

Middle East  
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One of the salient features of religious life in Yemen in the modern period has been the fading of historically rooted Yemeni forms of Islam. Zaydi scholars, for example, have been reduced to a minority group within the body of the *ulama* and have little say in the running of the country's affairs. The Shafi'i Sufis of the Hadramaut have fared even worse. The most visible form of Islam, and the one actively promoted by the state, claims to be above the sectarian identities of the Yemenis and ultimately adheres to the Salafi school. This requires explanation since Salafism is not usually associated with Yemen's religious and intellectual history.

The most commonly invoked name in official government discourse on religion and law in contemporary Yemen is by far that of Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Shawkani (d. 1834). Shawkani was the chief judge of the Qasimi imamate in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries who had, through his writings and political activities, attempted to mould Yemen's legal and political environment in a Sunni fashion. Shawkani was a Traditionist Sunni, or Salafi, who claimed that his legal and religious opinions were derived from a direct interface with the primary sources of revelation (Qur'an and Hadith), and not from the derivative works of the established schools of law. In so doing, he negates the multiple legal and sectarian divisions of latter-day Muslims. For him, most of the juridical textual legacy from the time of revelation could be ignored in favour of the teachings of *mujtahid* scholars like himself. Embedded in Shawkani's teachings was a call for reform and an overhaul of Islamic legal thought, elements which would later appeal to Muslim states as well as modernist intellectuals, who saw in his ideas a means of reforming their own societies.

Shawkani's vision of social and political order involved establishing a bureaucratic state, the centre of which would be a top-ranking jurist, a chief judge like himself. This jurist would have to have an independent intellect and be the 'renewer' of collective truth; in short, the source to which scholars and rulers alike should properly resort. The shift from Zaydism to Sunnism, which Shawkani had a central hand in effecting, was part of larger transformations in Qasimi state structures. The Qasimi imams, who ruled Yemen from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, were interested in establishing a dynastic state in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Shawkani's vision accommodated their needs; hence an alliance was struck whereby Traditionist scholars legitimized the rule of the Qasimi imams and in return, the imams provided patronage in the form of appointments and protection.

In the Yemeni context, a clear and distinct chain of Shawkani students has perpetuated his legacy to the present day. Shawkani's status as the symbol of both Yemeni nationalism and pan-Islamic reformist thought in a Sunni Traditionist mode has risen considerably since the Yemeni republican revolution in 1962. In addition to major avenues, schools and university halls being named after him, the republic promotes the editing of his works, and officially subscribes to his Traditionist interpretation of Islam. Appeal to his ideas and symbolic status as a much-recognized pan-Islamic reformer has proven to be an effective tool in silencing the more traditional Zaydi opponents of the republican regime. Briefly stated, the argument against the traditional Zaydis runs as follows: Zaydism's intrinsic moderation and acceptance of *mujtahids* allowed a figure like Shawkani to emerge from within the school and be patronized by the Qasimi imams. Therefore, Shawkani's understand-

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ing of Islam is in fact consistent with the *true* teachings of Zaydism. The not so negligible affirmation that Shawkani systematically attempted to demolish the teachings of the Zaydi school in a number of his works is invariably passed over in silence.

Another reason for the allure of Salafi Islam in Yemen is the fact that elements in Shawkani's teachings resonate with specifically modern Muslim concerns about Islam's decline and the necessity for renewal and rejuvenation. By monopolizing his discourse, the Yemeni state has garnered for itself an efficient means to instituting a more standard, or what can be termed 'generic Sunni', interpretation of Islam. And because Shawkani's Salafism has a considerable following across the Muslim world, all provincial and historically rooted conceptions and practices of Islam can be attacked for being atavistic.

The extent to which this 'generic Sunnism' has become dominant in Yemen can be gleaned semiotically by looking at the way most Yemenis pray in mosques nowadays in the regions considered to be Zaydi. Like Malikis – but unlike Shafi'is, Hanafis and Hanbalis – Zaydis practise the *irsal* while praying (i.e. they do not place the right hand over the left, a practice referred to as *damm*, but keep their hands lowered to their sides). Very few Yemenis practise the *irsal* nowadays, and some even make a point of praying in a non-Zaydi fashion. Though anecdotal, these and other bodily practices are important markers of religious identity and reveal a shift to a more Salafi practice of Islam.

## Encounter with a tribesman<sup>2</sup>

In Sa'da, the traditional Zaydi bastion in the country, was a 22-year-old tribesman from 'Usaymat, historically a Zaydi tribe of Hashid. He had been recently recruited by *al-Amn al-Siyasi* (political security service). When asked about the local Zaydis' complaints that their tombs were being desecrated and destroyed by the students of the scientific institute (where the tribesman had been educated) and other 'Wahhabi' sympathizers, his answer was categorical: 'The Hadawis are practising reprehensible innovations [sing. *bid'a*] when they visit their tombs and erect grave stones and domes over them. This is contrary to Islam and must be stopped.'

He insisted on referring to the local Zaydis as Hadawis, revealing that he had accepted a feature in the propaganda war that is waged against them by Sunni Islamists. This consists in asserting that Zayd b. 'Ali (the eponym of the Zaydis) did not establish a school or sect – thus no one has the right to use his name – and that it was the ardent followers of al-Hadi Yahya b. al-Husayn<sup>1</sup> who had established a wayward sect, thereby placing themselves beyond the pale of orthodoxy. Furthermore, his statement about visiting tombs clearly indicates that this young man had imbibed and accepted the Traditionist/Wahhabi discourse on graves – an important leitmotif in their literature. The proof offered for his assertions was a recitation of a number of Sunni prophetic traditions about the reprehensibility of erecting and visiting graves. Perhaps the most re-

markable feature of this encounter is that this man no longer identified with the historical school to which his forefathers had belonged, and he had the intellectual and scriptural wherewithal to vilify it. In comparison with his tribal ancestors, his knowledge of Islam was more considerable, but the content and the forms it took bore closer affinity with that of a contemporary Islamist in Riyadh.

## The way Zaydis have coped

Republican state policies have effectively marginalized traditional Zaydi scholars from the political arena. With few notable exceptions, such scholars have not benefited in terms of administrative or political appointments. Zaydis often speak of a combined onslaught by the state and by the Wahhabis, whose influence has been especially significant in the Sa'da province. The only organized effort by Zaydis to reclaim influence has come belatedly with the establishment of Hizb al-Haqq (The Party of Truth) in 1990 after the unification of the two Yemens. Al-Haqq's general secretary, Sayyid Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Shami, does not mince words in explaining why the party was established:

*Look, Saudi Arabia is pouring lots and lots of money into Yemen to promote its own version of Wahhabi Islam. This is actually an irrational and uncompromising version of our religion, which we can do without. So, we need to counter those efforts... and to fight intellectual advances by Wahhabism into Yemen.*

It is implicit here that the republican government has allowed this to take place and is therefore guilty by association. Politically, al-Haqq has proved ineffectual. It won only two seats in the 1993 parliamentary elections and none in 1997. In part, this is due to the ambiguous nature of a Zaydi political party operating in a republican context where it is all too easy to identify it with a call for reviving the imamate. In an unsuccessful attempt to clarify matters, al-Shami and other eminent Zaydi scholars issued a statement in which they declare their abandonment of the institution of the imamate. The imamate, they assert, is a historical construct that is no longer valid. The most important matter for the present age is to attend to the welfare (*salah*) and the betterment (*islah*) of the Muslim community. The latter, alone, has the right to appoint a leader, who is not an imam in the strict sense, but rather a hired servant (*ajir*). Finally, this Muslim leader may be descended from any lineage and belong to any race as long as the affairs of the *umma* are safe and sound. The institution which once defined Zaydism was thus done away with in a few pages.

A number of Zaydi scholars do not agree with the positions taken by al-Haqq's leadership, whether it is on the issue the imamate or regarding participation in the political processes in Sana'a. They remain formally outside the party, preferring to lead a

life on the geographical and political margins of Yemen. When unable to change an unjust regime, Zaydism advocates the practice of 'emigration' (*hijra*) from the abode of injustice to a more secure area where a life devoted to righteous living can be pursued. A number of leading Zaydis, such as Majd al-Din al-Mu 'ayyadi and Badr al-Din al-Huthi, live in rural areas where they teach. Thus far, no one has claimed the imamate. Instead, the more senior scholars have encouraged a younger generation of Zaydi activists to pursue activities in the fields of education, religious exhortation, and the editing and publication of Zaydi manuscripts. The two most prominent men of this younger generation are al-Murtada al-Mahatwari and Muhammad 'Izzan.

By and large, the efforts of traditional Zaydis to resuscitate their vision of religious and political order have been limited and mainly defensive, reacting to policies undertaken by the state or their Salafi opponents. Both in ideological and political terms, the response of the Zaydis has been meagre, being confined to the publication of texts and the establishment of a small number of schools and institutes. The story of the Zaydis and their detractors continues to unfold, but the outcome appears to have been determined in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century when the state chose to support Traditionist scholars such as Shawkani, whose intellectual heirs continue to dominate the juridical and political scene in Yemen. ◆

## Notes

1. Died in 911 CE, the first Zaydi imam in Yemen.
2. This encounter took place in 1994 during the author's fieldwork.

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