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Al-Albani's Revolutionary Approach to Hadith

STÉPHANE LACROIX

Portrait of Al-Albani from Ibrahim Muhammad al-'Ali, Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, Damascus: Dar al-qal, 2001.

When on the first of October 1999, Shaykh Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani passed away at the age of 85, he was mourned by virtually everyone in the world of Salafi Islam. To many, he represented its third main contemporary reference, after 'Abd al-'Aziz bin Baz (who himself had died a few months before) and Muhammad bin 'Uthaymin (who would pass away in January 2001), both leading figures of the Saudi religious establishment. Salafi newspapers, journals, and websites celebrated this Syrian son of an Albanian clock-maker—whose family left Albania in 1923, when he was nine years old, and re-established itself in Da-

In spite of his undistinguished social background al-Albani became known as the greatest hadith scholar of his generation. His reliance on hadith as the central pillar of law at the expense of the schools of jurisprudence caused him to take up controversial positions. This brought him into conflict with the Saudi religious establishment but also made him popular in Salafi circles.

mascus—who had become known as the *muhaddith al-'asr* (traditionist of the era), that is, the greatest hadith scholar of his generation.

How did al-Albani, with his undistinguished social and ethnic origins, come to occupy such a prestigious position in a field long monopolized by a religious elite from the Saudi region of Najd? The answer, as we shall

see through the example of al-Albani himself and some of his disciples, lies in his revolutionary approach to hadith.

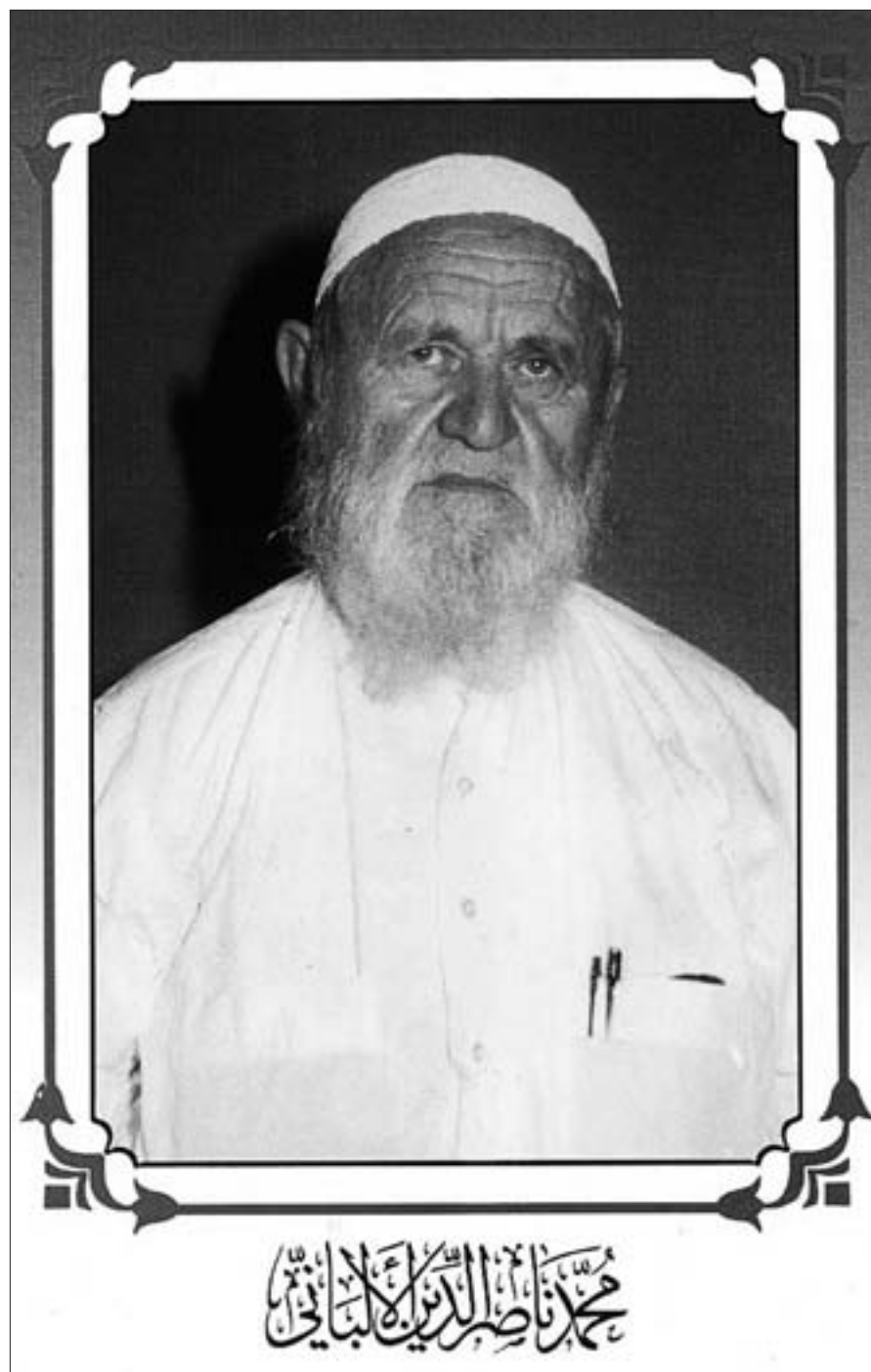
The Wahhabi paradox

Common knowledge considers Shaykh Nasir al-Din al-Albani to be a staunch proponent of Wahhabism, the discourse produced and upheld by the official Saudi religious establishment.¹ This is undoubtedly true in terms of *'aqidah* (creed), yet al-Albani strongly disagrees with the Wahhabis—and especially with their chief representatives, the ulama of the Saudi religious establishment—when it comes to *fiqh* (law). There, al-Albani points to a fundamental contradiction within the Wahhabi tradition: the latter's proponents have advocated exclusive reliance on the Quran, the Sunna, and the consensus of *al-salaf al-salih* (the pious ancestors), yet they have almost exclusively relied on Hanbali jurisprudence for their fatwas—acting therefore as proponents of a particular school of jurisprudence, namely Hanbalism. According to al-Albani, this also applies to Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhab whom he describes as “salafi in creed, but not in fiqh.”

For al-Albani, moreover, being a proper “salafi in fiqh” implies making hadith the central pillar of the juridical process, for hadith alone may provide answers to matters not found in the Quran without relying on the school of jurisprudence. The mother of all religious sciences therefore becomes the “science of hadith,” which aims at re-evaluating the authenticity of known hadiths. According to al-Albani, however, independent reasoning must be excluded from the process: the critique of the *matn* (the content of the hadith) should be exclusively formal, i.e. grammatical or linguistic; only the *sanad* (the hadith's chain of transmitters) may be properly put into question. As a consequence, the central focus of the science of hadith becomes *'ilm al-rijal* (the science of men), also known as *'ilm al-jarh wa-l-ta'dil* (the science of critique and fair evaluation), which evaluates the morality—deemed equivalent to the reliability—of the transmitters. At the same time—and contrary to earlier practices—al-Albani insists that the scope of this re-evaluation must encompass all existing hadiths, even those included in the canonical collections of Bukhari and Muslim, some of which al-Albani went so far as to declare weak.²

Revolutionary interpretations

As a consequence of the peculiarity of his method, al-Albani ended up pronouncing fatwas that ran counter to the wider Islamic consensus, and more specifically to Hanbali/Wahhabi jurisprudence. For instance, he wrote a book in which he redefined the proper gestures and formulae that constitute the Muslim prayer ritual “according to the Prophet's practice”—and contrary to the prescriptions of all established schools of jurisprudence. Also, he stated that *mihhrabs*—the niche found in a mosque indicating the direction of Mecca—were *bid'a* (an innovation) and declared licit to pray in a mosque with one's shoes. Another controversial position was his call for Palestinians to leave the occupied territories since, he claimed, they were unable to practice their faith there as they should—something which is much more important than a piece of land. Finally, al-Albani took a strong stance against indulging in politics, repeating that “the good policy is to abandon politics”—a



phrase implicitly aimed at the Muslim Brotherhood, whose political views he consistently denounced.

The presence of al-Albani in Saudi Arabia—where he was invited in 1961 by his good friend Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Baz to teach at the Islamic University of Medina—prompted embarrassed reactions from the core of the Wahhabi establishment, who disagreed with him but could hardly attack him because of his impeccable Wahhabi credentials in terms of creed. The controversy sparked by his book *The Veil of the Muslim Woman*, in which he argued that Muslim women should not cover their face—a position unacceptable by Saudi standards—, finally gave the Wahhabi establishment the justification needed to get him out of the Kingdom in 1963. He then re-established himself in his country of birth, Syria, before leaving for Jordan in 1979.³

However, the opposition al-Albani encountered from the Wahhabi religious establishment was not merely intellectual. By putting into question the methodological foundations upon which the Wahhabis had built their legitimacy, he was also challenging their position in the Saudi religious field.

From its inception, Wahhabism had established itself as a religious tradition—at the core of which laid a number of key books, both in creed and law. This tradition had been monopolized by a small religious aristocracy from Najd, first centred around Muhammad bin ‘Abd al-Wahhab and his descendants (known as the Al al-Shaykh) before opening up to a small number of other families. In the Saudi system as it took shape, the members of this aristocracy would become the only legitimate transmitters of the Wahhabi tradition; in this context, independent scholars were excluded because they had not received “proper ‘ilm” from “qualified” ulama.

Traditional Wahhabi ‘ilm, therefore, was the fruit of a process of transmission and depended on the number of *ijazas*—a certificate by which a scholar acknowledges the transmission of his knowledge (or part of it) to one of his pupils, and authorizes him to transmit it further—given by respected Wahhabi scholars. This is the very logic al-Albani—who, himself, owned very few of these certificates—would challenge by promoting his critical approach. As a matter of fact, according to al-Albani, transmission has no importance whatsoever, because, every hadith being suspect, the fact that it was narrated by a respected scholar cannot guarantee its authenticity. On the contrary, the important process is accumulation—a good scholar of hadith being someone who has memorized a large sum of hadith and, more importantly, the biographies of a large number of transmitters. Thus, the science of hadith can be measured according to objective criteria unrelated to family, tribe, or regional descent, allowing for a previously absent measure of meritocracy. More importantly, al-Albani’s claim of being more faithful to the spirit of Wahhabism than ‘Abd al-Wahhab himself made the former’s ideas very popular among Salafi youth.

Religious entrepreneurs

For all these reasons, al-Albani’s ideas would rapidly become a means for Salafi religious entrepreneurs from outside the Wahhabi aristocracy to challenge the existing hierarchy. Al-Albani himself quickly gathered a large following, in Saudi Arabia and beyond. He would soon have to be recognized, despite the initial hostility of the Wahhabi religious establishment, as one of the leading figures in Salafism.

In the mid-1960s, a number of al-Albani’s disciples in Medina founded al-Jamaa al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba (The Salafi Group which Commands Good and Forbids Evil), a radical faction of which, led by Juhayman al-‘Utaybi, would storm the grand mosque of Mecca in November 1979. Many of the group’s members—and especially its scholars—were either of Bedouin descent or non-Saudi residents, and were thus marginalized in the religious field. Their activism came, in part at least, as a response to their marginalization.⁴ One of the main religious figures of this group—who was “lucky” enough to have been thrown out of the Kingdom in 1978 and therefore did not take part in the 1979 events—was Muqbil al-Wadi‘i, who subsequently re-established himself in his native Yemen and became the country’s most prominent Salafi scholar.

In the late 1980s, some of al-Albani’s pupils, led by a Medinan shaykh called Rabi’ al-Madkhali, formed an informal religious network generally referred to as al-Jamiyya (“the Jamis”, named after one of their key members, Muhammad Aman al-Jami). Beyond their focus on hadith, the Jamis became known for emphasizing al-Albani’s calls not to indulge in politics and for denouncing those who did. Again, many of the Jamis were of peripheral origin (al-Madkhali was from Jazan, on the Yemeni border, while al-Jami was from Ethiopia) and had therefore been excluded from all leading positions in the religious field. They would finally gain prominence in the early 1990s, when the Saudi government supported them financially and institutionally, in the hope of creating an apolitical ideological counterweight to the Islamist opposition led by the al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Awakening), an informal religio-political movement which appeared in Saudi Arabia

in the 1960s as a the result of a hybridization between Wahhabism, on religious issues, and the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, on political issues.⁵

In the 1990s, a few students of al-Albani would go so far as to challenge both the Wahhabi religious aristocracy and al-Albani himself. Following the teachings of an Indian shaykh called Hamza al-Milibari,⁶ they would promote the centrality of hadith, while criticizing al-Albani for relying, in his critique of hadith, on the methods used by late traditionists—at least so they claimed. On the contrary, they would pride themselves for relying exclusively on the methodology of the early traditionists (that is those anterior to al-Dar Qutni (917-995)) and would therefore name their approach *manhaj al-mutaqaddimin* (the methodology of the early ones). Again, most of these scholars were peripheral figures, such as Sulayman al-‘Alwan, a very

young—al-‘Alwan was born in 1970 and started to become known as a scholar while he was in his twenties—shaykh of non-tribal descent, and ‘Abdallah al-Sa’d, whose family had come from the city of Zubayr in Modern Iraq. The two of them would later become key figures in the Saudi Jihadi trend, challenging the political order after they had challenged the religious order. As a consequence, they would be arrested and jailed after the May 2003 bombings.

Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani’s denunciation of the “Wahhabi paradox” and his promotion of a new approach to the critique of hadith as the pillar of religious knowledge have prompted a revolution within Salafism, challenging the very monopoly of the Wahhabi religious aristocracy. As a consequence, al-Albani’s ideas have given independent Salafi religious entrepreneurs a weapon with which to fight their way into previously very closed circles. Although none have yet achieved al-Albani’s prestige, some have become recognized scholars. Interestingly enough, al-Albani’s rise to prominence as a *de facto* part of an establishment he once rejected has encouraged some of disciples, proponents of the “methodology of the early ones,” to call—along al-Albani’s earlier line—for an even “purer” approach to the critique of hadith. As this shows, the revolutionary power of his method remains intact.

For Al-Albani ...
hadith alone may
provide answers to
matters not
found in the
Quran ...

Notes

1. As opposed to Wahhabism, Salafism refers here to all the hybridations that have taken place since the 1960s between the teachings of Muhammad bin ‘Abd al-Wahhab and other Islamic schools of thought. Al-Albani’s discourse can therefore be a form of Salafism, while being critical of Wahhabism.
2. Stéphane Lacroix, “Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani’s Contribution to Contemporary Salafism,” in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London/New York: Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2008 (forthcoming)).
3. On the controversies surrounding al-Albani, see *ibid*.
4. See Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix, “Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-‘Utaybi Revisited,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 1 (2007): 103-122.
5. For more details, see *ibid*.
6. The book is called *Al-muwāzana bayna al-mutaqaddimin wa-l-muta’akhhirin fī tashīh al-ahādith wa-ta’līlīhā* [The balance between the early ones and the late ones regarding the identification of authentic and weak hadiths].

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