Middle East
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Quest for a Phantom
Investigating Abu l-Huda al-Sayyadi

Abu l-Huda was born in a small village on the margins of the northern Syrian desert in 1850 into a family of humble origins. In his early childhood, he was initiated into the Rifaᶜiyya order, which is still widely spread today in the rural areas of Syria and Iraq. He was quick to develop substantial contacts with Rifaᶜi sheiks in Aleppo, who dominated certain important posts in the city. In 1874, he became the *naqib al-ashraf* (scion of the descendants of the prophets) there at a strikingly young age. In the following years, he managed to overcome several severe setbacks to his career and finally established himself in the entourage of the new Sultan Abdülhamid II, whose accession to the throne marked the end of the *tanzimat*, a period of wide-ranging administrative reforms in Ottoman history.[*]

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The shrine of Ahmad al-Sayyadi, ancestor of Abu l-Huda, near Huma, the spiritual centre of the Rifaᶜiyya in Syria.

Abu l-Huda was allegedly one of the most powerful men in the Ottoman Empire for several years. From 1881 onwards, he commenced vast publishing activities. It is claimed that he wrote up to 200 books, of which approximately 60 can still be found today. In 1909, he died in Istanbul on the Bosphorus island of Prinkipo where he had been exiled by the Young Turks after their *coup d'état*. Apart from this, little is known with certainty about Abu l-Huda.

In existing literature, he has been characterized as a reactionary and obscurantist, who tried to oppose the reformist circles of his time. He is usually juxtaposed with one of the two fore-thinkers of Arab nationalism: ᶜAbd ar-Rahman al-Kawakibi or Butrus al-Bustani. By this, he is interpreted as a mere tool in the hands of Abdülhamid II for spreading his pan-Islamic propaganda. Unfortunately this interpretation rests on only one small booklet of Abu l-Huda which, even at a short glance over his publication list, is clearly an exception. No thorough attempts have been made to question how this astonishing career was possible, what happened after Abu l-Huda had permanently settled in Istanbul and what comprised the contents of his writings. It might even be said that, over time, analysis gave way to the development of an 'Abu l-Huda topos', which is generally applied when something negative has to be said or explained away about the political and intellectual developments of the Ottoman Empire and especially its Arab provinces under Abdülhamid II.

The sources

When endeavouring to investigate Abu l-Huda, the reason for these fascinating lacunae in our knowledge of this important period in Middle Eastern history soon comes to light: the sources. To begin with, there is no autobiography and the biographies of some of his followers – once they are discovered – offer little information due to their laudatory genre. Painstaking research is necessary to find a substantial number of his books, and acquiring trustworthy and dated information through interviews poses difficulties. The archives of European consulates in Istanbul consulted thus far contain only material about two or three isolated episodes. Even classic strategies employed by historians of the Middle East, such as consulting *waqf* documents in Aleppo, provide scant results. Investigating Abu l-Huda is indeed a quest for a phantom.

What can be secured from these sources is information about people who had contact with Abu l-Huda. A certain pattern of recurring names reveals itself and many of these men can easily be identified. By such means, the common depictions of Abu l-Huda as an obscurantist and reactionary are severely contested: he obviously had early contacts with outstanding scholars in Damascus who were later to gain fame as the forefathers of
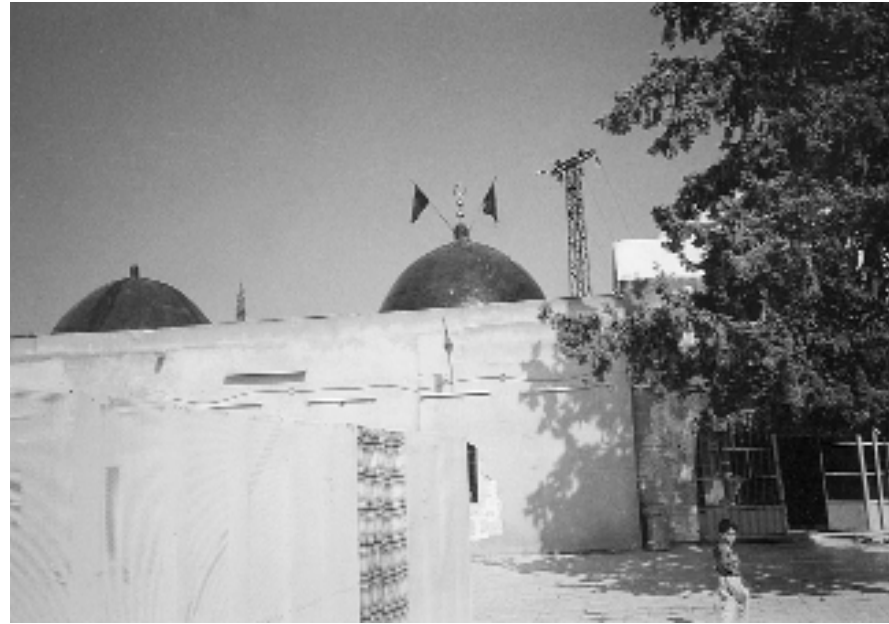
the Syrian Salafi movement. After his rise to influence in Istanbul, he supported such famous reform-minded theologians as Mahmud Shukri al-ᶜAlusi in Baghdad by providing him with a teaching post at the Sultan Ali mosque, which had been recently renovated and re-established due to Abu l-Huda's intervention. This being said, the similarities between the contents of especially Abu l-Huda's later writings to reformers such as Muhammad Abduh come as no surprise.

The common interpretation of the intellectual history of the Middle East in the late 19th century rests on an assumed rupture between reform-minded *ulama* advocating their vision of an Islam purified of popular practices and superstitious beliefs, on the one hand, and reactionary traditionalists resisting any change, on the other. Abu l-Huda is usually interpreted within this frame as the outstanding representative of the latter. This picture is erroneous.

Since Abu l-Huda was the leader of the Rifaᶜiyya order in his time, which was popular especially among the lower strata of society, he undoubtedly represented the more traditionalist camp in this dichotomy. But analysis of his social networks as well as of the development of his writings over time shows that the so-called 'traditionalists' had a permanent exchange of ideas with the reformers, thus developing a new interpretation of Islam. For example, a discussion of findings from the field of European astronomy concerning the distance between the sun and the Earth can be found in Rifaᶜiyya writings from the late 1880s. In this sense, the traditional sector of society appears less as resisting the changes of its time and perhaps more as actively contributing to these changes.

Lineage as a tool in the power-struggle

Abu l-Huda built up a network of contacts and followers in the entire fertile crescent. He even tried to take over the mighty Rifaᶜiyya in British-controlled Egypt, a move successfully opposed by the Khedive. Usually persons from less influential families, some of whom had experienced a recent loss of influence, were integrated into Abu l-

Huda's following. At the same time, a wide-ranging scheme of construction and restoration of shrines took place. Most of the important Rifaᶜiyya tombs are situated in Iraq, some of them in Baghdad. On the other hand, the famous shrine of ᶜAbd al-Qadir al-Jilani, founder of the Qadiriyya order, had served as an intellectual and political focus in that city over decades, if not centuries. It apparently lost much of its importance during the 1880s and 1890s due to the competition of the new and well-endowed Rifaᶜiyya shrines, since some of the most renowned scholars of Baghdad taught at the schools attached to these new shrines. The Qadiriyya's answer to these developments was simple: they claimed that one tomb was fake, that the man buried in the second (the Sultan Ali Mosque) was not the father of Ahmad ar-Rifaᶜi, who founded the Rifaᶜiyya, and that Rifaᶜi himself and consequently all of his offspring were not descendants of the prophet (*ashraf*, sing. *sharif*). Therefore, in the 1880s and 1890s a multitude of publications treating these subjects can be observed. This phenomenon comprised several aspects. Firstly, *ashraf* were exempted from military service and taxes. Secondly, these books were part of a major power-struggle going on in the Middle East at the close of the 19th century. On the one hand, there was the competition of several shrines for pupils and pilgrims at the local level. On the other hand, these books constituted the attempt of an overthrow of Abu l-Huda, himself the initiator of this sudden competition. As already mentioned, he was the *naqib al-ashraf* in Aleppo. He maintained this post until his death in 1909, although he stayed most of the time in Istanbul. The easiest way to get rid of Abu l-Huda was to negate his noble lineage leading back to the prophet via Ahmad ar-Rifaᶜi. This was done by reactivating very old debates about the noble lineage of the Rifaᶜi that traced back to the prophet. If this undertaking had succeeded, it would not only have meant that Abu l-Huda would have been unemployed in the strict sense of the word. Since the notion of a holy man in Islam is usually connected with the assumption that he is a *sharif*, it would most probably have meant that the recently construct-

ed and renovated shrines of the Rifaᶜi all over the fertile crescent would have lost all pilgrims, income and importance. Therefore, other competing Sufi orders would have experienced a steep rise in the number of their followers and influence. This means that the debate about lineage in the 1880s and 1890s was not a sign that nothing had changed in the Middle East over the last 500 years when these discussions were conducted for the first time. Even more so, it was a very particular power struggle, which owed much of its force to the socio-economic changes taking place in the Middle East in the late 19th century.

Changing research methods

A network analysis was developed in the late 1950s, originally by anthropologists, as a means for analysing smaller residential groups. It rests on the premise that individuals construct a network of personal relationships and use that network to reach their personal aims. It also rests on the premise that there are certain patterns underlying these networks. Network analysis challenges the structuralist view that individuals are completely determined by society's norms and categories, while trying to avoid the opposite extreme of formalist reductionism, which defines norms as mere by-products of social change. Only recently have the first attempts been made to apply the methodical instruments, developed for network analysis by anthropologists, to the sources of historians of the Middle East. Common pitfalls of historiography, like projecting modern nationalist paradigms such as borders or ethnic community back into the past, can thus be avoided. ◄►

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