the Hamidian era, as well as with a stronger shield against the concomitant increasing secular menace inherent in rationalism. Thus, Islamic Modernism helped the more traditional branch of the emerging Salafiyya in Dam-
ascus to fortify the rational aspects in the teaching of Ibn Taymiyya in accordance with modern needs.

It is more difficult to establish to what extent these emerging Salafis of Damascus influenced the thought of Muhammad 'Abduh. In view of their ideas as described above it seems, however, that Bitâr and his colleagues were at least partially responsible for 'Abduh's departure from the political activism of Afghâni toward the internal reform of Islam that was to characterize his mature thought. Sharing their traditional upbringing, as well as their Şûfi disposition,91 'Abduh could learn from the religious reformists of Damascus, and of other cities in Syria, the importance of formulating his ideas within the framework of orthodox Islam. He could also become aware through them of the writings of Ibn Taymiyya. A hint of such an influence on 'Abduh might be seen in Muhammad Bahjat al-Bîtâr's biography of his grandfather. Describing the visit of Bitâr and Qâsimi to Egypt in 1903, Bahjat recorded the remark that 'Abduh treated 'Abd al-Razzâq with such

---

respect that some of his Egyptian associates came to believe that he was actually his disciple while in exile in Beirut.\textsuperscript{92}

**Conclusion**

The Salafi trend emerged in the first half of the 1880s among the reformist-minded 'ulamā' of Damascus, and of other Arab cities under direct Ottoman rule, against the background of the consolidation of Sultan 'Abd al-Hamīd II's regime. These 'ulamā' readily embraced the rationalistic approach of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and the young Muḥammad 'Abduh, the protagonists of Islamic Modernism, in recognition of the need to adapt Islam to the requirements of the increasing pace of modernization. However, more conscious of the secularist danger inherent in rationalism, they confined it in their scheme of reform to the suitable implementation of the precepts of the Qur'an and the Sunna to the new circumstances of the time, their definition of the practice of *ijtihād*. Furthermore, contrary to the emphasis of the proponents of Modernism on the outer Western challenge to the world of Islam, the Salafis were more concerned with its inner degeneration, relating it to the conduct of those 'ulamā' and Šūfī shaykhs who were willing to harness orthodoxy in the service of 'Abd al-Hamīd's autocracy. In their view, by clinging to the practice of *taqlīd*, these orthodox men of religion obstructed the ability of Islam to modernize itself, while by their subservience to the Sultan, they lost their power to stem the unlawful innovations that permeated the emerging modern Muslim state. Some of the Salafis also expressed their resistance toward the autocratic regime of 'Abd al-Hamīd himself, who elevated these orthodox to their positions of dominance. In their struggle against the state-patronized 'ulamā' and Šūfī shaykhs, on the one hand, and in their approval of useful Western inventions, on the other, the Salafis relied primarily on the reformist teaching of Ibn Taymiyya. 'Abduh's Modernism then assisted them in reinforcing the rationalistic aspect of this teach-

\textsuperscript{92} Bitār, Ḥilyat al-Bashar, p. 16.
ing to suit the modern world, though it seems that their influence upon him was the more crucial, leading him to depart from Afghani’s political activism toward his own quest for the inner reform of Islam.

The reformist outlook of the first-generation Salafis of Damascus has been shaped in the Akbari circle of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jaza’iri or under his influence, during the late Tanzim period. Seeking to redefine the relationship between mysticism and reason in Islam under the impression of Western scientific achievements, ‘Abd al-Qādir urged his co-religionists to abandon the practice of *taqlīd* and make use of their own reason. Cognizant of the spirit of disbelief that the rationalist approach had generated in Europe, he also emphatically warned them to remove rationalism from the religious sciences. Above all, ‘Abd al-Qādir aspired to create a new spiritual elite on the basis of Ibn ‘Arabi’s mysticism, which would remold Islam in accordance with modern requirements. These propositions remained the basic principles that guided his close disciples who, under ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bītār, formed the more traditional branch of the Salafiyya, as well as the graduates of the newly established state schools who, following Tāhir al-Jaza’iri, formed its more innovative branch. Under the new circumstances of the Ḥamidian regime, both groups came to realize that the theosophy of Ibn ‘Arabi could no longer serve as an adequate foundation for the required reform. Its inadequacy derived both from the strengthening of the rationalist approach under the increasing pace of modernization, which tended to deny the validity of the irrational experience that underlies Ṣūfism, and from its use by the shaykhs of the popular orders in the service of the autocratic regime of the Sultan, which was bent on identifying it with their orthodoxy. Nevertheless, despite the Salafis’ consequent diminishing interest in Ṣūfism, they refused to follow Ibn Taymiyya’s attack on Ibn ‘Arabi, presenting the two instead as belonging to the same reformist tradition. Their adoption of the more rationalist and less submissive teaching of Ibn Taymiyya must be regarded, therefore, as an intensification rather than a negation of the Akbari thought as it was interpreted for them by ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jaza’iri.
Thus, seen from the Damascene angle, the origins of the Salafiyya lay in the shift of its reformist-minded ‘ulamā’ from the theosophy of Ibn ʻArabi, and from latter-day Ṣūfī reformism in general, to the teaching of Ibn Taymiyya, reinforced by the rationalist approach of Islamic Modernism. This shift, which reflected the new circumstances that prevailed in the Arab cities of the Ottoman Empire under the modernizing autocracy of ʻAbd al-Ḥamīd II, remained within the broad reformist middle way tradition of Islam. The Salafi turn against Ibn ʻArabi and the Ṣūfī orders occurred only later, under the leadership of Rashīd Riḍā in Cairo.93