THE EVOLUTION OF THE SALAFIYYA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
THROUGH THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF TAQI AL-DIN AL-HILALI

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the origins and development of a key religious orientation in contemporary Islamic thought. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the term “Salafiyya” was linked to a transnational movement of Islamic reform whose proponents strove to reconcile their faith with the Enlightenment and modernity. Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida were among its foremost representatives. Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, the Salafi movement became inexplicably antithetical to Islamic modernism. Its epicenter moved closer to Saudi Arabia and the term Salafiyya became virtually synonymous with Wahhabism.

The evolution of the Salafiyya and its apparent turn from modernism to purism, within less than a century, is a phenomenon that remains shrouded in mystery and marked by contradiction. To this day, it causes recurrent problems among scholars in various disciplines who try to understand the genealogy of the movement. Is there really a common lineage between the two types of Salafiyya? This dissertation answers in the affirmative and endeavors to demonstrate how the meaning and substance of this religious orientation changed so drastically.

The life and thought of Taqi al-Din al-Hilali (1894-1987), a Moroccan Salafi and globetrotter who lived through the various stages of the evolution of the Salafiyya, serves
as a case study. Because of his contacts with the most prominent Salafi figures of the twentieth century, both modernist and puristic, al-Hilali provides us with an unprecedented opportunity to shed light on the connections between these actors. By putting his experiences in context and showing how the changes in his religious ethos corresponded to larger trends, this dissertation argues that the rise of a transnational and generic Islamic consciousness, especially after the First World War, facilitated the growth of religious purism within key Salafi circles. The Salafis who most emphasized religious unity and conformism across boundaries usually developed puristic inclinations that proved useful in the second half of the twentieth century. Due in part to their affinities with the Saudi religious establishment, they survived the postcolonial transition and kept thriving while the modernist Salafis eventually disappeared.
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Note on Transliterations and Sources

For the transliteration of Arabic terms, I have followed the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* system. Hence, I have only used diacritical marks on italicized technical terms. All proper names (personal names, names of places, names of groups and political parties) as well as titles of books contain no diacritics, except for the ‘ayn and the medial and terminal hamza. The tāʾ marbūṭa is rendered as -a (not -ah) except when the word forms an idāfa, in which case the ending is rendered as -at. This dissertation also includes a number of words and names from North Africa that are usually spelled according to the French method and are sometimes of Berber origins. For the sake of consistency, I have chosen to standardize their rendition within reason. For example, I have written al-Turris, al-Fasi and Gannun instead of Torrès, al-Fassi and Guennoun.

Regarding footnotes, each chapter of the dissertation functions as an independent unit and provides full citations for books and articles that may already have been cited in full in a preceding chapter. Therefore, abridged references always refer to works previously cited in full within the same chapter. The final bibliography, for its part, is listed alphabetically. The reader must disregard the Arabic article “al-” except for authors who write in a European language and chose to capitalize the article in their last name (as in “Al-Rasheed, Madawi”). Another exception is the Arabic “Al” (family), as in “Al al-Shaykh, Ibrahim” (which is listed under the letter “A”).

Dates are cited according to the Common Era calendar (C.E.) and all translations are mine unless otherwise specified.
Introduction

In the summer of 1999, during a brief stay at the University of Chicago, I found myself sitting next to a group of three American Muslims who were casually discussing religious topics between two classes. At one point in the conversation, one of them reflected upon the statements of his friends and clamored very distinctively: “I hate the Salafis!” As a novice to the field of Islamic studies, I was immediately puzzled by this sentence. The only Salafis I had ever heard about were the Islamic modernists portrayed in most textbooks on the history of the Middle East and, so I thought, in Albert Hourani’s seminal study Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age.¹ Naively, I wondered how these conciliatory reformists who had lived prior to the Second World War could somehow repulse a young convert from the north side of Chicago.

It soon appeared that the short sentence I overheard was significant in at least two respects. On the one hand, it expressed, in a nutshell, the extent to which the Salafiyya is a delicate topic that can generate intense devotion as well as fierce aversion. It has indeed become such a hotly debated issue among today’s Sunni Muslims that some exchanges, be they oral or written, often verge on sectarian disputes. On the other hand, my colleague’s comment underlined how ambiguous (and in some cases downright perplexing) the definition of a Salafi’s religious identity could be. I later found out that the Salafis he had in mind were not Islamic modernists, but Wahhabis and Wahhabi-

¹ Albert Hourani, Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Hourani himself did not refer to these Islamic modernists as “Salafis,” but scholars often assume that he did and that his work is, in large measure, a reference on the modernist Salafiyya.
inspired Salafis, that is to say, the Muslims who embody the most puristic current in contemporary Sunni Islam. However, this clarification begged the real problem, for I still failed to understand how a single word—Salafiyya—could convey such different religious outlooks.

In keeping with these initial inquiries, this dissertation examines the evolution of one of the most significant transnational currents of Islamic thought in the twentieth-century. A hundred years ago, the Salafiyya was a broad movement of Islamic reform whose proponents strove to reconcile their faith with modernity. Its alleged founders, the pan-Islamic thinker and activist Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897) and his Egyptian associate Muhammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905), set out to prevent what they perceived as the growing threat of secularism and atheism on traditional Islamic beliefs. They argued that some of the most fundamental values of the Enlightenment—reason and progress—were inherent to pristine Islam and needed to be acknowledged and cultivated. For decades, Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike have depicted this Salafiyya as a liberal and moderate modernizing force whose agents could be found from Morocco to Indonesia.

Yet, by the end of the twentieth century, the Salafiyya had become inexplicably antithetical to Islamic modernism. It came to promote a puristic understanding of Islam in which literalistic inclinations checked rational investigations, and the notion of progress and the ethical underpinnings of modern values were altogether regarded with suspicion. As a token of this puzzling reversal, the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, as well as some
militant jihadists, are now among the many Muslims who refer to themselves as Salafis.\(^2\)

For the most puristic and upright among them, Islam should not be adapted or reinterpreted: rather, it needs to be understood and practiced as it was by the first three generations of pious Muslims. Therefore, late twentieth-century Salafis focused on correct beliefs and proper devotional behavior, sought to uncover heresies and religious innovations, and insisted on drawing strict borders between what is Islamic and un-Islamic.

The evolution of the Salafiyya in the twentieth century is a phenomenon that remains shrouded in mystery and marked by contradiction. The apparent incongruity between the old and the new acceptations of the term has been a source of confusion. How could a concept that was synonymous with Islamic modernism, over a few decades, become synonymous with rigorism and anti-syncretism in matters of religion? Some scholars have tried to sidestep the question by assuming that a parallel puristic Salafiyya had always existed since medieval times.\(^3\) Others have claimed that twentieth-century Wahhabis merely appropriated the Islamic modernists’ label in order to increase the credibility of their own doctrines.\(^4\) A third explanation based on a sketchy historical

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\(^4\) This second explanation may be found, without empirical evidence, in Muhammad Sa‘id Ramadan al-Buti, _al-Salafiyya: marhala zamaniiyya mubaraka la madhhab islami_, 2nd edition (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1998), 236.
outline suggests that the Salafiyya originated among Islamic modernists in Egypt, passed
to Hasan al-Banna and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood after Rashid Rida’s death in
1935, and then migrated to Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and 1960s when the Islamists fled
Nasser’s repression.\(^5\)

However, these assertions are either laconic or unsubstantiated, and ultimately
unconvincing. The lack of proper research on the evolution of the Salafiyya is now
becoming a serious problem for scholars and journalists alike. Is there really a
genealogical link between the modernist Salafiyya of Muhammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) and
the puristic Salafiyya of the Saudi mufti ʿAbd al-ʿAziz ibn Baz (d. 1999)? Whereas
recent studies deny any common lineage between the two trends,\(^6\) this dissertation
answers in the affirmative and endeavors to demonstrate why the discourse of the
Salafiyya changed so drastically in less than a century, why puristic modes of thought
triumphed over modernist ones, and how the Salafi ethos was affected by that
transformation.

The life and thought of Taqi al-Din al-Hilali (1894-1987), a Moroccan Salafi who
resided in many regions of the Muslim world and lived throughout the various stages of
the Salafiyya’s evolution, will serve as a case study. Because of his close contacts with
the most prominent figures of the Salafi movement, both modernist and puristic, al-Hilali
provides us with an unprecedented opportunity to shed light on the links between these
\(^6\) One specialist who recently denied the existence of a connection between the two types of Salafiyya is
(May 2006): 212.
various actors. By putting his experiences in context and showing how the changes in his religious ethos corresponded to larger trends, this dissertation will argue that the turn from modernism to purism was a gradual process that occurred in a series of steps. While each of these steps resulted from specific historical conditions and challenges, they all indicate that the rise of a transnational Islamic consciousness facilitated the growth and success of religious purism within the Salafi movement. As religious magazines, radio, international conferences and modern means of transportation continued to compress time and space, the leading figures of the Salafi movement—especially in the Middle East—increasingly envisioned the umma as a single and reachable community. In the context of the early twentieth century, they not only struggled against internal religious divisions, which they saw as a cause of global weakness; they eventually promoted a more generic Islamic identity in reaction to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the widespread challenge of colonialism. The Salafis who most internalized this transnational and generic understanding of Islam usually developed puristic inclinations that served them well after independence. Through their affinities with the Saudi religious establishment, they survived the postcolonial transition and thrived, whereas the modernist Salafis disappeared.

It must be noted, however, that the globalizing dimension of the modern era did not create Islamic purism per se. On the contrary, some readers will soon realize that puristic Salafis hold time-honored views. The quest for religious unity, purity and

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conformism through an unmediated return to the formative texts, for instance, is far from new in Islamic history. It has antecedents in both the medieval and the pre-modern periods. Yet the context of the modern era has offered unprecedented opportunities and incentives for the promotion and diffusion of this type of reformist project. Moreover, as we shall see in the first chapter, the success (and eventual commodification) of the labels “Salafiyya” and “Salafi” is also a modern phenomenon. Puristic Muslims of prior eras were never so insistent on identifying themselves by such terms.

The reader should also be aware that this dissertation bears first and foremost on the Salafiyya and is not a biography per se, as some may have wished it to be. Since I began my research in 2003, I have indeed noticed an increasing interest for Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and his work, both in the West and in the Arab world. One Moroccan-based website in Arabic is now devoted to him, while another, run by an Islamic activist who studied under him in Morocco, provides some biographical details in English. These recent initiatives aim at filling an obvious gap. Indeed, despite his fascinating life, al-Hilali is often unknown outside of Salafi circles, even in his native country. However, his name usually sounds familiar to Muslims in the United States and Britain, because he co-authored a Saudi-sponsored translation of the Qurʾan, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qurʾan in the English Language*, which has been widely distributed and reedited many times. Nevertheless, the primary focus of this dissertation is not to

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8 These two websites are [www.alhilali.net](http://www.alhilali.net) and [www.alhiwar.org/en](http://www.alhiwar.org/en) respectively.

document all of al-Hilali’s life and thought. I have only emphasized them insofar as they provide a valuable vantage point from which to examine the Salafiyya and its evolution throughout the twentieth century.

This approach may seem too ambitious to some, but its relevance is well worth the audacity. Not only is it possible to venture beyond the safety of microscopic historical analysis; it is also rewarding as long as a number of provisions are made clear from the onset. Hence, this study does not intend to provide a factual synthesis of the Salafiyya’s history, nor does it pretend to cover all of its facets, exponents or manifestations in every country. Such warnings should neither be understood as a disclaimer of academic liability nor as a lack of awareness of diversity. Rather, they bear witness to a series of conscious choices I have made regarding the subject matter of this dissertation as well as the historian’s craft in general. First, because the Salafiyya is an elusive intellectual phenomenon to which few studies have so far been devoted, it would be unwise to choose a comprehensive approach, as Gilles Kepel did—and could afford to do—with respect to Islamism. Second, I do not think that a strictly narrow study is the most purposeful alternative. I concur with the opinion of Moroccan historian Abdallah Laroui who argued that case studies must retain a certain degree of generality in order to reach out to others. If one wishes to address the most pressing questions regarding the genealogy of the Salafiyya and generate interdisciplinary interest for them, one should make sure that the study yields some observations and conclusions that are accessible, meaningful and

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useful to non-historians.

Therefore, I have chosen to diverge slightly from the pattern of an intellectual biography and to approach the subject matter from both narrow and broad perspectives. Through al-Hilali’s journey, I discuss a number of significant snapshots and transitional periods in the history of the Salafiyya. The dissertation comprises seven chapters. It begins with a critical analysis of the history, origins, and incipient meaning of the Salafiyya (chapter one). Then, the dissertation examines six different situations, trends or conjunctures that explain its transformation throughout the twentieth century: the inherent tensions, or poles, that existed within the modernist Salafiyya (chapter two); the modernist Salafis’ rehabilitation of Wahhabism in the 1920s for reasons of socio-political expediency (chapter three); the efforts at religious standardization and conformism in response to widespread colonialism (chapter four); the simultaneous promotion of Islamic nationalism under the aegis of Shakib Arslan (chapter five); the modernist Salafis’ loss of relevance and political leverage in the post-colonial era (chapter six); and finally, the triumph of the puristic Salafiyya and its epistemological underpinnings in the wake of the Arab Cold war (chapter seven). Primary sources for this work include al-Hilali’s own corpus of religious writings, journalistic work, memoirs, and personal archives as well as a variety of other Salafi material dating from the 1920s to the 1980s and originating mostly from Morocco, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

One should nonetheless keep in mind that the broader aspects of this work entail a number of hurdles. Admittedly, it is difficult to characterize the Salafiyya as a whole, at
any given time in the twentieth century. The transnational dimension of the movement, for instance, created conditions such that it evolved differently and unevenly in different localities. Moreover, evolution means that Salafi ideas were often subject to variations, changes and breaks over time, at a pace that was not the same everywhere. Thus, I am well aware that the Salafiyya was never uniform in time and space; yet I do not believe that an equal treatment of all regions over the course of nearly a hundred years should be a priority. Above all, what is critically needed is an attempt to identify and understand the historical watersheds that changed the trajectory of the Salafi ethos. The present dissertation should therefore be viewed as a departure point that submits a framework for the intellectual history of the Salafiyya in the twentieth century. I trust that this framework can be refined in the future, as geographical and temporal gaps are filled.

Heuristic hurdles also complicate the study of the individuals who embodied the Salafiyya. Because the Salafiyya was never a structured organization with a membership, there is no absolute criterion for determining who qualifies as a Salafi. Self-proclamations, coupled with acknowledgments from peers, remain among the best indications that are available to us, even if they cannot always be taken at face value. Moreover, it is not easy to know how many individuals among the masses developed a sensibility to the Salafiyya, or how everyday Salafis actually conceived of their religious commitment. Considering the scope and elusiveness of the Salafiyya, this hurdle may never be surmounted. Therefore, the present dissertation can provide valid indications regarding the historical trajectory of the Salafi movement, but cannot claim to convey the
voices of all Salafis. The reader will notice, for instance, that chapters three, four and five discuss significant ideas and campaigns that did not resonate with all Salafis, and should not be deemed representative of all Salafis.

Nevertheless, I have tried to emphasize tendencies, events, groups and writers that, in my opinion, carried more weight than others. This is why chapters three, four and five focus primarily on the leading Salafi circles of the Arab East, where I also locate the Salafiyya’s main epicenter. At the same time, my conclusions are based on sources produced by lettered elites (even though the views of individual thinkers within that category were not always consistent or consonant). Thus, I also lent an attentive ear to the main figures of the Salafiyya, namely, those who spearheaded the movement and commanded enough authority to articulate this particular interpretation of Islam. Given the current state of the historical literature on the Salafiyya, I believe this to be the most appropriate way of approaching the subject matter.

The Question of Typology

On the positive side, this broader approach makes it possible to address conceptual issues that are essential for understanding contemporary Islamic thought and grasping its nuances. Chief among them is typology, whose importance should in no way be minimized. It is, after all, the first analytical device to which any person instinctively resorts when reflecting upon Islam, Muslims, and Islamic activists. Unfortunately, the degree of typological imprecision found in the media, governmental statements, and in some academic circles remains highly problematic and continues to fuel
misunderstandings. Building upon an observation made by Thomas Kühn, one may compare the categories we use to define and distinguish between different Islamic actors to prescription glasses: they are tools designed to provide us with a sharper perception of reality. Yet if the lenses are inappropriate, the same glasses can further blur our vision and become detrimental, even without our being aware of it.12

In 2006, for instance, a large number of people either praised or decried George W. Bush’s use of the label “Islamic fascists” to describe Islamic terrorists. Some opposed it for reasons of political correctness or out of deference for Islam and Muslims, while others rejoiced at the President of the United States allegedly calling a spade a spade. However, few of the people who either opposed or applauded Bush’s use of the term “fascist” ever questioned what it meant in the first place. They knew it had a strongly pejorative connotation and was somehow antithetical to individual freedom; it most likely brought the notion of political violence to their mind as well. But beyond these vague negative images, what exactly is an Islamic fascist supposed to be? A Muslim who shares Mussolini’s conception of romantic nationalism and irredentism? A Muslim who condones the execution of political opponents? A Muslim who makes virility a political virtue? Some might argue that “fascism” applies to the terrorists’ dictatorial and totalitarian ambitions; but because al-Qa‘ida only voices grievances and does not even have a clear political platform, this interpretation would be hard to justify. Clearly, the main reason for which the term “Islamic fascists” should be avoided is that it hardly

possesses any intellectual value. It is a simplistic analogy that can, at best, give some people the false impression that they have now gained a better understanding of Bin Laden and his acolytes, their goals, and their motivations.

Far from being an academic fancy, careful typological distinctions are the initial step toward a more sophisticated identification and comprehension of various currents of thought and activism. The best recipe for gross misinterpretation is indeed to trivialize typology, as the term “Islamic fascists” does. One cannot hope to understand Islamic intellectual history and its most recent developments without at least a set of basic conceptual tools and reasonable definitions. Thus, by studying the evolution of the Salafiyya in the twentieth century, this dissertation will strive to refine and further explicate some key categories whereby to characterize different strands of contemporary Islamic thought. For better or worse, I have tried to restrict the number of typological distinctions to a minimum without sacrificing analytical sensibility. For all their quality and attention to details, the most exhaustive typological efforts sometimes miscarry their intended purpose of clarification and often end up being ignored by fellow scholars—not to mention the general public—who find their countless subcategories tedious or inconvenient.13

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13 One example of excellent scholarship that nonetheless fails, in my opinion, to achieve its intended purpose is William Shepard, “The Diversity of Islamic Thought: Towards a Typology” in *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer M. Nafi (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 61-103. Likewise, the Moroccan philosopher Muhammad ʿAbid al-Jabiri distinguished between four different types of Salafiyya, many of which are, in my opinion, inappropriate and misleading. Sometimes, these efforts misfire despite their noble purpose. One scholar who recently applauded al-Jabiri’s contribution to underscoring the complexity and diversity of the Salafiyya ended up using such a lax definition of the term that she could label virtually any Muslim reformer since the seventeenth
The first concept that needs to be delineated is, obviously, the Salafiyya. Its nature and meaning changed so much over the past hundred years that one must acknowledge at least two potential ways of defining it. For this reason, I distinguish between two ideal-types: a modernist Salafiyya and a puristic Salafiyya. I have no intention of demonstrating that one of them is a more accurate or authentic interpretation of Islam than the other; these are questions that concern the believers rather than the historians of ideas. However, the principle of neutrality has limitations that depend on one’s scholarly endeavor. Because this dissertation deals with the question of change in religious ethos, it cannot use a completely value-neutral language and cannot turn a blind eye to conflicting understandings of Islam and the scriptures. Doing so would not yield any useful analysis, nor would it lead to a better comprehension of the evolution of the Salafiyya. In short, it would not be scholarly virtuous or purposeful to refrain from talking of a “modernist” and a “puristic” Salafiyya, so long as it is understood that these adjectives convey no objective or absolute moral values.

**The Modernist Salafiyya**

This first ideal-type represents the Salafiyya as most Western scholars have understood it until recently, that is, as the prime example of Islamic modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More specifically, it refers to the modernist century as a Salafi. See Zakia Belhachmi, “Al-Salafiyya, Feminism, and Reforms in the Nineteenth-Century Arab-Islamic Society,” *The Journal of North African Studies*, 9, 4 (2004): 63-90.  

religious thought expounded by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad ʿAbduh, and Rashid Rida. As we shall see, chapter one argues that the concept of modernist Salafiyya is best applicable to this last individual. al-Afghani and ʿAbduh, for their part, may be branded as Salafis for reasons of convenience, but this usage is somewhat anachronistic. Needless to say, the concise definition found at the top of this introduction is not perfect and remains subject to criticism. First, one must acknowledge that the modernist Salafiyya was neither a formal movement nor a monolithic school of thought. Rather, it was a broad and multifaceted intellectual and religious orientation. While there were many common denominators uniting ʿAbduh and Rida, for instance, the two men did not always have the exact same view of Islam, nor did they agree on every issue. However, their objectives, and some of their core beliefs and attitudes, were similar enough to justify their inclusion in the same analytical category.

Second, equating the modernist Salafiyya to Islamic modernism raises yet another typological problem. In an excellent book published in 2005, Khaled Abou El Fadl argued that the label “moderate” was preferable to “modernist” for a variety of reasons that are perfectly valid, especially in the context of a discussion on Islam in general. I have nonetheless chosen not to follow Abou El Fadl’s terminology for three main reasons. The first one is that I use the term “modernist” in a more restricted sense and only apply it to people who introduced themselves, or were primarily known, as proponents of the Salafiyya. Therefore, I do not suggest that all Muslims who argue that

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15 Hourani, v, 344.
Islam is compatible with modern ideas belong to a one grand and imprecise category (the introduction to chapter six addresses this point and provide a few concrete examples of non-Salafi modernists). The second reason is that, unlike Abou El Fadl, I refer to modernism in its old theological acceptation. In the first decades of the twentieth century, modernism meant the restatement of a religious tradition in terms that were intelligible and appealing to the rational and increasingly atheistic minds of the modern elite. In other words, modernism was a religious reaction to the disenchantment of the world—a believer’s way out of a major dilemma, namely, that of “unintelligent religion fighting against irreligious intelligence.” Since this is exactly what the modernist Salafis set out to do, they fully deserve their epithet. Finally, the third reason is that I am reluctant to privilege the term “moderate,” because it is too often understood in political terms, as if it only applied to Islamic activists who accept democracy or favor non-violence. Obviously, the dichotomy between “moderate” and “radical” also applies to the religious spectrum. In that sense, the term “moderate” would, it is true, fully correspond to the modernist Salafis’ values. But in order to avoid undue political overtones or confusion, I have preferred to base my typology on the word “modernist” instead of “moderate.”

Readers will find a more substantial definition of this modernist Salafiyya throughout the first and second chapters of the dissertation. For now, it suffices to say that I also refer to this ideal-type, in many instances, as the “early twentieth-century Salafiyya” or the “progressive Salafiyya” (al-salafiyya al-taqaddumiyya), as one elder

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Moroccan activist suggested me. I consider that the adjective “progressive,” though controversial and perspectival, is an appropriate one insofar as I apply it to a current of thought whose ultimate objectives were openly forward-looking and inspired by the achievements of the Enlightenment, for which progress was the central leitmotiv. Early twentieth-century Salafis proceeded from the belief that the *umma* was lagging behind and needed to bridge its technical and philosophical gap with the West in order to become successful again. In that sense, the notion of progress captures another essential aspect of the modernist Salafiyya and clearly differentiates it from the puristic Salafiyya, even though the proponents of the latter claim to be progressive in their own way.\(^\text{18}\)

However, as one scholar recently remarked, this does not mean that progress has an absolute positive value and is always synonymous with better, smarter, or more advanced.\(^\text{19}\) To say that modernist Salafis were progressive may be an acceptable factual statement; but in the wake of the School of Frankfurt and critical theory, one can choose to dispute the merits of the Enlightenment and the progress it was supposed to bring about.\(^\text{20}\) The modernist Salafiyya is not immune to this kind of critique. Indeed, some of

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\(^{18}\) Some puristic Salafis insist that their rigorist understanding of Islam is not backward because it promotes technical progress and offers a moral system that they claim is far better than the corrupt values of the West. See Mustafa Hilmi, *Qawa'id al-manhaj al-salafi wa-l-nasaq al-islami fi masa'il al-ulahiyya wa-l-'alam wa-l-insan 'inda al-shaykh al-islam Ibn Taymiyya* (Cairo: Dar al-Ansar, 1972), 50-53.


the Muslim intellectuals who now exemplify the progressive trend have a rather poor opinion of Muhammad ʿAbduh and the Salafists of the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{21}

**The Puristic Salafiyya**

This second ideal-type should not be understood as a mirror image of the modernist Salafiyya. Despite major differences, the two possess common features with respect to theology and epistemology. The main difference is, obviously, that this second type of Salafiyya is one of the most puristic religious currents in contemporary Sunni Islam. Abou El Fadl, who chose to refer to this strand as “Islamic Puritanism,” describes it as a general orientation that is “[…] intolerant of competing points of view and considers pluralist realities to be a form of contamination of the unadulterated truth.\textsuperscript{22}” I largely subscribe to this definition, though one can find occasional exceptions where puristic Muslims are willing to concede some latitude or accept divergences of opinion in legal matters.\textsuperscript{23} The following account, in which the Syrian scholar Muhammad Saʿid Ramadan al-Buti narrates one encounter with a puristic Salafi, is a good example of the religious attitude that characterizes our second ideal-type:

One night, we were performing the evening prayer in some Arab country with a group of learned men and intellectuals. After the prayer, one of us raised his hand to invoke God and the rest of us began saying “amen” in response to his invocation (\textit{duʿāʾ}). Then, one of the men who were present stood up—he was

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\textsuperscript{21} One example is Mohammed Arkoun, \textit{Pour une critique de la raison islamique} (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1984), 59.
\textsuperscript{22} Abou El Fadl, 18.
\end{flushleft}
Salafi of creed—and withdrew from the group so as not to witness this abomination and partake in it with us. I told him: “For what reason [do you consider] this matter forbidden?” He replied: “Invoking God after the prayer is not part of the prophet’s guidance; rather, he performed the invocation during the prayer!”

al-Buti claims that this man’s error was not to hold such a belief, but to turn it into an absolute truth while rejecting out of hand the possibility that another valid interpretation of the formative texts could exist. Obviously, this is a detractors’ view of the puristic Salafiyya, just as Abou El Fadl’s aforementioned definition (as well as his decision to use the pejorative label “Puritanism”) is no less a rebuke of contemporary Islamic purism. A puristic Salafi would object and retort that his or her religious orientation is nothing but true Islam, which any Muslim must respect, protect, and adhere to. However, it is precisely their high degree of exclusiveness and assertiveness that distinguishes puristic Salafis from most Sunni Muslims. Their religious ethos combines an inflexible and often peremptory understanding of Islam with the unwavering certitude of professing the sole divine truth based on irrefutable textual proofs.

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24 al-Buti, 238.
25 Ibid., 238-239.
26 Other interpretations of Islam can be no less peremptory, but often are usually less exclusivist than the puristic Salafiyya. Hanafi activists, for example, can be extremely harsh toward Muslims who deny the validity of traditional schools of law. They can even become downright intolerant of their detractors, be they Ibn Taymiyya, Rashid Rida or the Wahhabis. Nevertheless, contemporary Hanafi activists tend to acknowledge that the structure of traditional Sunni Islam allows for diversity. As a result, they are also likely to accept the idea that a Muslim may choose to follow the Maliki rite, for instance, instead of the Hanafi one. For a case in point, see Hüseyin Hilmi Isik, Answer to an Enemy of Islam: This is the Refutation of the Lies and Slanders Which a Man of No Madhhab Named Rashid Rida of Egypt, Who Appeared in Disguise of a Religious Man, Wrote Against Islamic Savants in his Book Muhawarat (Istanbul: Isik Kitabevi, 1975). The book has since been reedited over a dozen times.
It may also be said that these Salafis are puristic because, as a rule, they refrain from venturing into uncharted religious seas. When facing a dilemma, they tend to opt for the most restrictive or less permissive solution in order to avoid innovations or possible sins, as did the puristic Salafi in al-Buti’s story when he decided to walk away from the rest of the group. This attitude is far from novel in Islamic history. In the ninth century, Ibn Hanbal is said to have abstained from eating watermelon because he did not know for sure if the prophet had ever eaten it or not.\(^{27}\) In many ways, today’s puristic Salafis reproduce the same approach to religious matters, which leads them to share three interrelated traits: scripturalism, literalism, and anti-syncretism. These terms shall be repeated regularly throughout the dissertation, for I use them as markers of religious purism. Precise definitions are thus in order.

By scripturalism, I mean that puristic Salafis consider canonical Islamic scriptures—even when their validity is debatable—far safer than any other criterion of truth. Among the lower criteria are secondary sources and human reasoning, whereas esoteric knowledge is rejected out of hand because it is not accessible to all and allegedly enables privileged individuals to unveil the secrets of this world and the next. In some extreme cases, this scripturalist approach verges on hadith fetishism. Puristic Salafis are generally reluctant to question the authority and legally binding nature of sound (\textit{sahih}) and good (\textit{hasan}) hadiths, even if they are reported in only one collection, result from a

single chain of transmission (āḥādī), or merely concerns etiquette (adab).\(^{28}\) In chapter seven, we shall see how this scripturalism influences the puristic Salafis’ conception of informed legal reasoning (ijtihād). It is also worth noting that such a high degree of scripturalism makes the puristic Salafiyya an exclusively Sunni phenomenon. Because the belief in the existence of an esoteric knowledge that was transmitted from generation to generation through the prophet’s descendents is central to Shi‘i theology, all branches of Shi‘ism are, by that very fact, incompatible with our second ideal-type.\(^{29}\)

Puristic Salafis are also inclined toward literalism in the sense that they avoid speculation and allegorical interpretations (ta‘wil) when reading the Qur‘an and the hadiths. They usually prefer to adhere to the letter rather than the spirit of a text in order to keep away from a potentially wrong or whimsical understanding of Islam. For instance, a group of senior Wahhabi religious scholars ruled that the traditional bowing in karate is unlawful, even if one only bows the head; the reason is that it could be tantamount to a kind of worship, whereas the sacred texts of Islam stipulate that worship is for God alone.\(^{30}\) Nevertheless, one should not think of puristic Salafis as mindless readers who do not ponder on the meaning of texts. Few of them would be literalistic enough to claim, for example, that the only valid way for Muslims to pay their mandatory alms-tax at the end of Ramadan (ṣadāqat al-fiṭr) is in barley or in dates because one

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sound hadith only specifies these two types of food. Puristic Salafis recognize that this would be an absurd rule in countries where no such products grow. Thus, they allow Muslims to make donations in their local staple food, but are often unwilling to carry the analogy further and allow equivalent payments in cash or inedible goods.\textsuperscript{31}

The third distinctive characteristic of the puristic Salafis is their religious anti-syncretism, that is, their complete dedication to ridding Islam from all the exogenous or allegedly exogenous elements that may have crept into its creed and rituals over the centuries.\textsuperscript{32} Many of these accretions are blamed on foreign intellectual influences, ranging from post-Socratic philosophy to Western social and political thought. As for the Islamic virginity that puristic Salafis claim to be restoring, it is always synonymous with simplicity and clarity. The following statement by a Pakistani Salafi who extolled Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab, the founder of the Wahhabi movement in eighteenth-century Arabia, encapsulates the value that is accorded to anti-syncretism: “Read the whole Kitabut-Tauhid [a famous short book written by Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab] and you will not find the slightest sign of any complexity, mystification, superstition, irrelevant things, syllogistic reasoning, or Greek sophistry.\textsuperscript{33}”

By virtue of this supposed absence of contamination, the Pakistani author praised Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s methodology for being entirely Qurʿanic—a vague


term intended to convey that his work was intellectually pure.\textsuperscript{34} Obviously, Muslim 
opponents of Wahhabism have a very different appreciation of this anti-syncretic 
approach. A few years ago, one of them argued that Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s 
 writings were embarrassingly vacuous and that his \textit{Kitab al-tawhid} was comparable to the 
notes of a student.\textsuperscript{35}

At the same time, it is true that the term “syncretism” has been subject to much 
criticism in the field of religious studies, even though scholars continue to use it and, in 
some cases, try to rehabilitate it. More specifically, the concept has been decried for 
being too essentialist and pejorative, that is, for conveying the idea that syncretistic 
religions are an inherently impure “mishmash” of different beliefs and practices.\textsuperscript{36} For the 
purposes of this dissertation, however, such implications do not constitute an impediment 
to analysis; rather, they reflect a key aspect of the puristic Salafis’ religious discourse. 
Indeed, puristic Salafis are openly essentialist and do not hesitate to refer to many 
interpretations of the scriptures as impure and contaminated forms of pseudo-Islam. In 
that sense, the notion of anti-syncretism is an appropriate translation of their efforts at 
establishing religious authority and authenticity.

The same aversion to syncretism also explains the puristic Salafis’ reluctance to 
consider the philosophical aspects of modernity (while its technological dimension has 
become less problematic), because they view modern values and categories as exogenous

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\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}, 79.
\textsuperscript{35} Algar, 14-15.
\textsuperscript{36} See the review and conceptual analysis of Siv Ellen Kraft, “‘To Mix or Not to Mix’: Syncretism/Anti-
\end{flushright}
norms that can only corrupt the true interpretation and practice of Islam. This is why I can afford to contrast modernism directly with purism, understood as two ideal-types, in several instances throughout the dissertation. Put simply, an ideal-typical puristic Salafi would not willingly strive to renew Islam in a modern idiom for fear of endangering the religion that God has already perfected for humankind. However, it is important to keep in mind that being a modernist, as stated above, does not mean “being modern.” Puristic Salafis who reject Islamic modernism cannot escape the historical reality in which they live, whether they like it or not. In a subtle way, they define modernity as much as it defines them: their understanding of Islam is sometimes more unprecedented and modern (in the chronological sense of the word) than they are willing to admit.

Among puristic Salafis, the three aforementioned traits—scripturalism, literalism, and anti-syncretism—rarely manifest themselves independently from one another. In most cases, they overlap and are mutually reinforcing. The puristic Salafis’ attitude toward Sufism provides a good example. First, their scripturalist outlook leads them to dislike the Sufis’ reliance on secondary sources, which may include Sufi lore and the teachings of Sufi shaykhs, as well as their reliance on intuitive or esoteric knowledge. As literalists, they also oppose Sufis because of their proclivity to search for hidden meanings in the sacred texts, for instance through numerology (‘ulūm asrār al-ḥurūf). Finally, as proponents of anti-syncretism, puristic Salafis often claim that Sufism is an

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un-Islamic innovation that stems from neo-Platonism, Christian monasticism and saint-worship, or Hinduism. In other words, they deny that it is endogenous to Islam.

There are other traits that characterize puristic Salafis, such as their insistence on the oneness of God (tawḥīd), their severe conception of worship (ʿibāda), or their strict position on women’s issues. Some of these themes will be discussed in the dissertation, but I have purposefully avoided defining puristic Salafis on the basis of their actual tenets. Instead, as the last few paragraphs have shown, I primarily wish to examine the puristic Salafiyya through the prism of epistemology. The reason is that epistemology is not merely concerned with positive knowledge (what puristic Salafis know), it also reckons with the cognitive processes that yield such knowledge (how puristic Salafis know what they know). Therefore, it allows one to observe the puristic Salafiyya from a better angle and to identify fundamental characteristics that truly distinguish this religious orientation from other strands of Islamic thought. In particular, epistemology contributes to underlining the subtle differences between Islamism and the puristic Salafiyya.

Abou El Fadl is right when he points out that the term Islamism is often so vague and broad that it can be used to stigmatize virtually any expression of Islam that one deems reprehensible or disturbing. Yet, the concept should not be brushed aside even if it tends to be elastic or misused. From a typological viewpoint, it remains an essential label for distinguishing a category of Islamic activists who, otherwise, might be wrongfully confused with puristic Salafis. Though Islamism is not a monolithic reality,

its proponents usually share a number of features: they view religion as an ideology, try to reformulate modernity along Islamic lines, and wish for the establishment of an Islamic state. This last point does not mean that they are always insurgents, but they usually are favorable to the establishment of such a state even when their strategy is to pacifically re-Islamize society first. As for the Islamic state they envision, it is often an Islamic rendition of the modern and centralized state that historically originated in Europe. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a case in point.

These characteristic of Islamism run counter to the highest ideals of the puristic Salafis. For them, it is foolish to turn Islam into an ideology—a comprehensive system for interpreting the historical and political reality, as the famous French intellectual Raymond Aron defined it—because one risks tampering with the purity of the God’s message in the process.39 For instance, the Indian-born Islamist Abu al-A‘la al-Mawdudi (d. 1979) reinterpreted the Arabic word for religion (dīn) and defined it as an all-embracing ethos he called “the system.”40 For contemporary puristic Salafis, this is nothing short of manipulation. Likewise, they are now very critical of Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), the foremost theoretician of radical Islamism, because of his pragmatic analysis of the scriptures. In his Qur’anic exegis, for instance, Qutb found ideological justifications for new modes of activism as well as solutions for the various temporal problems of his time. Puristic Salafis nowadays denounce “Qutbism” as a sect, although it is true that many of them tolerated and even supported Islamist movements in the past, either for

contextual reasons or because their political patrons encouraged them to do so.\textsuperscript{41}

Likewise, puristic Salafis now criticize organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the Hizb al-Tahrir because their members either do not profess a pure creed or fall prey to their appetite for partisanship (\textit{hizbiyya}).\textsuperscript{42} Finally, puristic Salafis are no less wary of the notion of Islamic modernity, which is so dear to the Islamists, because it implies an innovative reinterpretation of the scriptures and assumes that Islam could be congruent with foreign philosophical concepts such as democracy or gender equality.\textsuperscript{43} Generally speaking, puristic Salafis are more comfortable with the traditional principle of kingship tempered by respect to Islam than they are with the historically unprecedented notion of Islamic republic.

One must therefore be cautious before subsuming any group of Muslims who appear rigorist or zealous under the banner of the puristic Salafiyya. It is not clear, for instance, whether the Taliban in Afghanistan deserve to be counted among the latter category.\textsuperscript{44} Their attachment to the Hanafi school of law, as well as the influence of the Pashtun tribal code (the \textit{Pashtunwali}) on their religious legislations, makes them somewhat suspicious in the eyes of the some puristic Salafis.\textsuperscript{45} At the same time, one must not conclude that the puristic Salafiyya is equivalent to Wahhabism alone. It is true

\textsuperscript{43} Ahmad ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAziz al-Hasin, \textit{Daʿwat al-imam Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab: salafiyya la wahhabiyya} (Riyadh: Dar ʿAlam al-Kutub, 1999), iii.
\textsuperscript{44} One scholar who claims that the Taliban are Salafis is Olivier Roy, \textit{Globalized Islam}, 234.
that the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia constitute a prominent group within the puristic Salafiyya: one scholar even used the notion of “Salafabism” in order to underline the convergence that now exists between the Salafiyya and Wahhabism. Nonetheless, the puristic Salafiyya is a larger category. It includes non-Saudi individuals who, though extremely similar to the Wahhabis and closely associated to them, may differ from them on a number of issues. They may, for instance, feel less bound to the Hanbali school of law, as was the case with Taqi al-Din al-Hilali. The puristic Salafiyya also includes groups such as the Ahl-i Hadith of the Indian subcontinent, whose members proudly declare their non-affiliation to any school of law (ghayr muqallid).

Yet it must be noted that non-Saudi puristic Salafis often studied or taught in Saudi Arabia, or benefited from the patronage of its Wahhabi establishment. Like the Wahhabis, they tend to show a particular deference for Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab, his writings, and those of his religious heirs. For this reason, I alternatively refer to the puristic Salafiyya as the “Wahhabi-inspired Salafiyya” (al-salafiyya al-wahhabiyya). I also use the expressions “contemporary” or “late twentieth-century Salafiyya” to distinguish it chronologically from the modernist Salafiyya that was dominant in the first half of the twentieth century.

Of course, the boundary between these various ideal-types—the modernist Salafiyya, the puristic Salafiyya, and Islamism—are fluid and impossible to define with mathematical precision. Toward the end of his life, Rashid Rida was still a modernist

Salafi; but he had become much more puristic than his predecessors, and had also started to outline some of the ideas that would later be typical of Islamism. Similarly, it is difficult to determine to which ideal-type Taqi al-Din al-Hilali belonged in the mid-twentieth century, when he was still obviously modernist in some respects and had become resolutely puristic in others. To be sure, ideal-types have no more intellectual value than the one we endow them with: they are deliberate scholarly constructions, subjective though based on empirical observations, and created solely for analytical purposes. This is not to say that Muslims do not use the terms “Salafi” or “Islamist” when speaking about themselves. On the contrary, they do. Yet these categories are conceptual nebulae: that they are identifiable, but have contours that remain hazy. In reality, it is possible for an individual to be on the fringe of two or more of these ideal-types at the same time, making it virtually impossible for the observer to put this individual in a specific analytical category. Yet there is indeed something specific to each of the three aforementioned religious orientations and, as artificial and arbitrary as it may be, it is important to draw conceptual lines between them.

I also realize that the concepts and labels I chose for this dissertation cannot satisfy all readers. Some critics may argue that I should have refrained from using the adjective “puristic,” because it endows contemporary Salafis with an aura of purity that vindicates their religious views. Others will object that “Wahhabis” and “Wahhabism” are exogenous labels, and that it is wrong to refer to a group of people by a name other

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than the one they use to describe themselves. However, I have tried to make choices out of pragmatic considerations and academic integrity. The notion of Islamic purism is merely intended to convey the contemporary Salafis’ persistent preoccupation with religious purity, which they claim to represent; it does not validate this claim, nor does it necessarily imply a positive judgment on my part. I had originally opted for Abou El Fadl’s choice of words—“Puritans” and “puritanical”—which are already popular in the scholarly literature and have been used by Westerners since at least the 1920s to describe the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia. However, discussions with several specialists of early-modern Europe convinced me that these loan words coming from a Christian Protestant tradition could actually obscure more than they enlighten. A historically neutral term like “purist” is overall less controversial and less misleading.

With respect to Wahhabism, the problem is even easier to settle. Because the present study pertains to the evolution and inherent ambiguity of the Salafiyya, I cannot defer to political or academic rectitude and merely refer to Wahhabis as “Salafis,” as one Saudi-sponsored scholar was apparently prompted to do in 2002. The purpose of this dissertation is precisely to disentangle the conflicting acceptations of the label “Salafiyya” and to make sense of its history. As chapter three will argue, the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia did not refer to themselves as Salafis until the twentieth century. If I were to systematically call them Salafis throughout the dissertation, I would not only be

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48 The study originally used the term “Wahhabi,” but its author changed it for “Salafi.” He presumably did so at the behest of the King Abdulaziz Foundation for Research and Archives in Saudi Arabia, which contributed to the publication of the book. See Uwidah M. al-Juhany, Najd Before the Salafi Reform Movement: Social, Political, and Religious Conditions During the Three Centuries Preceding the Rise of the Saudi State (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2002), ix-x.
committing a historical inaccuracy; I would also be keeping the current confusion alive. Therefore, we need another label whereby to refer to the Islamic purists of the Arabian Peninsula. The term “Wahhabis,” despite its pejorative overtones, is the most reasonable choice. On the one hand, it is overwhelmingly present in primary sources, especially in the early twentieth century. On the other hand, even the staunchest defenders of Wahhabism in the twentieth century, from Harry St. John Philby to Rashid Rida, used that term. They chose not to revive the older and discontinued label “Unitarians” (muwāḥḥidūn), which Wahhabis had used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to describe themselves, but later abandoned.

**Historical Approach to Globalization**

One of the arguments underlying this dissertation is that the evolution of the modernist Salafiyya into a puristic form of Islam was concomitant with the development of a transnational and generic Islamic identity. The rise of a standardized and universal Islam valid in any cultural context was originally worked out by French scholar Olivier Roy, who defined it as the byproduct of a greater sociological phenomenon he termed the globalization of Islam.\(^{49}\) One of the conceptual merits of Roy’s approach was to underline that the globalization process currently affecting the Muslim world does not merely entail a clash between Islamic and Western norms, as the “jihad versus McWorld” framework suggests. Nor does it merely entail a political conflict between the state and its “reactive

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moralizers.\textsuperscript{50} In actuality, globalization also happens to shape new types of Islamic religiosity and to foster a dialectical tension between them. In other words, it fuels an intra-Islamic struggle over the true interpretation of Islam.

While this argument is undoubtedly seminal, its historical dimension is not as well developed as its sociological aspects. Although Olivier Roy did not specify any time period, he clearly assumed that the effects of globalization on Islam—ranging from deterritorialization to individualization—were very recent. His book does acknowledge medieval and pre-modern forms of globalization, but argues that they were too elitist, revolved too much around the Arabic language, and left traditional society too unchanged to compare with the major transformations that occurred in the last few decades: “In short, the earlier form of globalisation did not borrow its linguistic and technical tools from another culture, as is the case nowadays.\textsuperscript{51}” Overall, Roy’s book suggests that changes became noticeable after the alleged failure of political Islam from the late 1980s onward, and even more so after the advent of the Internet.

When globalization began is, to be sure, an open question. But Roy evidently surfed on an academic wave that saw globalization as the social sciences’ fastest-growing concept for explaining the world of the 1990s onward, with its unprecedented level of economic, political, and cultural integration. It is true that the last two decades were particularly rich in changes, but there are reasons to doubt that the transition from a pre-


modern to a contemporary form of globalization suddenly occurred a few years ago, following the computer revolution or the fall of the USSR. It should come to no surprise that historians recently began to challenge this dominant perception of globalization as well as its alleged empirical novelty. As Osterhammel and Petersson put it: “Some of what is being presented in sociological literature as new findings seems already very familiar to [historians].”

Indeed, close historical analysis shows that early twentieth-century Salafis were already coping with, reacting to, or taking advantage of such globalizing forces as migratory movements, deterritorialization, worldwide transfer of ideas (Western or not), and transnational interaction through informal networks. Rashid Rida, for instance, was an admirer of the Reuters news agency, observed the fate of all Muslim communities on each continent, corresponded with them, and attempted to train a new type of young, modernist and multilingual Muslim missionaries who would travel the world to convert non-Muslims and eliminate the religious divergences that divided the umma. Without a doubt, Rida already showed clear signs of an emerging global consciousness in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Thus, my dissertation departs from Roy’s sociological approach and proceeds from the historians’ view that globalization antedates the rapid changes that occurred in

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recent decades. The phenomenon, I believe, rather stems from long-term processes that were already at work in the early twentieth century, when al-Hilali converted to the Salafiyya. In this, I not only follow Osterhammel and Petersson, but also Fernand Braudel who, as early as the 1950s, called for the study of a “global society” whose degree of homogenization, he wrote, was not as novel or recent as most observers were inclined to believe.54 Precisely, the life and thought of Taqi al-Din al-Hilali are a testimony to the early manifestations of an expanding consciousness of the world in general, and of the Muslim world in particular. Pan-Islamic journals, modern means of communication, and the significant level of integration resulting from European imperialism all contributed to fostering a greater awareness of Muslim interconnectedness across borders. In a sense, this constituted a prelude to the globalization of Islam that Roy has discussed.

Like al-Hilali’s own life, this dissertation does not coincide with any national history. Instead, it jumps from one geographical area to another, even though I do not always follow in al-Hilali’s busy footsteps. While I have followed a broad chronological outline, I have also tried to organize the material in a thematic manner whenever possible. As a result, the dissertation does not put equal emphasis on every segment of al-Hilali’s worldwide journey. My primary aim was to identify a number of significant conjunctures and to shed light on the successive stages in the evolution of the Salafiyya. Over time, al-Hilali’s transnational outlook and global consciousness encouraged him to relinquish the

modernist and progressive dimensions of his religious ethos in favor of puristic ones. As the following chapters shall demonstrate, this gradual evolution is inextricably linked to the political and intellectual history of the modern Middle East and North Africa. While globalizing forces and the development of a generic Islamic identity favored the triumph of the puristic Salafiyya, such an outcome was neither predetermined nor ineluctable. In the end, the vagaries of history account for many changes that occurred within the Salafi movement over the twentieth century. Globalization did not dictate a course of event and still does not. The puristic Salafiyya may well dwindle in the near future in spite of globalization, or because of it.
Chapter One

The Origins, History, and Meanings of the Salafiyya

According to the statements of its current proponents, the Salafiyya transcends Islamic history. In their literature and on their websites, puristic Salafis affirm that their religious orientation has always existed and has always had the same meaning. This Salafiyya was never linked to a particular period in Islamic history because it has always represented Islam in its purest form, as it was first revealed. It is therefore incorrect, according to this argument, to say that there is an “old” Salafiyya and a “new” Salafiyya; rather, there can only be one, handed down from generation to generation without interruption. For this reason, the Salafiyya cannot be deemed a sect, a party or a school of thought, as some of its critics have contended, because it existed prior to the emergence of religious discrepancies within the umma.¹

From the faith-based perspective of devoted and committed Salafis, this interpretation is perfectly understandable. It provides a powerful and categorical assertion of an orthodoxy of which the Salafis claim to be the sole depositaries since the seventh century. Yet for the same reason one can also understand why other Muslims, when they possess differing opinions about the nature of orthodoxy and true Islam, find this interpretation both extremely irritating and coercive. But insofar as the Salafis are

convinced of their own righteousness and want their definition of Islam to prevail, their articulation of the Salafiyya serves them relatively well.

From a scholarly perspective however this interpretation is obviously too ahistorical to be satisfactory, even though there are elements of truth to it. The very existence of a specific Islamic orientation named “Salafiyya” implies that, at one point or another in history, ideas were collected, selected and synthesized so as to coincide with this particular name. And as the name itself indicates, the Salafiyya is not a divine revelation per se; it is a post-Qur’anic frame of reference tracing its origins back to the way pious ancestors understood Islam. Thus, like any religious or secular doctrine, it was constructed through human agency and could not have become an identifiable system of thought without at least some minimal processing. Because this “way of the pious ancestors” is a conceptualization rather than a revelation per se, it had to be first identified and defined before it could be preserved. This means that information had to be sifted, hadiths and reports had to be assessed and, ultimately, subjective choices had to be made. Contemporary Salafis tacitly acknowledge this reality when they endeavor to explain the origins of the term “Salafiyya” and justify its use. While the word salaf (ancestors) is mentioned in some hadiths, contemporary Salafis are aware that the word “Salafiyya” is nowhere to be found in the Qur’an or the Sunna. Who, then, coined this label? When did it emerge? Has it always been understood in the way contemporary Salafis understand it today?
This chapter will address these questions and will analyze the validity of the two main competing narratives on the origins, history, and meaning of the Salafiyya (as both a label and a religious orientation). It will conclude that the emergence of the label “Salafiyya” only emerged in the early twentieth century under the aegis of Islamic modernists, that the term originally referred to a theological stance, and quickly gained enough breadth to stand for a reformist program that had a strong rationalist and progressive component. This view disputes two of the most widespread assumptions regarding the origins and incipient meaning of the Salafiyya. On the one hand, it argues that, while the puristic Islam of today’s Salafis has clear antecedents in the medieval period, it was not known by the substantive “Salafiyya” until recently. Therefore, to speak of a medieval or an early modern Salafiyya is, to a certain extent, linguistically anachronistic. The label did not truly gain notoriety and recognition throughout the Muslim world until the first half of the twentieth century, and at the time it did not yet stand for a puristic understanding of Islam as it does today. On the other hand, this chapter’s conclusion is also contrary to the view that the creation and popularization of the word “Salafiyya” as a slogan occurred at the hands of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ʿAbduh from the late nineteenth century onward, as many Western scholars have taken for granted for nearly nine decades.

The Salafiyya According to Puristic Salafis

Virtually every work written by puristic Salafis about the Salafiyya begins with a philological introduction explaining the linguistic roots and meaning of the word salaf as
found in dictionaries, as well as its religious meaning as found in the Qurʾan (only as a conjugated verb) and the Sunna. One learns that the verb *salaf* means “to precede, to belong to an earlier time” and that the noun *salaf* means “ancestors, predecessors.” One also learns that since the prophet Muhammad imbued the term *salaf* with great prestige, the word acquired a technical religious meaning as well. Soon before his death, the prophet, who was then sick, told his daughter Fatima: “[…] and I am the best salaf for you.” In another oft-quoted hadith narrated by Ibn Masʿud and others, the prophet said: “The best people are [those of] my generation [qarnī], then those who come after them, then those who come after them.” Consequently, Muslim scholars have long considered that the pious ancestors were the men who lived in the first three generations of Islamic history, namely, the companions of the Prophet (ṣaḥāba), their followers (tābiʿūn), and the followers of the followers (tābiʿū al-tābiʿīn).

This definition, though consensual, is not a definitive factual statement insofar as its own terms are subject to interpretation. For example, according to what criteria should one determine who exactly the companions of the prophet were? Because the scriptures do not provide the answer, one must invariably invoke a sub-definition whose meaning proceeds from the historical steps that led to the constitution of Sunni discourse. In a recent study, Fuʿad Jabali has shown how the definition of the companions evolved out of the medieval controversy between the traditionists (*ahl al-ḥadīth*) and the rationalists (*ahl al-raʿīy*). To ensure that the greatest possible number of hadiths would gain legal

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2 This hadith is found in Muslim. Quoted in Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, “Masaʾil wa ajwibuha,” *al-Asala*, 2, 9 (1994): 86.

3 This hadith is found in Muslim and al-Bukhari. Quoted in *ibid.*, 87.
recognition, traditionists like Ibn Hanbal and his disciples disputed the idea that the term “companion” applied only to the people who had befriended and accompanied the prophet. By expanding the concept to include whoever met the prophet—if only for a brief moment—while he was Muslim and died as a Muslim, the traditionists elevated the status of a much larger number of hadith transmitters, whose reports could thereupon be viewed as legally authoritative because they went back to the prophet directly, without interruption. This seems to be the most prevalent definition among puristic Salafis, although they rarely address the issue.

Another difficult aspect of the definition of the pious ancestors is the question of piety and righteousness. Here again, a subjective assessment is unavoidable. In his critique of the puristic Salafiyya, Syrian scholar Muhammad Saʿid Ramadan al-Buti asked an important question: when the prophet talked about the best people, did he mean every single Muslim individual who lived during the first three generations? While many ʿulamaʾ have considered that the praise applied to all the individuals, irrespective of their degree of righteousness and integrity, the Andalusi hadith scholar Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (d. 1070), whom puristic Salafis hold in high esteem, had a more realistic understanding. On the one hand, he specified that the prophet’s hadith applied to groups, that is, to each of the first three generations taken as a whole. On the other hand, with respect to individuals, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr added a nuance. He thought that some individuals from the

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first generations were not so virtuous and that people from later generations could be considered better than them. Similarly, al-Buti, the Syrian scholar, suggests that the third generation was less pure and remarkable than the first two.

Contemporary puristic Salafis are no different in that they too have their own understanding of the prophet’s hadith and interpret it in a way that befits their own conception of Islam. As a result, they usually narrow down their definition of the pious ancestors: “From a historical standpoint, what is meant by salaf is: the companions, the followers, and their followers who were consistent with the Book and the Sunna. Whoever contradicted the Book and the Sunna with his opinion is not Salafi, even if he lived amid the companions, the followers, or the followers of the followers.” Obviously, determining whether or not one contradicted the Qurʾan and the Sunna is not always a simple and mechanical task; it may hinge on the application of a number of human criteria and judgments. In other words, the identification and selection of the truly pious ancestors is a subjective process whose outcome can only reflect how puristic Salafis conceive of orthodoxy and of one’s adherence to the Qurʾan and the Sunna.

In any case, puristic Salafis are neither eager to delve into this issue nor to list the names of all the potential individuals who may qualify as truly pious ancestors (especially when they are followers rather than companions). Instead, they usually single out a few ʿulama among the key figures of early Islamic scholarship. These include the

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7 Ibid., 10-11.
8 Bakr, 12. This statement is not an isolated one; it is a standard definition and is moreover commonplace in other Salafi publications.
alleged founders of the four Sunni legal schools, namely, Abu Hanifa, Malik, al-Shafiʿi, and especially Ibn Hanbal (d. 855), as well as the authors of the six canonical hadith collections, to name but a few.⁹

In truth, puristic Salafis often draw less inspiration from the most pious ancestors of the first generations than from posterior individuals who are not salaf per se—in the sense that they lived after the first three generations of Islamic history—but whose work came to exemplify what the Islam of the pious ancestors must have been. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), and Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) are, among others, the object of a particular admiration. Because of their puristic inclinations, these later figures are seen by contemporary Salafis as the best exponents of Islam as the pious ancestors understood and practiced it. In order to understand why this is so, we must probe into the religious assumptions and the theoretical underpinnings of the puristic Salafiyya.

The School of Thought of the Pious Ancestors

Most Sunni Muslims agree that the salaf, because they either met the prophet or lived relatively soon after his death, had a better grasp and a purer understanding of Islam, an understanding that was unsullied by later innovations. However, contemporary Salafis distinguish themselves from other Sunnis by their unreserved ascription to the

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⁹ Ibid. The same statement and list of names are found verbatim in other books. See, for instance, al-Tayyib ibn ʿUmar ibn al-Husayn, al-Salafiyya wa aʿlamuha fi Murattaniya Shanqit (Beirut: n.p., 1995), 26.
salaf, whom they turn into an “axis of authority” around which they elaborate their religious guidelines in terms of both law and creed. Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999), a prominent Wahhabi-inspired Salafi, declares that the Salafis are different from all other Muslim groups in that they neither attach themselves to a single person nor to a group of ordinary people, “[…] but to that which will not err, since it is impossible that the salaf would unite upon error, as opposed to the people of latter times, since with regard to the later generations, there is no text speaking in their favor.” Thus, claiming to be a Muslim and to follow the Qur’an and the Sunna is not sufficient proof of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, al-Albani says, because all Muslims do so, even the most blatantly misguided ones. It is therefore necessary to underline one’s ascription to the salaf who, as a group, are deemed infallible, and to introduce oneself as a Salafi. Through their interpretation of another hadith, these contemporary Salafis believe that they constitute the only group (firqa) that will be granted salvation in the hereafter.

They refer to their sacrosanct axis of authority by means of various expressions such as the way (ṭarīqa, maslak, sabīl), the understanding (fahm) or, more often, the methodology (manhaj) of the salaf. At times, they also use more value-laden expressions, the most common of which may be translated as the “doctrine” or “school of thought” of

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10 This expression is taken from the superb study by Wael B. Hallaq, The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 157. Hallaq uses it to explain the construction of doctrinal schools of law around the figure of the individuals who allegedly founded them.


12 al-Albani, 89-90.

the pious ancestors (*madhhab al-salaf*).\(^{14}\) This school of thought is then described in
simple terms as “that to which the *salaf* conformed” (*mā kāna ʿalayhi al-salaf*).

However, these expressions raise a number of questions because the earliest pious
ancestors did not leave behind a specific and detailed synthesis of their legal or
theological thought, nor did they provide a systematic doctrinal exposition of “that to
which they conformed.” They did not, for instance, legislate according to the
sophisticated methods that later became associated with the four Sunni schools of law.
This is why Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Wansharisi (d. 1508), a prominent medieval jurist from
North Africa, felt that the Maliki *madhhab* had more authority and normative value than
the decisions of the companions and their immediate successors. al-Wansharisi
acknowledged that these early *salaf* were well informed, but contended that their juristic
legacy was too ad hoc to command authority. He complained that they had never
organized their knowledge into a coherent system of methodological principles (*uṣūl al-
*fiqh*) and practical applications (*furūʿ al-*fiqh*).\(^{15}\) Indeed, this kind of legal theory and
methodology, to which classical Islamic law owes much of its refinement, emerged only
gradually and did not reach maturity until the tenth century, well after the death of its
alleged founders.\(^{16}\) This is especially true with respect to the Hanbali *madhhab*, which

\(^{14}\) Another expression that is more explicit, though much more usual, translates as “the Salafi school of
Islamic thought” (*al-madrasa al-salafiyya fi-l-*fikr al-islāmi*). See Mufrah ibn Sulayman al-Qawsi, *al-
Manhaj al-salafi: taʿrifuhu, taʿrikhuhu, majalathu, qawaʿiduhu, khasaʿisuhu* (Riyadh: Dar al-Fadila,
2002), 10.

(1960-61): 400.

\(^{16}\) Hallaq, 150-167.
was posthumously named after one of the puristic Salafis’ favorite pious ancestors, namely Ibn Hanbal, who had not transmitted a full-fledged legal doctrine.\(^{17}\)

Thus, historical scrutiny does not fully validate the idea that a legal school of the salaf ever existed. Salafi critics might argue that this conclusion is wrong, that \textit{uṣūl al-fiqh} and \textit{furūʾ al-fiqh} are in fact innovations, and that a legal \textit{madhhab al-salaf} did indeed exist through its promotion of informed reasoning (\textit{ijtihād}), its opposition to blind imitation (\textit{taqlīd}) and bigotry (\textit{taʿṣṣub}), and its complete reliance upon the Qurāʾan and the Sunna. But in return, one may point out that \textit{ijtihād} existed in practice but was not a duly-defined and regulated legal procedure until the eighth century, or that the opposition to \textit{taqlīd} was, at best, a legal principle by default because neither doctrinal schools nor cumulative and comprehensive bodies of positive laws existed during the earliest generations.\(^{18}\) In other words, overlooking the long process that led to the emergence of Sunni discourse and complex legal methodologies does not make for a convincing case. Today’s puristic Salafis tend to attribute to the pious ancestors a methodological unity and sophistication that is somewhat anachronistic and idealized.\(^{19}\)

Even if one approaches the \textit{madhhab al-salaf} as a purely theological doctrine (comparable in that sense to the Muʿtazili \textit{madhhab} or the Ashʿari \textit{madhhab}), it still poses a few historical problems. First and foremost, as Muhammad Saʿid Ramadan al-Buti notes, the actual concept of \textit{madhhab al-salaf} cannot directly be traced back to the

\(^{17}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 159-160.

\(^{18}\) About \textit{ijtihād}, see \textit{ibid.}, 113-114.

\(^{19}\) To attain and explain this degree of sophistication, puristic Salafis must either resort to later medieval scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya, al-Shatibi, Ibn Qudama, and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, or count them among the pious ancestors. For an exhaustive example, see al-Qawṣi, 277-404.
first generations of Muslims.\textsuperscript{20} This does not mean that the term is a modern invention. On the contrary, many ʿulama” from medieval times onward have referred to it. The real question is whether this theological *madhhab* was as comprehensive and self-contained as today’s puristic Salafis often suggest.

In this case, the most prudent answer would have to be negative. For the most part, past Muslim scholars have used the term *madhhab al-salaf* in an exclusively theological sense that is partially incompatible with contemporary Salafis’ discourse. To be sure, theological *madhhab*s are not as technical as—and therefore not fully comparable to—legal *madhhab*s. While the concept of legal school implies too many technical aspects to be open-ended, the concept of theological *madhhab* is not as stringent and can be loosely used to refer to any kind of doctrine, regardless of its depth or scope. Thus, for many medieval and pre-modern Islamic scholars, the expression *madhhab al-salaf* did not necessarily refer to a full-fledged theological school of thought. A good example can be found in the work of ʿAbdallah, the son of Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab, who had become the leading exponent of Wahhabism by the time the Saudis conquered Mecca in 1803. In one theological exposé, he introduced the expression *madhhab al-salaf* in a discussion about the divine attributes (*ṣifāt*) and used it as a de facto generic term referring to the doctrinal state of affairs prior to the emergence of scholasticism in Islam. As its counterpart, he used another loose and generic category, namely, the “doctrine of the successors” (*madhhab al-khalaf*), which designates the

\textsuperscript{20} al-Buti, 223.
various theological schools—Jahmism, Muʿtazilism, and Ashʿarism—that introduced and perpetuated the allegorical interpretations of God’s divine attributes.\(^{21}\)

From this perspective, the coherence of the *madhhab al-salaf* largely stems from the fact that it represents a status quo ante—a time when the *umma* had not yet faced the challenge of rational and speculative theology and Muslims had not yet begun to search for answers to the nature of God and His revelation. However, beyond the issue of divine attributes with which the concept of *madhhab al-salaf* has traditionally been associated, ᵃʿAbdallah ibn Muhammad ibn ᵃʿAbd al-Wahhab did not use the expression in the sense of a self-contained school or doctrine that offered clear answers to all possible theological questions, as contemporary puristic Salafis sometimes do. He rather understood it as the theological approach that promotes neither rational investigation nor allegorical interpretation of dogma.

Therefore, not all definitions of the *madhhab al-salaf* should be considered problematic. Only when the term is understood as the actual and all-encompassing theological school of the pious ancestors does it become difficult to substantiate.\(^{22}\) This helps to explain why today’s puristic Salafis have a tendency to define this *madhhab* negatively, that is, by explaining what it is not rather than what it is. We learn that is it


\(^{22}\) In his Arabic dictionary, *al-Muhit*, Butrus al-Bustani talked of the “doctrines” of the pious ancestors in the plural form (*madhāhib al-salaf*), thus implying that the first generations did not abide by a unique school of thought. Nonetheless, one contemporary puristic Salafi strangely used this same reference to demonstrate that there was only one school of the *salaf*. See Bakr, 11.
not Shi‘i, not Khariji, not Qadari, not Murji‘i, not Jabari, not Jahmi, and not Mu‘tazili. In other words, it is not tainted by any innovation and it follows the doctrine of the pious ancestors.

Recent Muslim critics have underlined that because the pious ancestors disagreed on so many issues—ranging from the created-ness of the Qur’an to the vision of God on the Day of Judgment—the idea of a unique and comprehensive madhhab al-salaf‘i in theology is, by and large, a historical myth. Nor did all of the pious ancestors adopt the same attitude towards the theological challenges that arose when, after the death of the prophet and the rapid territorial conquests, the Muslim community came into contact with an unprecedented number of Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Manicheans.

As a result of these interactions, religious debates (jadal) began to take place and, as al-Buti notes, the companions of the prophet adopted different stances. On the one hand, there were those who kept silent and avoided religious debates because they regarded them as an innovation. Umar ibn Khattab and Zayd ibn Thabit belonged to that group, as did Malik and Ibn Hanbal later. On the other hand, there were the companions

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23 Ibn al-Husayn, 20-23. It is interesting to note that Malik ibn Anas (d. 795) reportedly made a similar statement, but added a detail that does not play in the contemporary Salafis’ favor: “A man asked Malik, ‘Who are the people of the Sunna, Abu ‘Abdullah?’ He replied, ‘Those who do not have any names by which they are known—who are not Jahmis, Rafidites (Shi‘ites) or Qadaris’.” Malik’s opinion that the true followers of the Islamic tradition (ahl al-sunna) should not bear any specific name contradicts the Salafis’ insistence on their identity as “Salafis,” as we shall see below. When confronted to the lack of evidence of such a label in early Islamic history, Salafi scholars usually claim that the Salafis of the first centuries were known as either “ahl al-hadith” or “ahl al-sunna.” Their underlying argument is that Salafi-related labels became necessary later under the Abbasid Empire. For details on these justifications, see Bakr, 14, 23-24. About Malik’s aforementioned statement, see Muhammad Abu Zahra, The Four Imams: Their Lives, Works, and Their Schools of Thought, 2nd edition, trans. Aisha Bewley (London: Dar al-Taqwa, 2005), 56.

who preferred to engage in controversial discussions about religion in order to dispel the doubts that had been introduced into Muslims’ minds. ʿAli ibn Abi Talib and ʿAbdallah ibn ʿAbbas belonged to that second group; Abu Hanifa and Hasan al-Basri would later follow their example.\(^\text{25}\)

Context is an obvious factor in explaining why the pious ancestors disagreed among themselves and why, in some cases, they changed their own opinions. In his younger years, Abu Hanifa (d. 767), whom puristic Salafis usually count as a salaf, refrained from examining issues of creed from the vantage point of scholasticism (kalām), that is, by means of dialectical and rational proofs. But later in his life, when controversies began to increase in Iraq, he thought it necessary to defend the creed by new means; he began to resort to the methodology of kalām.\(^\text{26}\) Evidently, the needs and conditions of that period caused him to flirt with the very scholasticism that today’s puristic Salafis reject as contrary to the doctrine of the pious ancestors.\(^\text{27}\)

In short, the madhhab al-salaf, whether it be used in a legal or theological sense, is not, historically speaking, as easy to pin down as today’s puristic Salafis suggest. The concept is problematic enough that many Salafis prefer to ignore it altogether and to talk about a Salafi “methodology” (manhaj) or “orientation” (ittijāh, wijha), which tend to be sounder from a scholarly point of view. Others end up suggesting that the Salafiyya is a madhhab without really being one—as though it was the school of thought that warns

\(^{25}\) al-Buti, 151-152.
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 153.
\(^{27}\) Bakr, 142-143.
Muslims against adhering to any school of thought. But regardless of the terminology that they use, today’s puristic Salafis all claim to draw out of the pious ancestors a precise, clear, and self-contained set of religious guidelines, rules, and regulations. Yet we must ask hermeneutically where they find this synthesized Salafi Islam if it was not fully or systematically articulated by the pious ancestors themselves.

The answer brings us back to our aforementioned observation: they largely find it through the works of later Muslim scholars like Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab, to name but a few. First, these ʿulamaʾ, as a group, left behind a much larger corpus than the pious ancestors themselves. Second, they have been able to research, summarize, digest and articulate a relatively puristic form of Islam that would otherwise be less coherent. Third, the work of Ibn Taymiyya has been undeniably seminal. More than any other ʿalim before him, he endeavored to present his intellectual legacy—and, by extension, all the ulterior expressions of puristic Islamic thought that he inspired—as a reflection of the pious ancestors’ doctrine. This last point deserves further explanations.

Ibn Taymiyya’s Legacy

To understand the extent of Ibn Taymiyya’s influence, it must be noted that one way of making sense of the theological “school of the pious ancestors” is to understand it as a synonym for Hanbali theology. Indeed, unlike the Hanafi, Maliki, and Shafiʿi

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schools, the Hanbali school is the only one that is simultaneously legal and theological; it has even been argued that throughout Islamic history, the significance of the Hanbali school was greater in theology than in law.²⁹ In terms of substance, the literalistic and anti-syncretistic approach of Hanbali theology is virtually similar to what contemporary Salafis nowadays call the *madhhab al-salaf*. Yet, in terms of intellectual genealogy, Hanbalism does not hinge on ahistorical underpinnings. As its name indicate, it traces its origins back to Ibn Hanbal’s positions in creed, which have been clarified, completed, and summarized by later Hanbali scholars. Its name does not imply that it was the actual school of all the pious ancestors.

However, if a Muslim is deeply and utterly convinced that Hanbali theology is the sole expression of Islamic orthodoxy, he or she may think that it is absurd to use the adjective “Hanbali,” as though the doctrine was based on one man’s opinions. After all, Ibn Hanbal was the greatest defender of Sunni orthodoxy of his time and he relied heavily on transmitted reports and hadiths; one could reasonably assume that his theology is but the reflection of what the pious ancestors professed before him. Precisely, Ibn Taymiyya was the first Hanbali scholar to zealously insist that Hanbali theology was nothing but the creed of the *salaf*.

The most famous example took place in January 1306, while Ibn Taymiyya was interrogated by the governor of Damascus, the chief qadis of each Sunni legal school, and other prominent *ʿulamaʾ* of that city. Because he was judged a troublemaker by political

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authorities and religious critics alike, the task of this commission was to assess the orthodoxy of his creed. For this reason, Ibn Taymiyya was asked to dictate his theological beliefs. As it turned out, the declarations he made before the commission corresponded to the positions he had previously defended in his Wasitiyya, the famous profession of faith (‘aqīda) he had written in 1298 or 1299 and that is now a favorite among puristic Salafis. Yet, because the Wasitiyya was itself a controversial work, many of the “ulama” who acted as interrogators stood ready to condemn the theological stance of the accused. At that point, one qāḍī reportedly gave Ibn Taymiyya a chance to avoid prosecution by acknowledging that his Wasitiyya was a mere Hanbali work. Here is how Ibn Taymiyya narrated the incident:

He said: “[What] you wrote is the creed of imam Ahmad [Ibn Hanbal], so you [only have to] say that this is the creed of imam Ahmad,” meaning that no objections can be raised against a man who writes according to Ibn Hanbal’s madhhab since it is a recognized school [madhhab matbū’]. His purpose in saying this was to put an end to the quarrel of the opposing party. I replied: “I compiled nothing but the creed of all the pious ancestors [‘aqīdat al-salaf al-ṣālih jamīʿan] and it is not peculiar to imam Ahmad. Imam Ahmad only transmitted the knowledge that the prophet brought forth.”

However, this ambitious and risqué presentation of Hanbali theology was not typical of earlier Hanbali scholars. In his biographical dictionary, Abu al-Husayn ibn Abi Yaʿla (d. 1131) mentions how, in one of the oldest Hanbali professions of faith, the

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theologian al-Hasan ibn Isma‘il al-Raba‘i i specified that the creed of Ibn Hanbal was the creed agreed upon by 90 ‘ulama’ from among the followers (or pious ancestors of the second generation).\(^{31}\) The fact that al-Raba‘i provided an explicit figure means that he was, at the very least, unwilling or unable to affirm that all of the pious ancestors followed the exact same creed. But because Ibn Taymiyya lived through tumultuous times, he found it necessary to rouse the memory of the salaf and to portray them as a united and authoritative group.\(^{32}\) It is worth remembering that he was about seventeen when the last crusaders left the Levant and, as an adult, he experienced the Mongol invasions in Syria. Through this troubled period of apparent decline, Ibn Taymiyya endeavored to re-center Islam around a belief in the golden age of the pious ancestors. Their alleged degree of religious consensus and purity was diametrically opposed to the division and heterodoxy that Ibn Taymiyya saw in the Islamic heartlands of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. His glorification of the salaf and their era provided him with firm grounds to conciliate the various schools of Islamic thought and to argue against the Muslims whom he considered misled.\(^{33}\)

Although many have praised Ibn Taymiyya for attempting to rescue the umma from the internal and external challenges that it faced, his representation of the salaf was nonetheless idealized. The problem is not limited to his claim that all the pious ancestors


\(^{32}\) Henri Laoust, Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taki-d-Din Ahmad b. Taimiya (Cairo: Imprimerie de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1939), 63, 123.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 201-221.
adopted the exact same theological stance; one could also raise objections against the idea that his *Wasitiyya* merely reasserts what the *salaf* had previously discussed and agreed upon. For example, on the issue of the nature of the Qurʾan, Ibn Taymiyya followed Ibn Hanbal and stated that the Qurʾan is the uncreated (*ghayr makhluq*) speech of God.\(^\text{34}\) Today this dogma is largely accepted and puristic Salafis, following in the footsteps of Ibn Taymiyya and others, do not hesitate to affirm that all the pious ancestors believed it too. Prima facie, this assertion is credible: the idea of the creation of the Qurʾan was first introduced by the Jahmis and the Muʿtazilis and was briefly enforced by the ʿAbbasid caliph al-Maʿmun (d. 833) at the end of his reign. During the well-known period of tribulation (*miḥna*) that ensued, Ibn Hanbal, as well as a few other ʿulamaʾ, opposed the caliph’s religious policy and refused to profess an article of faith that they considered innovative and therefore ultimately, false.

There is no doubt that the belief in the created nature of the Qurʾan was innovative in the sense that it had never been articulated in the early seventh century. Yet, knowing that none of the prophet’s companions ever stated that the Qurʾan was created does not logically imply that they had always openly considered it uncreated. Studies have rather shown that, prior to the controversy that occurred under the caliphate of al-Maʿmun, most Muslims did not address the issue of the created-ness of the Qurʾan and were content to say that the book was the speech of God, without adding any further precision. It was only after the growth of Muʿtazilism and its empowerment under al-

\(^\text{34}\) Laoust, *La profession de foi*, 63 (page 16 in the Arabic section).
Maʾmun that the issue became central and forced the traditionists to systematically assert that the Qurʾan was uncreated.\(^{35}\)

According to al-Darimi (d. 896), only five traditionists would have explicitly stated that the Qurʾan was uncreated prior to the *mihna*. Commenting on this information, Wilferd Madelung writes that, if the reports that al-Darimi used are reliable, the formulaic use of the term “uncreated” dates from the reign of Harun al-Rashid (786-809). And if a slightly older primary source is to be believed, the expression could date, at best, from Sufyan al-Thawri, a pious ancestor who died in 778.\(^{36}\) Even so, this position may well have been considered unorthodox at the time. For example, Abu Yusuf (d. 798), a disciple of Abu Hanifa who was chief *qāḍī* under the ʿAbbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (d. 809), “[…] forbade praying behind anyone who asserted either that the Qurʾan was created or uncreated.”\(^{37}\) It thus appears that, prior to the *mihna*, the truly puristic theological stance was to refrain from discussing this issue, as the companions of the prophet had done. Earlier in his life, Ibn Hanbal himself reportedly considered that mentioning “created” or “uncreated” was a blamable innovation.\(^{38}\) But in the wake of the controversies of the mid-ninth century, a return to the status quo was no longer acceptable in the eyes of those who opposed Muʿtazilism: a Muslim who refrained from


\(^{37}\) Ibid., 520.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 520-521. This kind of linguistic-cum-historical argument can be carried even further. One Saudi-based scholar recently argued that the technical term for creed (*ʾaqīda*) was unknown to the pious ancestors of the first three centuries, and is therefore an innovation. See Hasan ibn Farhan al-Maliki, *Qiraʿat fi kutub al-ʾaqāʾid: al-madhhab al-hanbali namudajan* (Riyadh: Markaz al-Dirasa al-Taʾrikhiyya, 2000), 30-38.
stating that the Qurʾan was either created or uncreated was henceforth likely to be suspected of heresy.

In his *Wasitiyya*, Ibn Taymiyya made no mention of these historical nuances, but nonetheless insisted that the creed of all the pious ancestors included a statement to the effect that the Qurʾan was uncreated. In other texts, he quoted a number of hadiths according to which many *salaf*, and even the prophet himself, clearly called the Qurʾan uncreated.³⁹ Despite the fact that other Muslim scholars have labeled all of these hadiths forged,⁴⁰ contemporary puristic Salafis take Ibn Taymiyya’s explanation for granted and prefer, as much as possible, not to consider the elaboration of Hanbali theology as a historical, gradual and sometimes uneven process.⁴¹ To them, Ibn Taymiyya was too knowledgeable and reliable to have transmitted something other than pristine Islam, namely, the Islam of the prophet and all the pious ancestors.

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⁴⁰ Madelung, 522-523.
⁴¹ It goes without saying that the proponents of such an idealized reconstruction of the pious ancestors’ creed shy away from irregularities, especially when these irregularities concern major figures that contemporary Salafis count among their religious mentors. Nevertheless, some of these past scholars did not always meet the most orthodox standards in their own time. For a study on Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1201), who was met with hostility and condemnation by many of his fellow Hanbalis because of his qualified use of allegorical interpretation (taʾwil) and his method of argumentation inspired from speculative theology (kalām), see Merlin Swartz. *A Medieval Critique of Anthropomorphism: Ibn al-Jawzi’s Kitab Akhbar as-Sifat* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). Even more interesting is al-Bukhari’s (d. 870) controversial belief that the physical wording of the Qurʾan (lafz) was created (makhlūq), as well as his subsequent falling out of grace with the most conservative scholars of the Hanbali school who considered him theologically unreliable. For details, see Jonathan Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhari and Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunni Hadith Canon* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 66, 74-81, 141. For a contemporary Salafi scholar’s attempt to overcome this irregularity, to preserve the alleged creedal unity among the pious ancestor, and to prove that al-Bukhari could not have erred despite Ibn Hanbal’s previous condemnations, see the editor’s comments in Abu ʿUthman Isma’il ibn ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Sabuni, *ʿAqida al-salaf wa ashab al-hadith aw al-risala fi i’tiqad ahl al-sunna wa ashab al-hadith wa-l-a’imma*, ed. Nasir ibn ʿAbd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad al-Juday (Riyadh: Dar al-ʿAsima, 1998), 69-72.
Does the Salafiyya Exist Since the Middle Ages?

While contemporary puristic Salafis tap into Ibn Taymiyya’s depiction of a Salafi Islam, it is fair to say that they emphasize it to an unprecedented extent. From their vantage point, the doctrine—or methodology—of the pious ancestors antedates and supersedes all other Islamic schools of law and theology combined. According to al-Albani, a Muslim who claims to be Ashʿari, Maturidi, Hanafi, Shafiʿi, Maliki, Hanbali, or who adheres to any other school whose name derives from any given individual, is misguided. This Muslim must instead adopt the Islam of all the pious ancestors and call himself a Salafi; it is forbidden to do otherwise.42 This is why one’s explicit ascription to the salaf has become a key marker for identifying puristic Salafis and distinguishing them from other Muslims. In his famous two-volume history of the Islamic schools of thought published in the early 1960s, Muslim scholar Muhammad Abu Zahra defined the Salafis as those who have adhered to the methodology of the salaf since medieval times and have chosen to call themselves “Salafis.”43

Abu Zahra was not a puristic Salafi per se—on a few points he severely criticized Ibn Taymiyya and the Wahhabis—but his definition validates one of the puristic Salafis’ most central contentions regarding the history of their religious orientation. This contention is that the Salafiyya, as a set of religious rules and regulations and as a label, existed for centuries prior to modern times. For obvious reasons of religious legitimacy, contemporary Salafis wish to avoid charges of innovation and are quick to assert

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42 al-Albani, 87.
themselves as heirs to a time-honored puristic understanding of Islam. To some extent, their claim is credible insofar as scripturalist, literalistic, and anti-syncretistic trends have always existed throughout the history of Muslim societies, from the early medieval traditionists (ahl al-ḥadīth) to neo-Hanbalis such as Ibn Taymiyya. Yet the same claim ceases to be credible when contemporary Salafis go beyond generalities and project their specific set of religious rules and regulations, as well as the label Salafiyya, back in time.

Though historically debatable, this retroactive Salafiyya is easily taken for granted, even by non-Salafis. Abu Zahra, for instance, deemed it sufficient to cite a text by Ibn Taymiyya and to point out that it outlines the pious ancestors’ methodology; he therefore inferred that those who adhere to this methodology have been known as Salafis (salafiyyūn) for centuries and continue to be the torchbearers of a religious orientation called Salafiyya.\footnote{Ibid., 227.} However, Abu Zahra’s conclusion assumes premises that are nowhere to be found in the primary source he cites. While it is true that Ibn Taymiyya mentioned the term ṭarīqat al-salaf (way of the pious ancestors) twice in his short book Maʿarīj al-wusul, he never used the nouns “Salafis” or “Salafiyya.” Moreover, were Abu Zahra correct, it would be very difficult to differentiate the way of the pious ancestors that Ibn Taymiyya outlined from the mainstream Sunni Islam. Indeed, his definition of ṭarīqat al-salaf is largely congruent with standard Sunni legal methodology. It includes reliance upon the Qurʾan and the Sunna, consensus (ijmāʿ), sound analogical reasoning (qiyās),
and wisdom (ḥikma), which Ibn Taymiyya claims is contained in prophetic hadiths and reports from the pious ancestors.\textsuperscript{45}

Few Sunni Muslims today, be they Salafis or not, would deny the validity of this general methodology. Yet, contemporary puristic Salafis maintain that a large number of Sunnis do not qualify as Salafis. Such a gap indicates that contemporary Salafis further narrow down the definition that is supposed to lead to true Islam and that, beyond the rules that Ibn Taymiyya outlined, other criteria must play a role in defining the Salafiyya. Of course, puristic Salafis may object, with good reason, that the way of the pious ancestors goes deeper than practical applications (furūʿ al-dīn) and that its essence also resides in its canonical foundations (uṣūl al-dīn), which all rightly guided Muslims have shared throughout history. In other words, theological probity would be the characteristic that truly sets puristic Salafis apart from other Sunni Muslims.

There is indeed an undeniable continuity between Ibn Taymiyya and contemporary Salafis in that they all endeavor to avoid speculation and allegorical interpretations (taʾwīl), to implement the concept of monotheism (tawḥīd) to the fullest possible extent, to reject innovations (bidʿ), and to fight all types of idolatry (shirk) and bigotry (taʿṣṣub).\textsuperscript{46} But these underpinning principles, as old as they may be, remain guidelines that cannot preclude discrepancies, even among those who abide by them.


While they explain many of the rules and regulations of the contemporary Salafiyya, they cannot account for all of them.

For example, it is well known that Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya were more conciliatory than Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab towards various forms of Islamic religiosity, even though all three men must be counted among the greatest sources of inspiration for contemporary Salafis. As many scholars noted, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya did not oppose Sufism so long as it did not contradict the oneness of God and Islamic law. Nevertheless, contemporary Salafis largely overlook Ibn Qayyim’s mystical writings and either ignore the nuances of Ibn Taymiyya’s position or deny that he ever supported any aspect of Sufism. By virtue of some inexplicit criteria, they favor Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s ethic and prefer to condemn Sufism altogether.

Another example concerns a legal rule for divorce. Many contemporary Salafis follow the opinion of Ibn Taymiyya and consider that the triple ˯talāq in one phrase is invalid and does not lead to a final divorce. They view this as a Salafi rule par excellence. In Islamic legal jargon, the triple ˯talāq in one phrase refers to a man’s decision to divorce his wife by uttering three consecutive statements to this effect or by saying “I divorce you three times,” without having to wait for a three-month period.

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between each statement. The divorce is thus immediately final. As is often the case, this legal matter is subject to interpretation because some hadiths validate the procedure while others do not. Ironically, Ibn Hanbal, as well as many other pious ancestors such as ʿUmar ibn Khattab, are known to have upheld the validity of the triple ṭalāq in one phrase. Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya’s opinion is now considered more representative of the doctrine of the pious ancestors. As one critic rhetorically remarked, this implies that Ibn Hanbal, though a foremost salaf, was not Salafi with respect to divorce. Therefore, to say that the contemporary Salafiyya is a religious orientation that exists since medieval times is a partial truth and should not be understood literally. Despite the numerous common denominators that exist between medieval puristic ʿulama and their modern counterparts, a series of implicit factors and criteria continue to influence the way in which today’s Salafis interpret Islam and define their religious rules and regulations. Because the substance of the contemporary Salafiyya remains intertwined with the preoccupations of its exponents, it cannot be entirely transposed 1300, or even 600, years into the past.

However, contemporary Salafis are reluctant to consider that certain parts of their religious beliefs and practices are, or could be, dictated by subjective or contextual factors. A puristic Salafi could reasonably argue that Ibn Taymiyya rejected the validity of the triple ṭalāq in one phrase because he lived in the fourteenth century and had access

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50 The different types of triple ṭalāq are discussed in Abdul Hakim Ibn al-Matroudi, The Hanbali School of Law and Ibn Taymiyyah: Conflict or Conciliation (London: Routledge, 2006), 172.
52 al-Buti, 241.
to a greater body of knowledge than Ibn Hanbal; but this implies that the earliest, most pious ancestors did not have all the means to legislate properly and that their understanding of Islam was not necessarily flawless. Likewise, one could explain that Ibn Taymiyya rectified a misinterpretation and demonstrated that Ibn Hanbal’s real position on divorce could not have been the one that was attributed to him; but this could imply that generations of alleged Salafi scholars had previously agreed on a mistake. Whatever the explanation, it entails a risk of weakening one’s belief in a pure and uninterrupted Salafi Islam.

To augment the impression of continuity, contemporary puristic Salafis often endeavor to prove that the names by which they refer to themselves and to their own religious orientation represent no innovation. In their literature, they contend that the label “Salafiyya” is nearly as old as the type of Islam for which they believe it stands. By means of a semantic shift, they say that the expressions “doctrine of the salaf” (madhhab al-salaf) or “way of the salaf” (tariqat al-salaf) are interchangeable with the concept of “Salafism” (al-salafiyya). As we have seen, both Salafis and non-Salafis are prone to accept this reasoning because of the common linguistic root of these words as well as their assonance. Nonetheless, such a semantic shift has little historical basis. While the first two terms are indeed commonplace in medieval and pre-modern literature, the substantive “Salafiyya” and its derivatives are not. In truth, Salafi apologists cannot fully

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substantiate their claim. They have yet to produce a medieval primary source in which the noun “Salafiyya” is used.

Does such a technical detail truly matter? In many ways it does, and puristic Salafis themselves consider that the problem deserves consideration. In the struggle over the definition of true Islam, they are aware that their claim of being the only Islamic group that will achieve salvation can be greatly enhanced if they manage to demonstrate that their group has existed for centuries without interruption, has long bore the same name, and has always been easy to identify. In other words, the alleged perennial existence of the label “Salafiyya” and its derivatives serves as a historical guarantee of reliability on behalf of the individuals who introduce themselves as the modern depositaries of this label. Moreover, contemporary Salafis wish to preserve their integrity; because they are so insistent on condemning religious innovations, they cannot risk being branded as innovators themselves.

However, the evidence they have gathered so far is tenuous. Puristic Salafis rely on a few quotes that, while lending support to their argument, hardly prove it beyond any doubt. The most common quote, which is reproduced time and again both in printed texts and on websites, is taken from one of Ibn Taymiyya’s fatwas, where he writes: “There is no shame on whoever expounds the doctrine of the pious ancestors [madhhab al-salaf], ascribes himself to it, and refers to it; this must be accepted by agreement, for the doctrine of the pious ancestors is nothing but the truth.”54

Though clear and significant,

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54 Ibn Hasan, 53.
this quote is, strangely enough, never followed up with any concrete example of its application. Ibn Taymiyya did use the adjective “Salafi” at times (in both the masculine and the feminine), but it is not clear if he ever used it to describe a fellow Muslim, or if he ever developed the noun “Salafiyya” as a construct.\textsuperscript{55} If he did, it must have been highly unusual. In any event, contemporary Salafis never quote him doing so, and never indicate why or how he might have used these expressions. It is as though Ibn Taymiyya expressed a wish rather than a reality.

To strengthen their argument and to supplement Ibn Taymiyya’s sentence, contemporary Salafis usually provide two more quotes, translated into various languages and widely posted on Salafi websites. The first one comes from the genealogical dictionary of al-Samʿani (d. 1166), who wrote a short entry about the surname “al-Salafi” (the Salafi): “According to what I heard, this [surname indicates one’s] ascription to the pious ancestors and [one’s] adoption of their doctrine [\textit{madhhabihim}].\textsuperscript{56}” al-Samʿani, who seemed rather unfamiliar with the surname, could not list more than two individuals—a father and his son—who were known by it. Plus, the entry contains blank spaces in lieu of their full names, presumably because al-Samʿani had forgotten them or did not know them. One careful editor nonetheless cited three other medieval scholars

\textsuperscript{55} Henri Laoust alleges that Ibn Taymiyya sometimes used the term “Salafiyya,” but fails to specify in what form or in which context the medieval scholar did so. He only mentions that Ibn Taymiyya used the adjective \textit{muḥammadī} more often. Because Laoust did not provide any citation to buttress these assertions, it is difficult to weigh his opinion. See Henri Laoust, \textit{Le califat dans la doctrine de Rashid Rida} (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1986), 255. When Ibn Taymiyya uses the word “Salafiyya,” it is usually as an adjective among many others. See one example where he defends “[...] the Salafi, prophetic, lawful, divine way” (\textit{al-ṭarīqa al-salafiyya al-nabawīyya al-sharʿīyya al-ilāhiyya}) in Ibn Taymiyya, \textit{Darʾ al-taʿarud al-ʿaql wa-ḥ-naql}, ed. Muhammad Rashad Salim (Cairo: Matbaʿat Dar al-Kutub, 1971), 653.

who also attested that some people were, indeed, known by that surname. None of them lived prior to al-Samʿani.57

In the second quote, the epithet “Salafi” is once more used in reference to an individual. This time the sentence is found in a famous biographical dictionary written by al-Dhahabi (d. 1374). In a passage about the Iraqi scholar al-Daraqutni (d. 995), the author writes: “The man never got into speculative theology [ʿilm al-kalām] or religious controversy [al-jidāl]; he did not delve into that, for he was Salafi [kāna salafiyyan].” Here, the noun appears to be referring to the man’s theological stance alone. Yet there is no indication that this was a standard expression. On the contrary, the same dictionary also mentions that the exegete Ibn Shahin (d. 995), who was a contemporary of al-Daraqutni, referred to himself as “Muhammadi” (anā muḥammadī al-madhhab) rather than Salafi.59 In this case, Ibn Shahin was speaking about his legal stance: what he meant by this label is that he did not follow any of the traditional schools of law in particular. It would therefore be unwarranted to assume that the unusual expression “Salafi” was more significant or possessed any more authority than the equally usual ascription to the prophet Muhammad. As far the sources indicate, the term “Muhammadi” could well have prevailed over the term “Salafi” and come down from medieval times as the puristic label par excellence.

59 Ibid., 433.
In view of this evidence, one must concede that contemporary Salafis can partially support their contention: they have found a few written testimonies that attest the existence of a Salafi surname in medieval times, though no earlier than the twelfth century, nearly 500 years after the death of the prophet. However, these testimonies do not, by any means, echo the significance and popularity that the epithet “Salafi” currently enjoys in the Muslim world. On the contrary, al-Samʿani’s dictionary suggests that the surname was marginal at best, and the lone quotation taken from al-Dhahabi, who wrote 200 years later, does little to prove that the epithet was truly widespread in the Middle Ages. This may not necessarily be due to demographics or to the possibly low number of alleged Salafis who existed at the time. Rather, the reason may be that medieval puristic Muslims preferred other surnames such as “al-Athari,” whose root is a technical word designating the reports (āthār) by which the deeds and sayings of the pious ancestors are known. Until the twentieth century, this surname was undoubtedly more common than “al-Salafi.” In his dictionary, al-Samʿani easily listed the names of many people who were known by it in the Middle Ages.60

The modern period offers a strikingly different picture. Today, puristic Salafis adopt the surname “al-Salafi” en masse; they refer to the label “Salafiyya” in various circumstances to evoke a specific understanding of Islam that is supposed to differ from that of other Sunnis in terms of creed, law, morals, and behavior. The word “Salafiyya,” used as a noun and an adjective, is omnipresent in books, articles, and sermons; it is used

60 al-Samʿani, vol. 1, 114.
as a name for a number of associations, magazines, and bookstores.\textsuperscript{61} Salafi-related expressions and slogans have never been so used at any time in history. Even if one were to find a few examples showing that the substantive “Salafiyya” had been used in the medieval period, it would not compare with the exposure that this word has had in the past hundred years. This is an entirely modern phenomenon. In actuality, much of the hints suggesting the medieval existence of a religious orientation named “Salafiyya” result from unsubstantiated retroactive ascriptions carried out by twentieth-century scholars.\textsuperscript{62}

But these retroactive ascriptions lead to conceptual anachronism, just as it would be anachronistic to say that the Almohads of the eleventh century were Islamists because they shared similar traits with the modern exponents of political Islam, or because one can point to at least one medieval use of the word \textit{islāmiyyīn}, which Islamists now use to designate themselves.\textsuperscript{63} It would also be a mistake to assume that the meaning of any given term systematically remains the same over such extended periods of time. Whoever uses the term “Islamist” today invokes a concept that is inextricably linked to the evolution of Islamic thought in the twentieth century. Similarly, the word “Salafi”

\textsuperscript{61} Some of these observations can be found in al-Buti, 235. For an early self-proclaimed Salafi Association in the suburbs of Cairo, see the editors’ notice on the cover of Muhammad Ahmad ṬAbd al-Salam, ed., \textit{ʿAshr ṭasaʿ il wa ṣaqāʾid al-salafiyya} (Cairo: Matbaʿat al-Manar, 1932-33).

\textsuperscript{62} See the introduction to the first edition of ṬAli ibn ṬAli ibn Abi al-ʿIzz, \textit{Sharh al-tahawīyya fi-l-ʿaqida al-salafiyya}, ed. Ahmad Muhammad Shakir (Cairo: Dar al-Turath, 1980), 9. The editor—a renowned Egyptian Salafi who died in 1958—admits that he chose the title himself because the medieval author had not provided any. It should be noted that Shakir’s original edition was published through the “Salafiyya” Press in Cairo. For a Western example, see Marie Bernard, \textit{La profession de foi d’Abu Ishaq al-Shirazi} (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1987), 15, 51.

\textsuperscript{63} See the treatise by Abu Hasan al-Ashʿari (d. 939) entitled \textit{Maqalat al-islāmiyyīn wa ikhtilaf al-musallin} (Cairo: Maktubat al-Nahda al-Misriyyā, 1969).
appears to have had a narrow theological meaning in the twelfth century, whereas it is now much broader and applies to creed, law, morals, and behavior.\textsuperscript{64}

It goes without saying that the history of a term, or even the existence of a gap between a term and the idea to which it refers, needs not always be problematic. To refer to the Muslim Brotherhood as an “Islamist” movement, for instance, is conceptually acceptable, and moreover convenient, so long as one does not pretend that Hasan al-Banna invented the term in 1928. Sufis, for their part, openly acknowledge that the word “Sufism” was unknown to the first Muslims and that it was later chosen to refer to an older type of Islamic piety.\textsuperscript{65} The same could be said about the term “Salafiyya” if, as we mentioned earlier, its proponents were content to think of it as the most recent expression of a time-honored scripturalist, literalistic, and anti-syncretistic current of Islamic thought. Contemporary Salafis usually admit to this interpretation to some extent, and concede that the term Salafiyya did not exist during the first centuries of Islamic history.\textsuperscript{66} Yet they are often reluctant to further consider the historicity of the words and concepts they use, even if they find themselves in an untenable position. Though they cannot produce evidence of their own label being used by the earliest Muslim community, some Salafis nonetheless brand Sufism as a religious innovation because,

\textsuperscript{64} Bakr, 5.
\textsuperscript{65} al-Buti, 189.
among other reasons, neither the prophet nor his companions ever said the word “Sufism” (*taṣawwuf*). 67

### The Salafiyya According to Western Scholarship

For several decades, Western scholarship has understood the Salafiyya in a way that is diametrically opposed to the contemporary puristic Salafis’ view of themselves. According to this alternative narrative, the Salafiyya is a movement of Islamic modernism whose origins are relatively recent: it was founded in the late nineteenth century by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ʿAbduh, continued to thrive under the aegis of Rashid Rida, and gradually split and died down in the 1940s, leaving Islamism and secular modernism in its wake. 68 The substance of this Salafiyya is, by definition, significantly more liberal, rationalist and progressive than the other, more puristic version of the Salafiyya. The former often appears to have little in common with the latter. It suffices to underline that contemporary puristic Salafis usually regard ʿAbduh with suspicion and rarely concede that he ever was a Salafi. 69

This modernist definition of the Salafiyya is not groundless, but is not entirely accurate either. It revolves around yet another unsubstantiated assumption, in this case

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69 See Hilmi, 37; Muhammad Fathi ʿUthman, *al-Salafiyya fiṣ-l-mujtamaʿat al-muʿāṣira* (Caire: Dar al-Afaq al-Ghad, 1982), 77. One author conceded that al-Afghani and ʿAbduh were “partially” Salafi, but he had more negative than positive things to say about the two men. See al-Qawsi, 121.
the belief that al-Afghani and ʿAbduh, while in exile in Paris in 1884, created a reformist movement whose slogan was “Salafiyya” and whose organ was the journal *al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqa* (The Indissoluble Bond).  

Studies written in English often accept this idea—directly or indirectly—on the authority of the famous British Orientalist Sir Hamilton Gibb, who mentioned it in his *Modern Trends in Islam*. As for studies written in French, they either accept it on the authority of a book originally published in 1926 by Henri Lammens (a source notable for its lack of footnotes), or on the authority of Henri Laoust and his 1932 article on the Salafiyya. Because Hamilton Gibb based his own analysis of the Salafiyya on this very same article, there are reasonable grounds to believe that the unsubstantiated assumption traces its origins back to French scholarship.

A closer look at the bibliographical references listed in this article shows that Henri Laoust, for his part, repeated the information he found in an appendix that was published in 1925 in a leading French journal. When tracing the chain of transmission further back, the reader is redirected to a text dating from 1919, which was published in the same journal and written by its then director, the famous French scholar of Islam and Sufism Louis Massignon. This appears to be one of the oldest Western sources linking

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70 This assumption has also been taken for granted by some scholars in the Middle East such as, for example, al-Buti, 231-236.
73 Gibb, 133.
75 Another reference to this text can be found in the famous book by Lothrop Stoddard, *The New World of Islam* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1921), 86. It should be noted that Stoddard somewhat obscured Massignon’s explanation of the historical origins of the Salafi movement.
the label “Salafiyya” to al-Afghani and ʿAbduh, although it provides no evidence to support its claim. The information was apparently taken at face value and reiterated again and again throughout the years by a chain of Western scholars who trusted each other’s authority.

It is indisputable that, during their stay in Paris, al-Afghani and ʿAbduh gave Islamic reformism a new impetus. Never before had Islamic-cum-modernist ideas reached such a wide international readership nor had they had such a significant intellectual impact in the Middle East, North Africa and beyond. It is also true that the key themes developed in al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqa—from the call for Islamic unity to the call for modern education and science—remained on the agenda of all the Islamic modernists of the next generation. Yet while al-Afghani and ʿAbduh provided the initial élan for a new type of Islamic reformism that came to be known as the Salafiyya, it would be incorrect to pretend that this word was their slogan or their label. To my knowledge, the expression “Salafiyya” is not mentioned once in al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqa. Even the first issue, in which the authors explain the raison d’être and the objectives of their journal,

76 See Revue du monde musulman, 36 (1918-1919): 325. Because Massignon did not directly address the issue of the origins of the label “Salafiyya,” he did not submit that al-Afghani and ʿAbduh had coined the term. Yet he claimed that the Salafiyya, as a great modern intellectual movement, was born in India in the works of Siddiq Hasan Khan (d. 1890), the founder of the Ahl-i Hadith movement. Massignon added: “[…] and from there, [the Salafiyya] was spread by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Shaykh ʿAbduh and established itself in Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo and even in the Maghrib and Java.” Once again, Massignon did not explicate his intriguing claim. There were indeed many commonalities between the reformism of Siddiq Hasan Khan and that of the Islamic modernists in the Middle East. We know, for instance, that the latter had read the works of the former. But on a technical level, I have not found any textual evidence so far showing that Siddiq Hasan Khan used Salafi labels. The reason why Massignon conceived of the Salafiyya as a great movement that originated in India may be because he learned about the concept through his personal relationship with the al-Alusi family in Iraq, whose members were indeed influenced by the work of Siddiq Hasan Khan.
does not show any signs of adopting the word “Salafiyya” nor any of its derivatives. Primary sources simply do not corroborate the idea that al-Afghani and ʿAbduh coined “the Salafiyya” or used it as their rallying cry as early as the 1880s.

Additionally, the expression is not easier to find in the two men’s other writings. One must wait until the twentieth century before running across the word “Salafiyya” on a regular basis. Historian Itzchak Weismann, who wrote a sophisticated study on the origins of the modern Salafi movement, postulated that Salafi labels first gained in popularity among Islamic reformers in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, who then associated themselves with the Islamic modernist trend of Muhammad ʿAbduh. This seems likely. Weismann notes:

Our sources do not specify when the modern adherents of Ibn Taymiyya began to call themselves Salafis 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 Wahhabis. In any case, after the revolution of 1908 […] the use of this name seemed to them already self-evident.

Because the early twentieth-century Salafis of Syria, Iraq, the Hijaz and Egypt all corresponded and collaborated with one other, it is indeed difficult to pinpoint where exactly the resurgence of Salafi labels could have occurred. Yet there is no doubt that references to such a terminology were on the rise in all these reformist circles during the first decade of the century. A couple of explicit mentions can be found, for instance, in one of the Iraqi scholar Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi’s most famous books originally written

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in 1907.\textsuperscript{78} A few years earlier, though perhaps not prior to Muhammad ʿAbduh’s death, the term “Salafiyya” discretely found its way into Rashid Rida’s seminal journal \textit{al-Manar} (The Lighthouse). At first, Rida understood the word in a narrow theological sense and used it as an adjective that characterized the unique creed of the pious ancestors (ʿaqīda wāhida salafiyya), which he openly equated with Hanbali theology.\textsuperscript{79} In other cases, as in a text dated from late 1906, he used the word \textit{salafiyya} not as an adjective but as a plural noun meaning “Salafis,” just as the Arabic words ḥanābila and \textit{ashāʿira} are plural forms meaning "Hanbalis" and "Ashʿaris" respectively.\textsuperscript{80}

Despite its presence in the most influential reformist journal since al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqa, the word Salafiyya was not yet a slogan at the beginning of the twentieth century, nor was it a label standing for a specific trend of Islamic modernism. Instead, it was a mere technical term that designated a more puristic theology than that of the Ashʿari school, which was then prevalent in the Muslim world. Accordingly, Rida considered that being Salafi was not sufficient to be counted among the proponents of the Islamic modernist movement of al-Afghani and ʿAbduh. In a 1913 article, he declared that Najd, the heart of today’s Saudi Arabia, was the region in which Salafi theology was the most widespread. However, he noted that the Wahhabis were overcome with harshness (jafāʾ) and exaggeration (ghulw) and were not “moderate” like the other Salafis

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\item \textsuperscript{79} \textit{al-Manar}, 8 (1905): 615, 651.
\item \textsuperscript{80} Rashid Rida, \textit{al-Wahda al-islamiyya wa-l-ukhuwwa al-diniyya wa tawhid al-madhahib} (Cairo: al-Maktab al-Islami, n.d.), 10. This is the meaning that Henri Laoust had in mind when he entitled his article “Le réformisme orthodoxe des ‘Salafiyya,’” whose actual meaning in English is: “The orthodox reformism of the individuals collectively known as ‘Salafiyya.’”
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in Iraq, the Hijaz, Greater Syria, and Egypt. This distinction was significant. In Rida’s mind, moderation (iʿtīdāl) was indeed the most defining characteristic of the school of thought (madrasa fikriyya) that al-Afghani and ʿAbduh had founded.

In several occasions, he referred to the proponents of this school as a third and moderate reformist party (ḥizb muʿtadil) that promoted conciliation between Islam and the political, social, and scientific achievements of Western civilization. Its agenda was a progressive yet religious alternative to the radical acceptation, or refusal, of change. In other words, it was a moderate school of thought because it struck a balance between reason and revelation, while at the same time arriving at a middle ground between blind imitation of the West on the one hand, and Islamic stagnancy on the other. These goals may have been foreign to the Wahhabis, as Rida remarked, but they were central to the thought of several modernist Salafis, most notably Shukri al-Alusi (d. 1924) in Iraq, Tahir al-Jazaʾiri (d. 1919) and Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (d. 1914) in Syria. These are some of the men whom Rida openly considered part of the third, moderate party. They were Salafis (Hanbalis) with respect to theology but, more importantly, they also espoused progressive and modernist ideas.

Their strict theological beliefs were thus tempered by an overriding desire to match the philosophical and technical achievements of the West. In that sense, their religious worldview was very different from the puristic attitude of today’s Salafis. Rida,

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81 *al-Manar*, 16 (1913): 749.
for instance, was cautious not to succumb to a categorical or rigorist approach to religion that could hinder modernist reinterpretations of Islam. Early in his career, he did not think that Hanbali books of theology were faultless; rather, he considered that they provided the soundest and wisest way to avoid internecine religious debates and to encourage Muslims to unite while being true to their Islamic identity. Moreover, he refused to discredit other theological positions altogether, such as Ashʿarism and Muʿtazilism, or to dismiss them out of hand. Evidently, theological purity was not yet an end in itself and the Islamic modernists of the early twentieth century invoked the pious ancestors for reasons other than to settle dogmatic issues. In opposition to contemporary puristic Salafis, they also conceived of the salaf as role models whose dynamism and creativity in all facets of life, even profane ones, should inspire the Muslims of the modern era and bolster their self-esteem. The Islamic modernists’ goal was not so much to copy the pious ancestors in words and deeds as to recapture their progressive spirit.

Such an approach can be traced back to al-Afghani, who had already invited Muslims to know the biographies of their pious ancestors (sīrat al-salaf), arguing that whoever is familiar with the life of the salaf cannot fail to see the virtues of rationalism and of the ability to adapt to changing conditions. In the same vein, the first issues of al-Manar contained short articles devoted to the achievements of the pious ancestors, from the successful politics of the rightly-guided caliphs to the military exploits of ʿAmr

ibn al-ʿAs (d. 671), the general who led the Muslim conquest of Egypt. For Rida and other like-minded Islamic modernists, the pious ancestors exemplified the full potential of Islam and reminded modern Muslims that it is possible to be orthodox and creative at once. Should Muslims take the salaf as role models, it was argued, they would be rational, indulgent, flexible, strong and united. The umma would cease to be lackluster and would regain its past greatness.

It took some years before these virtues and principles could be subsumed under the concept of “Salafiyya.” Over time, increasing references to the pious ancestors, combined with repeated calls for worldly reform, freedom and modern science caused the definition of “Salafiyya” to expand. The word never lost its narrow theological acceptation, but nonetheless took on an additional meaning and came to designate the movement of Islamic modernism originally spearheaded by al-Afghani and ʿAbduh. Its advent as a label and a slogan dates from this period. In 1917, “al-Salafiyya” was selected as the title for a short-lived reformist journal, _al-Majallat al-Salafiyya_, for which Tahir al-Jazaʾirī served as a consultant. Its two editors, Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib and ʿAbd al-Fattah Qatlan, were two Syrian émigrés in close contact with Rashid Rida. Relevant examples of the journal’s progressive and modernizing goals can be found in the scientific almanac (taqwīm ʿilmī) that was published in late 1917 in lieu of the eleventh

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87 A good example is found in _al-Manar, 22_ (1921): 184-185.
and twelfth issues. Not only did this almanac aim at introducing readers to astronomical and geographical sciences for both religious and profane purposes; it also displayed a clear openness toward the West and non-Muslims minorities within Egyptian society. For instance, the relatively complex chart that provided the specific time for each Muslim prayer on each day of the year included corresponding entries based on the Gregorian and Coptic calendars. It also made mention of Jewish holidays. In other sections of the almanac, the editors endeavored to revive the scientific heritage of Islamic civilization while trying to teach the readers about the Western calendar system and its arithmetic rationale.

Alongside the monthly “Salafiyya” journal, al-Khatib and Qatlan had also established a bookstore bearing the same name (al-maktaba al-salafiyya). The two entities complemented each other. The bookstore’s mission was, of course, to make Salafi literature available to the public at a reasonable price. By the end of 1917, copies of at least fifteen printed titles were available for sale (some of which al-Khatib had previously released as early as 1913) as well as several manuscripts. But a closer look at the list of publications reveals that the Salafi bookstore conveyed an image of “Salafi” literature that was more much rationalist and progressive than strictly literalistic or anti-syncretistic. Besides the treatises on Arabic grammar and the science of hadith by al-Suyuti (d. 1505) and Tahir al-Jaza`iri (d. 1919), the bookstore sold works by Ibn Sina (d. 1037) on topics such as phonetics and logic as well as selections from the medieval

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89 al-Khatib and Qatlan, 81-93. This consideration toward non-Muslims is reminiscent of the position adopted by Muhammad ʿAbduh. See Hourani, 156.
philosopher al-Farabi (d. 950) entitled *Principles of Ancient Philosophy*. Today, these last two authors and their intellectual achievements are usually considered antithetical to the Salafiyya.

The list also included *al-Islam wa-l-Islah* (Islam and Reform), the Arabic rendition of a report from the British consul in Tunis to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in London. The managers of the Salafi bookstore deemed this report worthy of publication because it allegedly praised the merits of Islam. The reasons that appear to have motivated their choice in this case are in fact quite representative of the early twentieth-century Salafis’ attitude toward the West. In their eagerness to show that Islam was compatible with modern civilization, modernist Salafis often sought the approval of European elites. Rashid Rida, for example, had blamed the Sufi brotherhoods and their superstitions because, among other things, they prevented Europe from seeing the true rational face of Islam. What the West thought of Muslims did matter to him. As we shall see throughout the dissertation, the desire for recognition decreased. Over time, it evolved into apologetics and Islamic self-assertiveness; in some instances, it gave way to a growing disregard toward the West’s moral judgments, be they real or potential.

Another key establishment that contributed to an overlap between “Salafiyya” and Islamic modernism was the Salafiyya Press (*matbaʿat al-salafiyya*) in Cairo. This famous publishing house, whose head was again Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib, supplied the Salafi bookstore and became one of the prime centers for the dissemination of “Salafi” works in

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90 The list and its details are found in al-Khatib and Qatlan, 97.
the 1920s.\textsuperscript{92} Because the individuals who insisted on a theological Salafi terminology often happened to call for modernism as well, the two realities slowly began to merge. Using “Salafiyya” as a label to market the reformists’ literary output gradually blurred the distinctions between the strict theology attributed to the pious ancestors and the progressive agenda for which the pious ancestors served as role models.

In the end, the noun “Salafiyya” stopped being used as plural form meaning “those who adhere to Salafi theology” and became a substantive—Salafism—whose meaning was broad and resolutely modernist. A new plural word, namely \textit{salafiyyūn}, came to refer to the individuals who adhere to the Salafiyya. These terms entered the lexicon of academics and activists alike. In 1947, \textsuperscript{93} Āllal al-Fasi (d. 1974), the most prominent heir to Ābdūh’s school of thought in twentieth-century Morocco, saw no problem in discussing the Salafiyya as a broad movement of religious renewal, progress, and enlightenment \textit{(inārat al-‘uqāl)} before an audience at al-Azhar University in Cairo. To him, the Salafiyya was not merely a theological stance, but the latest manifestation of an older Islamic reformist current whose scope al-Afghani had considerably extended to address the challenges of modernity.\textsuperscript{93}

This inherently modernist facet, which allowed the Salafiyya to stand out as a third and moderate party, must be kept in mind in order to avoid the pitfalls of retroactive

\textsuperscript{92} The exact date of the foundation of the Salafiyya Press in Cairo is unclear. There is no indication that it existed at the time of the publication of the Salafiyya journal in 1917, and al-Khatib and Qatlan used a different printing press at the time. I surmise that it became operational in 1924, but it was certainly established prior to 1925. See Muhammad \textsuperscript{93} ‘Abd al-Rahman Burj, \textit{Muhīṭ al-Dīn al-Khatīb wa dawruhu fi-l-haraka al-‘arabiyya, 1906-1920} (Cairo: al-Hay‘a al-Misriyya al-‘Arba‘ Amma li-l-Kitab, 1990), 148.

projection. It is true that several Muslim reformists from different parts of the world had already pioneered and inspired some of the Salafis’ key religious ideas, sometimes well before the mid-nineteenth century. Yet, for reasons of conceptual coherence and despite the undeniable continuities in the history of Islamic reformism in general, these individuals should not necessarily be included among the founders of the modernist Salafiyya.94

Even by tracing the origins of the movement back to a nineteenth-century reformist such as Muhammad al-Shawkani (d. 1834) in Yemen, one overlooks that the Salafiyya—or what became known as the Salafiyya in the early twentieth century—owes its distinctiveness and originality to the fact that it offered Islamic solutions to the problems raised by the West’s philosophical modernity. A closer examination reveals that al-Shawkani did not meet this requirement: “[…] he does not convey in any of his writings a concern about a European intellectual menace, despite having been aware of a European economic, political and military presence in the Islamic lands—notable Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt.95” Because al-Shawkani was an Islamic reformist but not an Islamic modernist per se, his connection to the early twentieth-century Salafiyya should not be overstated. Promoting a return to the Qur’an and the Sunna, favoring

ijtihād, and opposing taqlīd are not signs of Islamic modernism unless they consciously serve a progressive agenda that addresses the challenges of Western modernity.

Conclusion

Prior to the twentieth century, never had the Muslim world been so exposed to the term “Salafiyya” or its derivatives. The history and meaning of these words, as well as those of the ideas to which they refer, are multi-layered and remain contested. The puristic Salafis of the late twentieth century, for instance, see themselves as the modern exponents of true Islam—a strictly delineated Salafi Islam whose rules and regulations come from the prophet, were mediated by the pious ancestors, and were preserved by a series of especially vigilant medieval scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya. In academic circles, however, particularly in the West, the Salafiyya has long been understood in a much less puristic sense. Until now, it is commonly presented as the Islamic modernist movement initiated by al-Afghani and ʿAbduh. Far from being overly rigorist, this Salafiyya was rather supposed to embody change, reason, and progress.

Although there is some truth in both of these views of the Salafiyya, they are also fraught with retroactive projections, ahistorical claims, and unsubstantiated assumptions. The puristic Salafis’ narrative depicts a mostly unchanging Salafiyya that crossed centuries unhindered and unaffected by contexts and individuals. Several objections can be raised concerning the historical accuracy of a unique and all-encompassing school of thought of the pious ancestors, whether it applies to law, theology, or both. To speak of a doctrine or a methodology of the pious ancestors instead of a school of thought does not
alter the fact that puristic Salafis observe a set of religious rules and regulations that have been tacitly at least, like any other system of thought, shaped by human criteria and circumstantial considerations. Today’s Salafis are correct when they say that the fundamental principles of their puristic Islam have existed for centuries: the attitudes of a ninth-century Hanbali toward Muʿtazilism, for instance, would indeed be strikingly similar to those of a puristic Salafi of the late twentieth century. Yet, this argument becomes more dubious when nuances are eliminated and Salafis suggest that each and every aspect of contemporary Salafi Islam, including the substantive “Salafiyya” by which it is known, have passed through history as an unadulterated whole. While it is true that the surname “al-Salafi” has existed at least since the twelfth century, it no longer serves as a mere theological marker. Its contemporary meaning has a larger scope and is more value-laden than it ever was in any previous century.

Western scholars, for their part, are partly correct when they define the Salafiyya as Islamic modernism. However, they, too, are often guilty of retroactive projection. Their mistake is to assume that the label “Salafiyya” was chosen and popularized by al-Afghani and ʿAbduh in the 1880s whereas the label, in reality, gradually emerged, starting in the beginning of the twentieth century. While Rashid Rida made use of the Arabic words salafi and its plural salafiya (denoting the proponents of Hanbali theology), their meaning was strictly theological. Over time, as his leading journal al-Manar continued to refer to the pious ancestors as role models and past examples of Islamic dynamism, the theological and progressive allusions to the salaf merged. In due course,
the substantive Salafiyya, or Salafism, emerged, gained ground and became a de facto label for the multi-faceted movement of Islamic modernism originally founded by al-Afghani and ʿAbduh. It has remained a label since then, even if puristic Muslims have claimed it for themselves and given it a different meaning.

However, as both definitions of the Salafiyya are now historical and linguistic reality, they should be accepted so long as they are properly distinguished. Nevertheless, it must be noted that conclusions about the origins of the word will never be definitive unless someone undertakes the improbable task of gathering and sifting through all existing Islamic texts since the seventh century. It is, from a purely logical viewpoint, easier to disprove that the substantive “Salafiyya” never existed prior to the twentieth century than it is to prove it. But if some indefatigable researcher were to find a hitherto unknown example showing that the word was used in another century, he or she would also need to show that it had the same meaning and that it truly served as a label or a slogan, as it did in the twentieth century.
Chapter Two

Conversion to the Salafiyya

Generally speaking, the modernist Salafis of the early twentieth century viewed Hanbali theology as an ideal balance point. On the progressive side, it justified the removal of all religious accretions and superstitions on which they blamed the umma’s state of ignorance. In that sense, Hanbali theology paved the way for further reforms. On the puristic side, it also served as an anchor that prevented Islamic modernism from running adrift. While modernist Salafis were open to change and reinterpretation with respect to law and socio-political matters, they were less audacious with respect to creed—a domain in which they believed reason had little potency and could foster undue doubts and dissensions.¹ Rashid Rida, for one, confessed that he had been puzzled, in his youth, by the Hanbalis’ opposition to speculative theology (kalām). He assumed that they were a stagnant group of people who adhered to the literal meaning of Islamic texts, who did not truly understand them, who were ignorant of the inherent truths of science, and could not conciliate Islam and modern knowledge. However, he later realized that Hanbalism provided a more solid and reliable basis than Ashʿarism. Reading Hanbali books, he wrote, was like walking on a straight path, whereas reading Ashʿari ones

amounted to swimming in deep sea (bahr lujūjī), where one has to struggle against the waves of philosophical doubts and the currents of theoretical investigation.²

Adherence to Hanbali theology did not prevent modernist Salafis from being rational; it rather allowed them to use reason as much as possible and in various ways without fearing to go overboard or endanger their faith. Undoubtedly, reason (‘aql) was a prominent feature of the early twentieth-century Salafiyya. It was the key to progress: only through reason could the umma hope to break out of its lowliness (dhull) vis-à-vis the West.³ To varying degrees, modernist Salafis targeted Sufism as one of the most pernicious causes of stagnancy and decline. From the popular use of amulets for medical purposes to the occult interpretation of religious texts, mystical knowledge and practices were considered major obstacles to the advent of reason and science in the Muslim world.⁴ In addition, modernist Salafis argued that Sufism steered Muslims away from the scriptures and, by the same token, from the soundest and most rational source of guidance. For many individuals including Rida, rejecting of Sufism was therefore a personal defining moment and a crucial intellectual step toward Islamic modernism.⁵

The story of Taqi al-Din al-Hilali’s conversion to the Salafiyya corresponds to that pattern. The reasons for which the young Moroccan man decided to turn away from his mystical convictions and to adopt a new set of epistemological assumptions are worthy of attention, because they indicate the extent to which reason was inherent to the Salafiyya in its incipiens. However, because Islamic modernism consisted in a broad program that comprised political, social, linguistic, and religious dimensions, al-Hilali naturally privileged some of these aspects over others. In view of his scholarly inclinations and his strong interest for hadiths, it soon became obvious that he aspired to become a religious specialist and to emphasize the more puristic side of the modernist Salafiyya, leaving the progressive and socio-political dimensions to others.

This chapter offers a narrative of the events that led to al-Hilali’s conversion and argues that, at the time, he was neither a religious maverick nor a fully puristic Salafi. al-Hilali did embrace the modernist Salafiyya, but his conversion underlined the tensions and the potential imbalance that existed between different tendencies within this religious orientation. On the one hand, as stated above, the modernist Salafiyya sought to reconcile a rational and progressive ethic with a puristic theology and a deep attachment to the formative texts. On the other hand, modernist Salafis were also divided between their desire to engage in a certain type of grassroots socio-political activism—which sometimes included anti-colonial and proto-nationalist activities—and their devotion to

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6 Based on al-Hilali’s own choice of words, it seems appropriate to use the term conversion. He himself wrote about his “exit” from Sufism and his “entry” into the Salafiyya. See Taqī al-Dīn al-Hilalī, al-Da’wa ila Allah fi aqtar muḥtaṭifā (Medina: n.p., n.d.), 7.
the painstaking religious scholarship necessary for the revivification and purification of Islam.

This last distinction often depended on generational or contextual factors. While ʿAbduh’s younger Egyptian disciples founded the Hizb al-Umma (People’s Party) in 1907 in reaction to British imperialism, other famous Salafis in Syria and Iraq who had not yet experienced Western colonialism were primarily concerned with writing reformist exegesis, reviving the texts and ideas of Ibn Taymiyya, establishing libraries, and so forth. To be sure, the various poles or tendencies that coexisted within the modernist Salafiyya were not mutually exclusive by any means. In Syria, Tahir al-Jazaʾiri (d. 1920) founded and managed the Zahiriyaa Library, but was no less politically minded. The manuscripts of Ibn Taymiyya that he sought to preserve contained ideas that allowed him to oppose the rule of the Ottoman sultan ʿAbd al-Hamid II. It is thus fair to say that each individual could, under the umbrella of the modernist Salafiyya, choose from a wide range of possible approaches to reformism that often overlapped, but sometimes appeared at odds with one another. Striking a balance between religious and socio-political tendencies, or between progressive and puristic goals, was a delicate matter. This balance, or equilibrium, did not always have to occur on an individual level; rather, it had to exist on a broader level, that is, within the modernist Salafiyya as a whole. In the early twentieth century, this broad and multifaceted reformist movement remained united enough to deal with its own internal tensions. In the long run, however, the prevalence of

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7 Hourani, 170, 222.
certain tendencies (or poles) over others influenced the course of the Salafiyya’s evolution in the twentieth century.

al-Hilali’s Sufi Background

Muhammad Taqi al-Din al-Hilali was born in 1894 in the Tafilalt region of southeast Morocco, in a village near the historic ruins of Sijilmasa, once a flourishing trade post on the caravan road to Timbuktu. The Tafilalt region is also the cradle of the ruling ʿAlawi dynasty and, like the current king of Morocco, al-Hilali claimed an Arab and sharifian descent through ʿAli and Fatima, respectively the cousin and the daughter of the prophet. More specifically, as the last name al-Hilali indicates, Taqi al-Din’s ancestry had links to the Banu Hilal, the unruly Arabian tribe whose emigration to North Africa was ordered in the eleventh century by the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir in an attempt to rid himself of a potentially rebellious force and, presumably, to undermine the authority of his breakaway Zirid governor in Ifriqiyya. Indeed, it was from the city of Kairouan, south of Tunis, that one of al-Hilali’s ancestors traveled to southeast Morocco, where he then settled down.

As effervescent as the region of Sijilmasa may have been in the Middle Age, by the end of the nineteenth century it was but a pale reflection of its grandiose past. According to al-Hilali, there were few educated people in the area. His father, ʿAbd al-

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10 Abdallah Laroui, L’histoire du Maghreb: un essai de synthèse (Casablanca: Centre Culturel Arabe, 2001), 139-140.
Qadir, was fortunately one of them: he was a jurist (*faqīḥ*) and a deputy judge (*nāʾib ʿalā al-qāḍī*). Under his guidance, and with the help of his grandfather, the young Taqi al-Din (he was then known as Muhammad al-Taqi) began his religious education at home. Because he had learned the Qur’an by heart by the age of twelve, his father decided to send him to a local shaykh for lessons in Qur’anic recitation (*tajwīd*). Thereafter, al-Hilali suspended his studies for several years until after he left for Algeria in 1915 to make a living.

He recounted his childhood memories with a particularly critical view on the religious life at the time:

> I saw the people of my region [Sijilmasa] being extremely enthusiastic about Sufi brotherhoods; you could hardly find one of them, educated or ignorant, who was not affiliated to the corps of one of the orders and fond of its shaykh, [as though] he were mad with love. [He] would ask him for help in cases of misfortunes, and be always grateful and praiseful. If he obtained a favor, he would thank the shaykh for it; if a calamity befell him, he would impute it to his insufficient love for the shaykh and inadequate adherence to the brotherhood. It would not occur to him that his shaykh was incapable of doing anything either in the hereafter or in this world [...]. I heard people saying: “He who does not have a shaykh, Satan is his shaykh.”

Though al-Hilali wrote these lines in the 1970s from the standpoint of a puristic Salafi, his depiction is in keeping with other accounts of the pervasive influence of Sufism and Sufi brotherhoods in twentieth-century Morocco, especially in rural areas.

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A famous British member of the Royal Geographical Society who traveled to the Tafilalt region on the year of al-Hilali’s birth claimed that Sufi brotherhoods were exceptionally thriving in that region.15 In retrospect, it was only natural for the young al-Hilali to be inclined toward mysticism. We know that his father, far from discrediting Sufism, was favorable to the practice of visiting the tombs of local saints and asking them for help (istimdād).16 Thus, like most inhabitants of the Tafilalt, Taqi al-Din yearned to join a Sufi order. His wish was to join the Tijaniyya, whose popularity among the educated elite of the region aroused his interest and curiosity. The fact that his father had refused to belong to this particular brotherhood did not stop him. al-Hilali was still an adolescent when he decided to visit the head (muqaddim) of the local branch and asked him to be initiated. He learned the order’s litany (wird), took part in the daily office (waẓīfa), and remained a member of the Tijaniyya for the next nine years.17

We do not know exactly how al-Hilali was making a living in Algeria or why he decided to cross the border, but he was traveling in the country when a series of unusual experiences caused him to doubt his Sufi convictions for the first time. In between two towns, the camel he was supposed to look after managed to untie its legs and escaped in the desert. al-Hilali tried to approach the animal, but every time he reached for its neck the camel jumped with fright and ran further away. al-Hilali’s reaction was to implore the eponym Sufi shaykh of his brotherhood, Ahmad al-Tijani (d. 1815), and beg him to make

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16 One of these local saints was al-Hilali’s ancestor. al-Hilali, *al-Hadiya*, 7-8.
the camel stop and kneel. The stray animal never complied, but al-Hilali instinctively blamed himself: “I did not suspect my shaykh at all of being unable to fulfill my wishes.”

Convinced that he had failed to please his shaykh, al-Hilali was in spiritual distress. He found solace in a volume from al-Ghazali’s *Ihya ‘ulum al-din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) upon which he had unexpectedly come across. Deeply moved by this reading, he began staying up through the desert’s cold nights in a state of prim devotion. One such night, while he was praying in front of his small tent, al-Hilali claims that he saw white clouds emerging from the eastern horizon. The clouds then moved in his direction until an individual came out of them, approached him, and began to pray. Terrified by this nightly apparition, al-Hilali asked God to either make the individual speak or make him leave. The individual eventually greeted al-Hilali—though the latter could not hear a voice—and slowly walked back to the white clouds that carried him away. He disappeared out of sight in the dark.

al-Hilali has never been able to ascertain what happened to him or to determine what kind of being he encountered that night. Yet he was convinced that it was not a satanic figure. On the contrary, he seemed inclined to believe that the individual was an angel of good omen. Indeed, a few days later, the prophet Muhammad reportedly appeared to al-Hilali in a dream (*fī-l-manām*) to give him specific instructions.

According to his recollections, the prophet took his hand and ordered him to study

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18 Ibid., 9.
19 Ibid., 9-10.
20 Ibid., 11.
religious science. When al-Hilali asked whether he should study exoteric or esoteric knowledge (*al-ʿilm al-ẓāhir am al-bāṭin*), the prophet gave him an answer that proved fateful: “He told me: the exoteric science.”\(^{21}\) In the midst of this conversation, al-Hilali could not help but wonder why the prophet was ordering him to study while he was in the middle of French-controlled Algeria; after all, some Moroccan ʿulamaʾ readily condemned the Muslims who traveled there. Perplexed, al-Hilali asked whether he should study in the land of the Christians or in the land of the Muslims. The prophet told him he could study in either one, for all lands belong to God.\(^{22}\)

These instructions made such an impression on al-Hilali that he followed them very closely throughout the remainder of his life. Yet, because the prophet had not condemned his affiliation to the Tijaniyya, the thought of abandoning Sufism never occurred to him. In al-Hilali’s mind, leaving his *ṭarīqa* was still tantamount to leaving Islam.\(^{23}\) At the time, he merely wished to obey the prophet and to study exoteric religious science, that is, the non-intuitive and scripturalist sciences usually associated with the science of hadith, Qurʾanic exegesis, theology and *fiqh*. In view of this goal, al-Hilali visited a man named Muhammad ibn Habib Allah al-Shanqiti, the most learned and pious person of a local Algerian tribe, and asked him for advice about higher studies in Morocco, Tunisia, or Algeria.

As it turned out, al-Shanqiti ran a school in a tent, where he taught his students the basic principles of religious sciences. When he suggested al-Hilali to enroll, the latter

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\(^{21}\) al-Majdhub, 185.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.

reluctantly accepted. Though al-Shanqiti’s curriculum did not live up to al-Hilali’s new ambitions, he studied with this professor for at least three years and followed him when he relocated his school near Oran.\(^{24}\) During this period, al-Hilali learned Maliki jurisprudence and Arabic grammar.\(^{25}\) He also developed his teaching skills, as he occasionally substituted for al-Shanqiti. This line of work proved rewarding and al-Hilali was soon hired to teach for a notable from southern Algeria. Two years later, he was given the opportunity to move back to his native country when Ahmad Sukayrij (d. 1944), a fellow Tijani and chief qāḍī of the city of Oujda, asked him to tutor his son and nephew in Arabic literature.\(^{26}\) al-Hilali accepted the job and stayed in Oujda for a year. He then traveled to Fes, where he hoped to fulfill his dream of pursuing higher religious education in a renowned school.

**A Rational Awakening**

It was in Fes that al-Hilali’s religious outlook changed most drastically. Upon his arrival in the old city, he briefly attended classes at the Qarawiyyin, the utmost center of religious learning in Morocco, and quickly obtained a diploma (ṣahāda) from it.\(^{27}\) His studies were short and do not appear to have left a profound impression on him. al-Hilali’s religious identity remained sensibly unchanged and continued to revolve around Sufism. When he paid a visit to ʿAbd al-Hay al-Kittani, the prominent Sufi leader whom

\(^{24}\) al-Majdhub, 185. al-Hilali mentions conflicting dates and it is therefore difficult to provide a reliable chronology.

\(^{25}\) Anonymous, 5.


\(^{27}\) The nature of this diploma is unclear. See al-Majdhub, 185-186, 191.
he had already met in Oujda, the latter allegedly warned him against the Tijaniyya and—in what seems to be a rather unlikely statement—against the inherent treachery of all Sufi orders including the Kittaniyya itself. But al-Hilali was nonetheless impervious to doubts and refused to give any credence to such allegations. Personal testimonies and arguments of authority seemed unable to weaken his belief in the Tijaniyya or affect his deeply-rooted Sufi convictions.

One of the most remarkable aspects of al-Hilali’s conversion to the Salafiyya is the fact that it occurred through a mode of debate that is part of the Islamic historical heritage, but is frowned upon by many contemporary puristic Salafis, namely, dialectical and speculative logic applied freely to religious matters. Hence, the context of al-Hilali’s conversion leaves little doubt as to the nature of the Salafiyya in early twentieth-century Morocco. In the wake of ʿAbduh’s reformism, it was still a movement of religious enlightenment that elevated reason as of the foremost criteria for understanding and defining Islam, sharing it with others, and determining how it ought to regulate Muslim society. For early twentieth-century Salafis, religious beliefs and convictions, except for a few theological tenets, were of little value unless they had a strong rational basis. It is, thus, no coincidence that dialectical reasoning ultimately convinced al-Hilali to embrace the Salafiyya. Islamic modernists would not have relied on a mere enumeration of Qur’anic verses and hadiths.

The conversion occurred relatively quickly in November 1921. al-Hilali was discussing with a bookseller who worked near the Qarawiyyin when the latter asked him if he had met Muhammad ibn al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi, the famous modernist Salafi who lived in Fes. al-Hilali had evidently heard of him, presumably at the Qarawiyyin, because his reply was categorical: “I said to [the bookseller] that I would never sit next to that man and would not meet him, because he hates shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani and spoke evil of his brotherhood.” The bookseller told al-Hilali that, as a student of religious knowledge, he would benefit from being more open-minded and willing to converse with people whose opinions differed from his. By pointing out that he had nothing to lose besides a great opportunity to learn, the bookseller finally convinced al-Hilali to look for al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi at the tribunal of Fes al-Jadid, where he worked as a qāḍī.

By the 1920s, Muhammad ibn al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi (d. 1964) was already an important figure of the Islamic modernist movement. Born to a family of ʿulamaʾ, he had studied at the Qarawiyyin and had been a pupil of another key Salafi, Abu Shuʿayb al-Dukkali (d. 1937), who is commonly referred to as the Muhammad ʿAbduh of Morocco or, alternatively, as the pioneer of the modernist Salafiyya in Morocco. Indeed, al-Dukkali had been exposed to the principles of Islamic modernism during his studies at al-Azhar, whose curriculum ʿAbduh had previously redefined.

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At first, al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi defined his social role through anti-colonial struggle. In 1908, following the French occupation of Casablanca, he allegedly sold all his books to buy a rifle and a horse so he could join the tribal resistance led by Muha U Hammu. But because this army was improvised and too weak to engage French troops, it soon disbanded, forcing al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi to explore other ways of resisting European encroachment.\textsuperscript{33} The modernist Salafiyya, with its reformist and educational goals, became for him the most suited means of elevating the Moroccan people morally and intellectually until it regained its complete independence. Thus, in addition to being a qāḍī in Fes, al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi was first and foremost a teacher at the Qarawiyin, where he had worked since 1912.\textsuperscript{34}

His biographers have described him as the proponent of an enlightened Salafiyya who, like ʿAbdul Qadir al-Sahrawi, Shaykh al-islam Muhammad ibn al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi (Casablanca: Matbaʿat Dar al-Nashr al-Maghribiya, 1965), 18-19.\textsuperscript{35} al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi himself acknowledged that he was influenced by Rida’s journal al-Manar.\textsuperscript{36} Among other examples of his modernist and progressive approach, he supported the concept of a truly constitutional monarchy, opposed polygamy and triple ʿtalāq on the basis of their irrationality and, later in his life, encouraged the daughters of sultan Muhammad V to remove their ḥijāb in public in order

to lead the way for the emancipation of Moroccan women.\textsuperscript{37} Therefore, the man whom al-Hilali accepted to visit did not envision the Salafiyya as a strictly puristic ethos. For al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi, strengthening the Moroccan people meant freeing them from the shackles of religious ignorance and stagnation (\textit{jumūd}), which Sufism contributed to maintain. al-Hilali knew all too well that he was about to meet an opponent of the Sufi orders; yet he may not have been unaware that al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi was himself a former Tijani.

After his conversation with the bookseller, al-Hilali went to the tribunal of Fes al-Jadid and ran across al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi as he was exiting the building. The two agreed on an appointment later that evening at the modernist Salafi’s house. Their meeting started out in a formal and somewhat bookish manner: al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi stood up, put books in front of his young guest, and talked about them. Although al-Hilali found the man congenial and very educated, he was not particularly intrigued by his speech and was soon ready to leave the house.\textsuperscript{38} When al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi invited him to spend the night, al-Hilali accepted, but soon began to regret his decision when other guests arrived and set out to mock and criticize Sufi brotherhoods. al-Hilali felt so uncomfortable and guilt-ridden to lend an ear to such discourse that he tried to escape the property.

Unsuccessful, he quickly felt prisoner of his host’s hospitality. al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi noticed the malaise and asked his young guest why he seemed so dispirited. al-Hilali explained that he was a Tijani and could not remain among people who openly

\textsuperscript{37} al-Sahrawi, 29-30; Khettouch, 167, 253.
\textsuperscript{38} al-Hilali, \textit{al-Hadiya}, 15.
denigrated his convictions. It was at this moment that al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi confessed to al-Hilali that he, too, had belonged to the Tijaniyya. He apologized on behalf of his friends for the unwarranted insolence, but kindly challenged al-Hilali to a debate (munāẓara) about the soundness of his beliefs. al-Hilali accepted the challenge out of pride.  

The arguments that al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi raised all revolved around one single question, which is at the core of the Tijaniyya’s legitimacy: did the prophet Muhammad truly appear to Ahmad al-Tijani while the latter was awake rather than asleep? In other words, was this Sufi order really based on instructions that Ahmad al-Tijani received directly from the prophet in the eighteenth century? To understand the significance of this issue, it is important to keep in mind that the Tijaniyya is, to a certain extent, unlike other Sufi brotherhoods. This “Tijani exception,” as one specialist called it, stems from the fact that Ahmad al-Tijani allegedly obtained his mystical knowledge in 1782 through a vision of the prophet that occurred while he was awake (yaqazatan).  

Visions of the prophet are far from uncommon in Islamic history. Throughout centuries, various Muslims of all convictions have reported them; al-Hilali was no exception. However, these visions usually occur in dreams (manāman), hence the particularity of Ahmad al-Tijani’s story. Because he received his guidance and his wird from the prophet and, above all, in a state vigilance, al-Tijani could claim a superior status for himself and his ṭarīqa. This was, at least, how his later disciples perceived him.

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39 Ibid., 17.
al-Tijani was given the title of khatm al-ʿawliyāʾ (seal of the saints) by analogy to Muhammad, who is considered seal of the prophets. By virtue of the inherent superiority of its origins and the prophetic source of its mystical knowledge, the Tijaniyya has been, according to Jean-Louis Triaud, perceived as arrogant. Never had a Sufi brotherhood caused so much controversy and generated so many passionate denunciations.\(^{41}\)

Therefore, al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi endeavored to convince al-Hilali that the very basis of the Tijaniyya was false. By attempting to demonstrate that the story of Ahmad al-Tijani’s exceptional vision made no sense, he wished to invalidate the Tijaniyya as a whole. In a manner that is reminiscent of the Socratic method, he confronted al-Hilali with a series of five hypothetical propositions whose purpose was to unveil the illogical nature of his Sufi beliefs. First, al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi reminded his young guest of the conflict that pitted the Meccans against the Medinans in 632 regarding the succession of the prophet. The two groups could not agree on the political and religious future of the community: the Ansar considered a dual system—a ruler for each community—while the Muhajiirun claimed that power should belong solely to the tribe of Quraysh.\(^{42}\) Their disagreement was so strong that it delayed the prophet’s burial for three days. Yet, Muhammad never appeared to his own companions while they were awake in order to settle such a crucial dispute. al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi asked: why would the prophet have


granted this privilege 1200 years later to Ahmad al-Tijani, a man of lesser stature, and for a less important reason? 43

He followed with four other observations of similar nature. Why, for instance, did the prophet not appear to either Abu Bakr or Fatima, his own dear relatives, when the two were quarreling over inheritance? Why did he not appear in broad daylight during the Battle of the Camel in 656 to prevent internecine strife and bloodshed? Why did he not appear to the leader of the Kharijis and order him to obey ʿAli? Why did he not appear during the conflict between ʿAli and Muʿawiya, when the community was losing its best people and the unity of the umma was clearly at stake? In each case, al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi implied that it would have been illogical (ghayr maʿqūl) for the prophet to appear in broad daylight to Ahmad al-Tijani whereas he never did in these aforementioned cases, when it would have been more urgent, appropriate, or useful. 44

Throughout the debate, these arguments increasingly dumbfounded al-Hilali. His responses—when he had any—were based mostly on the sayings of Ahmad al-Tijani rather than on the Qurʾan and the Sunna. Nevertheless, al-Hilali refused to admit his defeat. He left al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi and said he would review these proofs and give them a thought. The two men met seven times afterward and, by the last session, al-Hilali realized that he had been completely mistaken about Islam. He rapidly became convinced that all Sufi brotherhoods were misleading, that Muslims should only rely on the formative texts, and that it was absolutely impossible to combine these two realities. al-

44 Ibid., 18-20.
Hilali claimed that al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi’s irrefutable proofs caused him to abandon Sufism completely and for good.\footnote{Ibid., 20-22.} He was now a Salafi, like his mentor.

For the purpose of this study, it is not relevant to find out whether al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi was right or wrong about the Tijaniyya. The important point is, rather, that he managed to convince al-Hilali and that he did so by invoking logic and reason. Because these were the parameters of the conversion process, they indicate the type of Islamic reformism al-Hilali embraced. In the end, what he experienced was a twofold rational awakening, for the debate changed his religious beliefs as well as his epistemological assumptions. Throughout his discussion with al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi, al-Hilali sensed the inferiority of arguments based on hearsay evidence, secondary sources, or Sufi literature, all of which were considered obscurantist by most Salafis. Even if Ahmad al-Tijani was well versed in religious science, his sayings failed to impart as much authority to an argument as did logic and direct quotations from the Qur’ān or the Sunna.

A triumphant reason combined with a return to the formative texts of Islam was the hallmark of the modernist Salafiyya in Morocco and elsewhere. By accepting the validity of these two principles, al-Hilali joined a transnational community of Muslims for whom progress and enlightenment were central to Islam. There is no reason to believe that his conversion was sui generis or that he converted to a parallel, puristic kind of Salafiyya. On the contrary, al-Hilali later found out that al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi had
borrowed his arguments from a book written by another famous modernist Salafi, the Iraqi scholar Shukri al-Alusi (d. 1924).46

The Modernist Salafiyya and its Ambivalence

Sources are unfortunately too scarce or often too posterior to the 1920s to allow precisions on how al-Hilali originally conceived of the Salafiyya to transpire. We know that he envisioned it as the rational opposite of Sufism, yet nothing in his autobiographical narrative and anecdotes suggests that al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi introduced him to other key issues in the modernist Salafiyya, such as the reform of fiqh, the struggle against fatalism, or the borrowing of hard and human science from the West. Nor is there any indication that al-Hilali’s conversion immediately fostered a new and deep interest for proselytism (daʿwa) and the prescription of proper devotional practice. Given the fact that the Tijanis of the Tafilalt already proscribed the visitation of saints (ziyāra) and forbade the occurrence of celebrations on behalf of a shaykh or a saint (mawāsim),47 it is possible that he did not initially concern himself with matters of orthopraxy. Above all, his decision to embrace the Salafiyya meant an unconditional rejection of intuitive knowledge in general. Prior to his conversion, al-Hilali had already begun to seek esoteric knowledge, but he had never thought that esoteric knowledge was inherently inferior, or that the two types of science could not be combined. His encounter with


47 al-Hilali, al-Hidaya, 7; Benabdellah, 7, 22.
Muhammad ibn al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi completely changed this epistemological assumption.

Based on the nature and substance of the debate that took place in November 1921, one must conclude that al-Hilali understood the Salafiyya as a religious orientation that privileged reason (ʿaql), the Qurʾan, and the Sunna, and aimed at bringing them all into agreement. Rather than being overly literalistic or scripturalist, al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi’s speech implied that it was both appropriate and necessary to assess religious beliefs on the basis of their rational underpinnings. Precisely, al-Hilali adopted his mentor’s views because they seemed more rational and logical to him than Sufism. He could hardly have failed to notice that Islam’s rational aspect was the cornerstone of the modernist Salafis’ multifaceted reform program. However, we do not know whether or not he realized that two of the key goals of this program were to strengthen the Muslim community vis-à-vis the West and bring it in tune with modernity.

In any case, al-Hilali quickly found his niche within the broad movement of Salafi reform. In accordance with the instructions he had received from the prophet in Algeria, he wished to pursue his quest for exoteric knowledge. More specifically, he developed a marked interest for the science of hadith, which he came to regard as the exoteric science par excellence. al-Hilali claims that this interest was dormant since his youth rather than sudden. Many years earlier, his father brought him to the palace of Moulay Rashid ibn Muhammad, the son of Moroccan sultan Muhammad IV (d. 1873), who was governor of the Tafilalt between 1896 and 1911. Although al-Hilali was still a child at the time, he
had been fascinated by the governor’s extensive knowledge of hadith.\footnote{Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, “Dar al-Hadith wa fadl ʿilm al-hadith,” Daʿwat al-Haqq, 7, 7 (April 1964): 1.} He now wanted to devote his time and energies to learning the actions and sayings of the prophet.

In due course, his desire to study hadiths led him to focus on the scripturalist side of the modernist Salafiyya and to become a strong advocate of Hanbali theology. This does not necessarily mean that he thought history should move backwards. Returning to the formative texts of Islam and bypassing the tedious traditional scholarship—summaries, commentaries, and technical glosses—was often a means to recapture the dynamism of pristine Islam and inspire progressive reforms. In return, many Islamic modernists considered that scripturalism and Hanbali theology provided a measure of rigidity that guaranteed a stable religious basis beyond the reach of rational investigation. This reassuring dogmatic anchor allowed social, political, and moral reconstruction to take place freely in other spheres of Muslim life. The two aspects were not mutually exclusive.

Therefore, al-Hilali’s interest for the scripturalist foundation of Islamic modernism should not be construed as hostile to reason or progressiveness per se. However, there was indeed some ambivalence within the modernist Salafiyya. The movement’s originality, as is well known, consisted in issuing a call for change inspired by the West while promoting an idealization of the first centuries of Islamic history. Modernist Salafis were well aware of the challenges that this synthesis could pose. They could not let the balance tilt too much toward either one of these two poles, or else their
movement risked degenerating into retrograde religious purism or pure emulation of the West. The early twentieth-century Salafiyya did have a more puristic side; but overall it remained subordinated to the movement’s modernist ambitions. When al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi chopped down a famous tree from which the people of Fes sought favors, his goal was not merely to fight innovations for the sake of religious purity, as Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab had done in Arabia in the eighteenth century. Rather, al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi was trying to eradicate deeply-ingrained superstitions so as to free his fellow Muslims from the state of ignorance and intellectual immaturity that allowed France to subjugate them. His objectives were, in the end, humanist, this-worldly, and anti-colonial. To say that the movement contained some of the seeds of Islamic purism, then, should not be understood as a deterministic statement; in fact one could also argue that the modernist Salafiyya contained the seeds of Islamism and secularism.

Although modernist Salafis managed collectively to prevent the movement from running adrift, each reformist did not always achieve a proper balance between its various poles. It was only natural for some Salafis to give greater attention to the puristic side of the Salafiyya than to its Westernizing side, and vice-versa. But such differences were not problematic as long as all Salafis collaborated, consciously or unconsciously converged toward a common objective, or viewed themselves as the proponents of a

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50 The same could be said about the Salafis’ anti-maraboutic campaigns in Morocco and Algeria, especially when it concerned Sufi orders that collaborated with French authorities. See Daniel Rivet, Le Maghreb à l’épreuve de la colonisation (Paris: Hachette, 2002), 339; Laroui, 339.
51 Hourani, 344, where he speaks of the secularizing wing of the movement.
52 See, for instance, how Albert Hourani presented Husayn al-Jisr, one of Rashid Rida’s first Salafi teachers, and how he underlined the differences between him and Muhammad ʿAbduh. Ibid., 223.
moderate reformist party (*ḥizb muʿāradil*) in the Islamic world. al-Hilali was, evidently, among the Salafis who preferred to emphasize the puristic side of the movement. However, one must be careful not to anticipate later developments and to assume that he was a Wahhabi-inspired Salafi from the onset. al-Hilali was not the perpetuator of a long-standing Wahhabi presence in Morocco whose roots date from the eighteenth century.\(^{53}\) Such an interpretation is not only doubtful in view of the circumstances under which al-Hilali converted to the Salafiyya; it also overstates and misinterprets the role of Wahhabism in Moroccan history.

Under the reigns of Muhammad III (d. 1790) and Mulay Sulayman (d. 1822), it is true that the Wahhabi doctrine reached the learned circles of Morocco. The first reports came through pilgrims on their return from Arabia, but the ʿulamaʾ of Fes later obtained more information when, around 1810, their Tunisian homologues forwarded them a copy of a letter they had received from the Saudi emir Saʿud I (d. 1814). Both Muhammad III and Mulay Sulayman regarded the Wahhabi doctrine with sympathy and used it, in part, to undercut the influence of Sufi brotherhoods and thus reinforce their own power.\(^{54}\) However, these two sultans never institutionalized Wahhabism and, as many signs show, never embraced it thoroughly. Mulay Sulayman, despite his repeated attacks on the Darqawiyya order, differed markedly from the Wahhabis of the Arabian Peninsula in that he was himself a Sufi who belonged to the Tijaniyya. He was close to Ahmad al-Tijani.\(^{55}\)


\(^{54}\) Laroui, 256-257.

Muhammad III, for his part, declared that he was Maliki of rite but Hanbali of creed. This famous declaration suggests that his adoption of Wahhabism was selective and idiosyncratic, since the Wahhabis of Arabia also claimed to be Hanbalis of rite.  

Nevertheless, it has become commonplace to affirm, without due nuances, that Muhammad III was Morocco’s first Salafi and that Mulay Sulayman adhered to Wahhabism. The first affirmation is obviously based on a retroactive use of the term Salafiyya, as discussed in the preceding chapter; it would therefore be more appropriate to follow Abdallah Laroui’s example and use “pre-Salafism” when discussing this period of Moroccan history. As for the second affirmation, which relates to Mulay Sulayman, it is a simplification that fails to consider the aforementioned nuance about Sufism. It also disregards the historiographical debate regarding the Moroccan response to the letter of Saʿud I, and the sultan’s actual involvement in the process. In any case, the Wahhabi influence in Morocco was not as strong or as clear as it may appear. The doctrine never found much support among the population, and the Moroccan scholars who favored

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58 Rivet, 161.

59 Abdallah Laroui, Esquisses historiques (Casablanca: Centre Culturel Arabe, 1992), 42.

60 One thesis, though not the most credible one, holds that Mulay Sulayman was unaware of the enthusiastic letter that Hamdun ibn al-Hajj, one of the most prominent scholars of the Qarawiyyin, wrote back to the Wahhabis of Arabia in response to their religious statement. See al-ʿUmari, 364-368.
Wahhabism were systematically opposed by others who defended their traditional affiliation to Sufism and the Maliki school.61

Because it is theoretically and empirically difficult to support the idea that Wahhabism was well established in the country, there is no reason to view al-Hilali as the direct heir to a distinctive Wahhabi-inspired Salafiyya that was perpetuated in Morocco since the reign of Muhammad III. In 1921, al-Hilali could hardly have converted to anything but the modernist Salafiyya. The strength of this movement in Morocco was already remarkable, and its emphasis on socio-political modernization (taḥdīth) clearly distinguished it from Wahhabism.62 In the Moroccan context, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the Salafiyya was not merely a creed anymore. It was a broad movement of reform that branched out to various interrelated spheres: social, political, linguistic, and religious.63 At the time of al-Hilali’s conversion, younger and older Moroccan Salafis were already involved on all these fronts, although their political activism was still in its infancy and did not truly gain momentum until the 1930s.64 However, a few societies such as Ansar al-Haqiq (The Partisans of Truth) and especially al-Widad (Friendship), which was based in Salé but had branches elsewhere, already existed and promoted

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61 Harakat, 87-88.
literacy, modern sciences, freedom of press, and the preservation of Muslim identity. Among their members were active younger Salafis.65

It is important to establish this context, because, following his conversion, al-Hilali displayed no clear desire to act or work for the sake of the community. He may have wished to become a Salafi activist in the future and help his people cope with the challenges of colonialism in some way; but at the time, he was determined to study religious science. Unlike many of his fellow Salafis, he showed no intention of getting involved on the Moroccan scene. A few months only after al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi convinced him to embrace the Salafiyya, he departed for Egypt on his own, in search of ʿilm al-ḥadīth. Though choosing this path had become more difficult by the 1920s due to the restrictions imposed by the French protectorate, the yearning that moved al-Hilali was extremely powerful and had motivated others Salafis before him. In the early twentieth century, the Arab East and its learning centers attracted the attention of young reformists who longed to travel to the lands from which the Salafiyya emanated. Cairo was often the ultimate destination. Among the young Moroccan Salafis who had made this journey before al-Hilali was Muhammad al-ʿArabi al-Khatib (d. 1980), a student of al-Dukkali who traveled to Egypt to study at Rashid Rida’s reformist institute, Dar al-Daʿwa wa-l-Irshad (about which more will be said in the next chapter). al-Khatib returned to Morocco

a few years later in 1913, and opened one of the country’s first Free Schools in 1919, in Tetouan.\(^{66}\)

Free Schools emerged in Morocco as a response to the colonial presence. Offering a modern curriculum combined with teaching methods that insisted on critical inquiry rather than memorization, these autonomous establishments provided an alternative to the traditional Islamic education system that was, according to many, unable to prepare young Moroccans to face the colonial reality. The Free Schools differed slightly from one another in terms of organization and programs, but they all represented a social and intellectual effort to resist the French and Spanish intrusions. Incidentally, their number was rapidly multiplying when al-Hilali converted to the Salafiyya. Between 1919 and 1924, as many as twenty-five were founded, nine of which were located in Fes alone, providing education for over 500 students in the city.\(^{67}\) The majority of these schools were founded by Salafis and, therefore, staffed by like-minded individuals. Many prominent young Salafis chose to contribute to this patriotic pedagogical endeavor that also served the socio-political objectives of the modernist Salafiyya. Among others, ʿAllal al-Fasi, Mukhtar al-Susi, Muhammad al-Makki al-Nasiri, ʿAbd al-Salam Bennouna, and Muhammad Dawud all taught in Free Schools during the 1920s after they


\(^{67}\) Damis, 60, 74-75.
completed their higher studies or, in some cases, while they were still attending classes at the Qarawiyyin. 68

al-Hilali could well have imitated his colleagues and stay in Morocco to teach in a Free School, but he chose not to. The specific reasons behind his decision are unclear, but his personality, ambition, and intellectual inclination invited him to choose a path that did not immediately lead him to social or political advocacy. It is obvious from the sources that al-Hilali revered erudition and dreamed of becoming a religious scholar. Over time, teaching became one of his primary activities, although it was often for the sake of orthodoxy. al-Hilali’s main cause was the promotion of proper doctrines for Muslims who either ignored them or had strayed from true Islam. Even though his conversion to the Salafiyya represented a major religious turnabout, it did not instill in him an ardent desire to change the social and political landscape of Morocco, nor did it turn him into a dedicated activist.

Evidently, al-Hilali’s priority was not to stay in his country. Rather, it was to carry out the instructions he had received from the prophet in his dream: to gain exoteric religious science, wherever it may be found. However, his quest would now take place within a modernist Salafi framework and would be geared toward strengthening the movement’s religious basis. In other words, al-Hilali now had a set of guiding principles: to oppose Sufism and rectify doctrinal errors. While this could pave the way for the implementation of the Salafiyya’s social and political reforms, there is no evidence that

68 Ibid., 65.
al-Hilali ever contemplated this task. Within the Salafiyya, his new role would be to safeguard the movement’s puristic anchor and to obtain the scholarly means to ensure a job well done.

**Conclusion**

When al-Hilali abandoned Sufism to embrace the Salafiyya in 1921, he turned his back on one of the most popular and widespread expressions of Moroccan Islam. In return, he joined a small and urban religious elite that reproduced and cultivated reformist ideas whose origins were found in the Arab East. The modernist Salafiyya in Morocco was the local extension of the broad movement of Islamic modernism that was linked to Muhammad ʿAbduh and Rashid Rida. The Moroccan pioneers of this current of thought were themselves heavily influenced by these men, either directly or indirectly.

The story of al-Hilali’s conversion to the Salafiyya demonstrates that the reliance on reason as the basis for the establishment of religious truth was still a cornerstone of this movement. Through a fateful debate, the famous Moroccan Salafi Muhammad ibn al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi underlined some logical problems that, according to him, confirmed the invalidity of the Tijaniyya. He thus managed to change al-Hilali’s convictions altogether within a few weeks. The new Salafi convert rejected Sufism, first and foremost, because dialectical reason convinced him to do so. This rational awakening not only changed his religious beliefs; it also warranted the complete rejection of esoteric sciences as a source of religious knowledge. In other words, al-Hilali adopted a strong scripturalist outlook, even though he was not yet a puristic or Wahhabi-inspired Salafi.
However, it is true that he quickly positioned himself on the puristic wing of the modernist Salafiyya. It appears that his interests centered mainly on theological purity, whose promotion required a struggle against the Sufi beliefs he knew all too well. al-Hilali did not condemn or undervalue modernism, but his wish was to focus on dogma and hadiths. These objectives were far from incompatible with the modernist Salafiyya. Restoring dogmatic unity, for instance, was seen as a necessary step toward the elimination of all the divisions that weakened the umma and made it an easy target for European imperialism. Therefore, al-Hilali’s emphasis on the scripturalist side of the Salafiyya did not automatically disavow any of the movement’s rational or progressive underpinnings.

Obviously, all Salafis were not alike; they had different types of conviction. Some preferred to insist on rationalism and religious adaptation to changing times while others, like al-Hilali, were more interested in promoting the strict theological anchor on which the early twentieth-century Salafis relied. Likewise, some were inclined toward social and political activism whereas others were more scholarly. But together, they contributed to making the modernist Salafiyya both a true synthesis between Islam and modernity and a broad program for the reform of religion, society, politics, and language. al-Hilali emphasized certain aspects of this broad Salafi program and disregarded those for which he was less enthusiastic or felt less qualified. Religious issues such as dogmatic orthodoxy and the fight against Sufism were his initial priorities. He left the other aspects of the modernist Salafiyya to others. Hence, his desire to study hadiths and to become a
Salafi erudite overrode his desire to stay in Morocco as an activist. Soon after he obtained a visa, he was bound for Egypt.
Chapter Three

Rashid Rida’s Rehabilitation of Wahhabism and its Consequences

When al-Hilali arrived in Egypt in 1922, he probably did not think that his quest for religious sciences would become a worldwide voyage and that it would take him twenty years to set foot again in Morocco. Nevertheless, his recent conversion to the Salafiyya had provided him with the necessary resolve to make sacrifices. It was in Egypt that al-Hilali committed himself to a life of daʿwa: “I vowed to God that I [would] proselytize His oneness and the Sunna of His prophet wherever I am; this is the most important purpose in life.” Indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, he soon found an opportunity to go to the village of Rirmun, in Upper Egypt, to support a small community of Salafis who were struggling against the alleged enmity of Sufi shaykhs. However, it was in Alexandria that al-Hilali began his one-year stay in Egypt and first took on the role of teacher and defender of the Salafiyya.

At the time, a former student and colleague of Rashid Rida named Ṭaqi al-Din al-Hilali, named ʿAbd al-Zahir Abu al-Samh was the imam of a small Salafi mosque in the precinct of Raml. According to al-Hilali, Abu al-Samh faced a lot of opposition and was even subject to physical violence. The entire religious elite of Alexandria rejected him and accused him of being a

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Wahhabi, of professing a fifth madhab, and of causing fitna within the community by denying both the saints’ miracles and the prophet Muhammad’s capacity to intervene in this world from beyond the grave. When his outraged detractors complained to the Egyptian authorities, the governor of Alexandria ordered Abu al-Samh to stop preaching and had the Salafi mosque closed. It is not clear if al-Hilali and Abu al-Samh were already good friends at the time, but Abu al-Samh knew and trusted the young Moroccan Salafi enough to contact him and invite him to act as a substitute preacher. al-Hilali readily accepted the offer and, for about two months, headed the small Salafi mosque of Alexandria under controversial circumstances.

Evidently, within a few months of his arrival in Egypt, al-Hilali had made his way into a select group of Rashid Rida’s closest students. Sources do not indicate whether he met Abu al-Samh through Rida or the other way around. (Despite his multiple anecdotes, al-Hilali does not recount how he was first introduced to these individuals.) All we know is that he crossed their path at some point during his Egyptian quest for the science of hadith (ʿilm al-hadīth). One of al-Hilali’s first initiatives had been to head to the university of al-Azhar in Cairo. Unfortunately, the venerable Islamic institution had not met his expectations: he attended classes, but soon withdrew because the professors could

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2 Ibid., 10. The fact that Abu al-Samh was accused of being a Wahhabi does not mean that he was a Wahhabi per se. The term was often used as a generic derogatory label for anyone opposing traditional Islamic beliefs and practices or aspects of Sufi thought. Both Muhammad ʿAbduh and Rashid Rida had been accused of being Wahhabis as early as 1903 and 1908, respectively. See David D. Commins, Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 106, 130.

not provide him with the knowledge he was looking for. Eventually, al-Hilali began attending Rida’s private sessions (majālīs) in Cairo. There, he found all the depth and dynamism that was missing at al-Azhar. Rida was an engaging teacher and the reformist ideas he defended were no less stimulating. al-Hilali later declared that the sharp discussions that took place during these sessions allowed him to reach intellectual maturity. Over time, a strong personal relationship developed between the two men. al-Hilali visited Rida regularly, wrote articles in al-Manar, and kept a regular correspondence with his new mentor. In addition, al-Hilali befriended some of Rida’s closest disciples, with whom he soon partook in a key phase of the evolution of the Salafiyya.

In the field of modern Islamic intellectual history, Rashid Rida’s relation to Wahhabism remains a blind spot. While a number of scholars from different generations have underlined his penchant toward the puristic Islam of Saudi Arabia, they have usually done so in passing or in a laconic form. As a result, many crucial questions remain unanswered and are now generating confusion: why did Rida become an enthusiastic

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supporter of Wahhabism? Did his rehabilitation campaign have any impact at all?

Historians have indeed been vague regarding the exact nature of Rida’s support to Wahhabism, its causes and, ultimately, its consequences. Albert Hourani, whose *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* remains one of the best references on this issue in a European language, only provided a succinct analysis. He explained that Rida’s attitude vis-à-vis Wahhabism was the natural outcome of his personal inclinations toward Hanbalism. Hourani also took Rida’s declarations at face value and thus assumed that his contacts with Ibn Saʿud were strictly political.⁸

However, new evidence from al-Hilali’s religious memoirs invites us to reconsider this interpretation and to return to Rida’s own corpus. A close reading of the sources suggests that Rida primarily tried to rehabilitate Wahhabism for reasons of socio-political expediency. Although he was hoping for the success of Ibn Saʿud, he clearly regarded the Wahhabi ʿulamaʾ of Najd with suspicion. Therefore, he attempted to rid them of their counterproductive religious attitude while at the same time helping them to overcome their lack of popularity in the Hijaz and abroad. To achieve these goals, Rida facilitated the transfer of some of his most trusted disciples to Mecca and Medina. In the end, however, his efforts favored the transformation of the Salafiyya from a movement of Islamic modernism into a more puristic understanding of Islam.

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Unconditional Support to Ibn Saʿud

At first glance, Rida’s rehabilitation of Wahhabism is puzzling. It is true that his approach to reformism was more conservative than that of his master Muhammad ʿAbduh. Rida relied more heavily on transmitted knowledge (naql) and also had a narrower, more technical definition of the pious ancestors (salaf). Yet he remained, at heart, an Islamic modernist. As heir to the school of thought founded by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ʿAbduh, Rida upheld the very notions of rationality and progress which had never been the hallmark of Wahhabism. It is no wonder that ʿAbduh had openly criticized the Wahhabis and their religious ethos for running counter to the intellectual and social objectives of the modernist Salafiyya. Although the Wahhabis originally declared their intention to wipe out the dust of taqlīd, ʿAbduh argued, they ended up being “[…] more narrow-minded and disgruntled than the blind imitators.” For him, they were in no way conducive to civilizational or scientific progress. How, then, could ʿAbduh’s closest disciple become a supporter and defender of Wahhabism?

While part of the answer is certainly idiosyncratic, much of it is contextual. During the decades that followed ʿAbduh’s death in 1905, increasing European involvement in the Middle East generated a sense of emergency among Islamic reformers. The fact that Rida’s gradual turn to Wahhabism began in the aftermath of the

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First World War is no coincidence.\textsuperscript{11} With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the failure of Faysal’s Arab Kingdom in 1920, the loss of Iraq and Greater Syria to the Mandatory Powers, the triumph of secular Kemalism in Turkey, and the abolition of the caliphate in 1924, the survival of the \textit{umma} appeared seriously threatened. Rida’s initial response to this sequence of events was not to support one group or one doctrine in particular, for he believed that factionalism and sectarianism could only weaken the already fragile Islamic community. Instead, he endeavored to promote Islamic unity through the pages of his periodical \textit{al-Manar}, while personally inviting Muslim elites to set their differences aside in order to prevent further European encroachment. In 1919, for instance, Rida advised Sharif Husayn and Ibn Sa‘ud—who were then rivals for the control of Arabia—not to fight one another. This was no time for division, Rida pleaded, and so the two rulers had to resolve their dispute if they hoped to preserve the independence of the region.\textsuperscript{12}

Though he definitely admired Ibn Sa‘ud and his religiosity, Rida could not let anyone’s political ambitions interfere with the good of the \textit{umma}. He was particularly worried that internecine feuds might provide the Europeans powers with a pretext for intervention.

But following the establishment of the Mandates in 1920, Sharif Husayn’s privileged relationship with Britain could no longer be taken lightly. When he rejected Rida’s project for building an alliance between the various rulers of the Arabian Peninsula, enmity grew between the two men. It did not take long before Rida condemned Sharif Husayn for siding with and relying on a non-Muslim and colonial state

\textsuperscript{11} Henri Laoust, \textit{Le califat dans la doctrine de Rashid Rida} (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1986), 1.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{al-Manar}, 21 (1919): 249.
in order to remain in power.\textsuperscript{13} For him, the so-called King of the Hijaz (a title that Western Powers had bestowed upon Sharif Husayn) was nothing more than a sellout who cautioned Britain’s oppression of Arabs and Muslims in exchange for personal gain.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, by 1923, Rida had already begun calling upon other Arabian emirs to rescue the Hijaz from the grip of Hashimite rule. At the time, he regarded Imam Yahya of Yemen as the most suited candidate for the task because, much to his regret, Ibn Saʿud disengaged from Arab affairs and seemed unwilling to break out of his confinement.\textsuperscript{15}

The circumstances that finally caused Rida to lend his full support to Ibn Saʿud arose from Sharif Husayn’s self-proclamation as caliph two days after Atatürk abolished the institution in March 1924. While this event confirmed Sharif Husayn’s arrogance in the eyes of Rida, the nature of the offense had a particular significance. The question of the caliphate had been central to Rida’s reformist agenda; in a sense, it encapsulated all his hopes for the renewal of Islam and the rejuvenation of the Islamic community. Rida envisioned a modern-day caliph, freely chosen by the `ulama’ through a process of deliberation, and whose ideal character, complete devotion, and extensive knowledge of both profane and religious sciences would make him a beacon of modernism. As the supreme interpreter of Islam (\textit{mujtahid}), this caliph would lead all Muslims on the path to

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{al-Manar}, 28 (1927): 5.
\textsuperscript{14} Rashid Rida, \textit{al-Khilafa} (Cairo: al-Zahra li-l-lam al-ʿArabi, 1988 [1922]), 82-83.
\textsuperscript{15} These frank remarks have troubled one prominent Saudi scholar who edited a large compendium of selected, pro-Saudi texts from \textit{al-Manar}. He deemed it necessary to write a footnote explaining that, in opposition to Rida’s contention, Ibn Saʿud had not disengaged from Arab affairs per se. His apparent aloofness was rather part of a planned political strategy. See Rashid Rida, \textit{al-Mukhtar min al-Manar: saḥat min mawaqif al-malik ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz wa suwar min jihadihi}, ed. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim Al al-Shaykh, vol. 1 (Riyadh: n.p., 1995), 30.
progress and unity.\textsuperscript{16} Nothing could contradict these criteria, procedures, and noble objectives more than Sharif Husayn’s arbitrary appropriation of the caliphate. Beyond his betrayal of Arab solidarity and independence, he had now desecrated Islam, disrespected the \textit{umma}, and endangered its future. For Rida, this was intolerable.

Incidentally, Ibn Saʿud began launching attacks on the Hijaz a few months later, in September 1924. Rida could not ask for better news: he had found his hero and would support him wholeheartedly. From that moment onward, he became, along with his longtime friend Shakib Arslan (d. 1946), one of the most vocal and steadfast partisans of Ibn Saʿud outside of the Peninsula.\textsuperscript{17} As he saw it, the Wahhabi sultan was rendering all Muslims worldwide a much-needed service. The Hijaz and its two holy cities were the focal point of the \textit{umma} and were too symbolic of Islamic unity to be left to a usurper with poor religious credentials. Rida claimed that Sharif Husayn was guilty of heresy (\textit{ilhād}) on a number of counts, such as ruling according to his whims, forbidding his Najdi enemies to perform the pilgrimage, and imposing exorbitant extra-Islamic taxes (\textit{mukūs}) on both the local population and foreign pilgrims. He had even violated a prophetic hadith by monopolizing bread production in Mecca and selling the loaves at a price no one was allowed to dispute.\textsuperscript{18} In stark contrast, Ibn Saʿud came to represent everything Rida expected from a Muslim ruler. His commanding leadership, combined with his staunch commitment to the \textit{sharīʿa} and the creed of the pious ancestors, were

\textsuperscript{16} Hourani, 239-240.
\textsuperscript{17} On Arslan’s support to Ibn Saʿud, see William L. Cleveland, \textit{Islam Against the West: Shakib Arslan and the Campaign for Islamic Nationalism} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 74, 126-127.
exactly what the post-Ottoman Islamic world needed: “England feels that one of the
greatest dangers to her policy in Arab or Islamic countries is the existence among the
Muslims of a strong emir, especially if he believes in his religion, adheres to it, and is
backed by a people of true faith, like Ibn Saʿud and his people.”

As months rolled by, the connection that Rida drew between religious assiduity
and political power gained in credibility. Ibn Saʿud’s saga was indeed a success story.
Within a few years, the Sultan of Najd conquered the Hijaz, united the rest of northern
and central Arabia, and gained recognition from the Western Powers without being
subject to colonial rule. Although Atatürk had achieved similar results in Turkey
through a highly secular agenda, Rida was categorical: God rewards Sunni orthodoxy and
orthopraxy with greatness and success in this world. This is not to say that Rida would
have supported a ruler whose religious rigorism was an impediment to progress. One of
the reasons he had so much admiration for Ibn Saʿud is that the latter was flexible and
willing to adopt the technological dimension of modernity, if only to ensure the
consolidation of his nascent polity. While Rida was often wary of innovations in matters
of dogma and ritual, he considered that good innovations (bidʿ hasana) in worldly
matters were both valid and necessary insofar as they allowed Islam and the umma to
grow stronger. No informed Muslim, he wrote, should oppose the acquisition of modern
weapons to defend the believers or the construction of railroads to facilitate the

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19 Ibid., 53.
20 Historians have highlighted that the relative independence of the Arabian Peninsula was mainly due to
the Western Powers’ lack of interest in the region. See Cleveland, 126-127.
21 Rida, al-Wahhabiyyun, 3-5, 63.
pilgrimage; and since no other Arab leader approached Ibn Saʻud’s mixture of religious purism tempered by pragmatism, Rida indefatigably condoned his actions, justified his decisions, and defended him against his Hashimite and pro-Hashimite detractors.22

Defending the Wahhabis Despite their Shortcomings

Rida could not support Ibn Saʻud as an individual and as a ruler without also supporting Wahhabism as a doctrine. As far as dogma was concerned, this probably caused him no moral dilemma, for he had already shown signs of approving the Wahhabi creed as early as 1901.23 At that time, Rida implied that he did not know much about Wahhabism; but he stated that he had no reason to believe that it contradicted the creed of the pious ancestors. In the 1920s, however, he was much more assertive. He spared no effort in deflecting criticism away from Wahhabism and, as much as possible, from Ibn Saʻud’s Wahhabi entourage. He agreed to publish (and sometimes add commentaries to) any text that attested the virtues and orthodoxy of the movement, whether the documents in question were modern or pre-modern, or whether they were credible or biased. Rida did not wish to appraise all his sources critically or to place them in context, nor did he always want to explain their relevance to the contemporary situation. He contented himself with exposing his readers to any text that was favorable to Wahhabism,

22 Ibid., 5, 73-75. Ibn Saʻud became subject to more criticism following the signature of the Anglo-Saudi treaty of 1927, which put Rida in a difficult position since he had previously condemned Sharif Husayn for his alliance with Britain. Nevertheless, Rida continued to defend Ibn Saʻud, claiming that the latter was inexperienced and had acted out of necessity.

regardless of its origins, its author, or the reason for which it had been written in the first place.

Among the documents upon which Rida relied heavily was the apologetic letter written by Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s son, ʿAbdallah, at the time of the first Saudi conquest of Mecca in 1803. This letter had been written to assuage the early critics of Wahhabism, so Rida could quote it at length without further comment or editing. He even reprinted and distributed it freely through the Manar printing press. It should be noted that Ibn Saʿud paid Rida to have several other Wahhabi books printed through this facility. In addition, other Egypt-based Salafis such as Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib (d. 1969) followed Rida’s lead and put their writing skills to the service of Ibn Saʿud. al-Khatib was a close friend of Rida and edited a number of Salafi journals, the most important of which was al-Fath, whose publication began in 1926 as a supplement to al-Manar. Its editorial line was resolutely pro-Saudi and pro-Wahhabi. al-Khatib also managed the Salafiyya printing press and bookstore in Cairo (maṭbaʿat al-salafiyya), which the Wahhabis used in several occasions to print and distribute their literature.

Yet, Wahhabism was not merely a doctrine with a will of its own: it was a movement with a history that spanned more than 150 years and involved numerous actors whose understanding and implementation of the original doctrine varied depending on

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24 Rida, al-Wahhabiyyun, 15.
their status and the context in which they lived. Supporting the concrete manifestations of Wahhabism in history proved to be a considerable challenge given the infamous reputation of Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, his epigones, and his followers since the late eighteenth century. Indeed, as Ibn Sa‘ud’s conquests progressed, Rida received an increasing number of comments and letters from readers of al-Manar who worried about the Wahhabis and their taking over the two Holy Sites of Mecca and Medina (haramayn).

In one case, a man wrote to ask whether or not Ibn Sa‘ud’s warriors had destroyed the enclosure (hujra) in which the tomb of the prophet is found and the green dome (qubba) that is on top of it: “Should not the Islamic world be infuriated by such actions if they have indeed occurred? And if the Ikhwan took into consideration the feelings of the Islamic world in this matter and refrained from [committing] these actions, then what should we make of the numerous things that have been written about this [rumor]?”

Rida wrote that he considered the question ludicrous and “not worthy of an answer,” but he replied that the Ikhwan had probably not razed anything either around or on top of the prophet’s tomb. He explained that the chamber and its dome were not a mosque and, therefore, did not constitute a case for which demolition was required. Rida buttressed his contention by saying that when the Wahhabis first conquered Medina in 1803, they had not destroyed the building. Yet, he acknowledged that they had intended to do so,

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27 Rida, al-Wahhabiyyun, 58.
28 Ibid., 57-58. Rida explains that it is forbidden to transform tombs into mosques, that is, to either bury a corpse in a mosque or to build a mosque over a tomb. In these cases, demolition is required.
and that they probably would have carried out the demolition had two Wahhabis not died in the process.²⁹

In this instance, as in many others, Rida’s efforts to rehabilitate Wahhabism betrayed a certain discomfort. He knew that Najdi troops and men of religion could be over-zealous; and in a rather self-defeating apologetic élan, he admitted that his interlocutor’s fears were historically founded. The fact that Rida supported Wahhabism so energetically does not mean he was fully at ease with the actions and beliefs of all Wahhabis. It rather reveals the extent to which Wahhabism alarmed Muslims worldwide, thus forcing Rida to react proportionally. Even a prominent Algerian Salafi like ʿAbd al-Hamid ibn Badis, who was a devoted reader of al-Manar, admitted that he admired Ibn Saʻud but disliked the fanatical tendencies of Wahhabism.³⁰ One finds the same ambivalence in the discourse of Shakib Arslan who, despite his incessant praise for the Saudi leader, had mixed feelings toward the Wahhabis:

There is no denial that the Wahhabis exaggerated in demolishing, cutting, destroying, and uprooting, whenever they passed by a dome, a site of visitation [mazār] or a tree to which madness was attached, and their skins shivered at such sights. But even though I acknowledge their exaggeration [ghulwihim] in this matter, I do not see them as deviating, in it, from the norms of the proper law [al-shaʻr al-qawīm].³¹

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²⁹ Ibid., 58. The two Wahhabis had fallen down the building while trying to remove the golden spheres and the crescent that were attached to the tip of the dome.
³⁰ Cleveland, 106.
Arslan’s position was symptomatic of the dilemmas and tensions that pro-Saudi Salafis experienced. Rida himself was not insensitive to the potentially adverse effect of religious purism. In his publications on Wahhabi-related matters, one finds several signs of uneasiness and reservation.\textsuperscript{32} In one instance, he recognized the Najdi’s religious relentlessness (\textit{tashaddud fi-l-din}), but argued that their attitude was better than the undeclared resignation of other Muslims.\textsuperscript{33} Elsewhere, he acknowledged the existence of fierce exaggerators (\textit{ghulāt}) among the Wahhabis, but strove to downplay their importance by stressing that Ibn Saʿud was a reasonable and moderate man.\textsuperscript{34} In 1921, he still acknowledged their relative ignorance (\textit{daʿf fi-l-ʿilm}) and overzealous practice (\textit{shadid al-ghulūw fi-l-ʿamal}).\textsuperscript{35} A few years later, Rida exonerated the Wahhabis in advance for any future wrongdoing and wrote that, by virtue of their relentlessness in religion, they were not infallible.\textsuperscript{36} Rida admitted several times that the Wahhabis were prone to extremism, but he asked his readers to overlook this negative side. For him, it was better to either judge Wahhabism on the basis of its pragmatic and moderate political leader, or to accept the fact that a little religious extremism was better for the \textit{umma} than the erosion of Islamic identity.

Nevertheless, the fanaticism of the Ikhwan— Ibn Saʿud’s religious warriors—was sometimes so extreme that even Rida had difficulties condoning it. Still, he could not

\textsuperscript{32} Rida’s major publication on Wahhabism is his book \textit{al-Wahhabiyyun wa-l-Hijaz}, which was released in 1926. It built upon articles he had previously published in \textit{al-Manar} and the daily newspaper \textit{al-Ahram}.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{al-Manar}, 27 (1926): 555.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{al-Manar}, 21 (1919): 233.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{al-Manar}, 22 (1921): 182.
\textsuperscript{36} Rida, \textit{al-Wahhabiyyun}, 57.
afford to criticize them openly: their military importance was such that Rida was forced
to overlook their excesses in order not to jeopardize the success and legitimacy of Ibn
Saʿud’s victories in the Hijaz. One particularly controversial event, which sent a shock
wave throughout the Islamic world, did in fact undermine the credibility of Rida’s
campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism. In 1924, during the first phase of the
conquest of the Hijaz, the Ikhwan captured the city of Taʾif, reportedly plundered it, and
killed many of its inhabitants. Rida must have been appalled at the news, but he did not
condemn Ibn Saʿud’s warriors. 37 Though he expressed regrets, he argued that such
actions happened in all wars, were generally the result of mistakes, grudges, or personal
issues. To defuse the crisis, he reminded his readers that this type of mishap had even
happened to the most righteous Muslims, namely, the companions of the prophet, whose
errors had led to the killing of innocent victims. 38

Fortunately, the Ikhwan did not represent a permanent source of controversy.
Once the Saudi military conquests were over, and as soon as Ibn Saʿud decided to turn
against his unruly Wahhabi troops, Rida readily supported their elimination. 39 The
individuals that proved to be most problematic in the long run were the ʿulamaʾ of Najd
or, as one scholar described them, the Najdi “ritual specialists.” 40 Rida was aware that

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37 Several decades after the event, Ibn Saʿud’s former chief interpreter simply denied the veracity of the
accusation, saying that the massacre of Taʾif never occurred and was based on fabrications and rumors
spread by the Hashimites. See Mohammed Almana, Arabia Unified: A Portrait of Ibn Saud (London:
Hutchinson Benham, 1980), 71.
38 al-Manar, 26 (1925): 462.
39 Muhammad ibn ʿAbdallah al-Salman, Rashid Rida wa daʿwat al-shaykh Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-
Wahhab (Kuwait City: Maktabat al-Maʿalla, 1988), 510.
40 See Madawi al-Rasheed, A History of Saudi Arabia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 49,
where she claims that the Najdi mutawwīʾa did not have enough religious expertise to deserve the title of
their rigid austerity could become counterproductive and detrimental. Arabia would be able to achieve great things under the aegis of Ibn Saʿud, but only as long as these ʿulamaʾ did not sabotage the progressive reforms or oppose modernism.

It did not take long before Rida struggled with that problem. In a private letter to Shakib Arslan dated from November 11, 1926, he told his friend about a project concerning two ancient Hijazi buildings, namely, the house in which the prophet was born and the house in which his first wife Khadija had lived. Rida was hoping to turn these two houses into specialized madrasas for training hadith experts and Islamic missionaries (duʿāt ila-l-islam). He also wished to make the sites accessible to pilgrims so that they could be taught a lesson and learn that the glorification of a building other than a mosque is illegal, even if it is the house in which the prophet was born.

In his letter, Rida relates how he broached the topic during a meeting with Ibn Saʿud in Mecca. The latter told him that the project would not be feasible and would cause a major commotion unless he persuaded the ʿulamaʾ of Najd to accept it.

According to Rida, Ibn Saʿud told him: “Write me what you just said; I will send [your proposal] to so and so among [the ʿulamaʾ] and will ask them to agree.” Rida wrote the letter but, in the meantime, a group of pilgrims from India began to venerate the houses and turn them into objects of Islamic devotion. Due to the ensuing controversy, Ibn Saʿud

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41 The letter is reprinted in Shakib Arslan, al-Sayyid Rashid Rida aw ikhaʾ arbaʿin sana (Damascus: Matbaʿa Ibn Zaydun, 1937), 456-460.
42 Ibid., 458.
43 Ibid., 459.
caved in to the rigorist ‘ulama’, rejected Rida’s project, and the two sites were destroyed, even though they contained no tomb and did not technically need to be demolished.\textsuperscript{44} Rida lamented the lost opportunity to teach millions of pilgrims about the true nature of \textit{tawḥīd} and \textit{shirk}.

The Wahhabi ‘ulama’ of Najd did more than oppose innovative projects: some also rejected the very ideas on which Rida based his Islamic reformism. In 1927, a Najdi scholar named ʿAbd al-Rahman Nasir al-Saʿdi wrote a letter to \textit{al-Manar} asking Rida to prepare and publish a study on an extremely important matter, that is, the alleged spread and growing popularity of heretical teachings among the Egyptian elite.\textsuperscript{45} What al-Saʿdi had in mind were not only the books of al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, or Ibn ʿArabi that were sold in Cairo, but also the ethical underpinnings of Islamic modernism itself. In his letter, the Najdi scholar told Rida how distressed he was to see signs of freethinking and disbelief (\textit{kufr}) in the Egyptian press and in religious works. More specifically, he disparaged against a recent Qur’anic exegesis in which an Egyptian modernist, Tantawi Jawhari (d. 1940), prompted the people to learn sciences and philosophy. The reason the \textit{umma} declined, according to Jawhari, is that such ideas had fallen into oblivion.\textsuperscript{46} But for a conservative Wahhabi like al-Saʿdi, this contention was a preposterous distortion of the truth. According to him, it was precisely these foreign philosophical ideas that had caused the downfall of the Islamic world. In a typically Hanbali fashion, he discredited Tantawi Jawhari.

\textsuperscript{44} Kostiner, 103.
\textsuperscript{45} The letter and Rida’s answer to it are found in \textit{al-Manar}, 29 (1928): 143-147.
\textsuperscript{46} Tantawi Jawhari was known for his scientific inclinations in matters of exegesis or, as one Tunisian scholar put it, his “Qurʾanization” of science. See Hamadi Redissi, \textit{L’exception islamique} (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 36.
Jawhari for not being literalist enough, for claiming that prophetic stories were parables, and for considering that Islamic laws were delusions. Judging by the tone of his letter, he had nothing but deep contempt for allegorical and modernist interpretations of the scriptures. He even cast doubts on the purity of Rida’s discourse: “Some of my companions have told me that your Manar contains something like that.”

The Islamic modernist in Rida must have been highly disappointed to encounter such inflexibility. How could Ibn Saʿud’s state flourish and become a post-Ottoman beacon of progress and guidance if unsophisticated Wahhabi ʿulamaʾ like al-Saʿdi were intractable? In his reply, he told the Najdi scholar that the Egyptian exegesis in question was not heretical. Rida mentions that he perused it for a few minutes and concluded that the work is commendable because it invites Muslims to learn temporal and natural sciences (ʿulūm al-kawn), which could only make Muslim states stronger. To claim that these sciences contradict the scriptures amounted to defaming the religion of God:

> It is necessary that you distinguish between natural sciences, which we invite [people] to learn, and philosophy, both ancient and modern. Philosophy consists of opinions and theoretical thoughts whereas natural sciences are an expression of the science by which God gave benefits to His creation, such as water, steam, air […], the advantages of electricity—which include the telegraph, the telephone, and more—as well as amazing products like war machines for the land, the sea, and the sky.

Concerning the reading of the scriptures, Rida pointed out that allegorical interpretations (taʾwīl) were sometimes apropos because, without them, several Muslims

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47 al-Manar, 29 (1928): 144.
48 Ibid., 146.
would have abandoned Islam. This contention was a central and recurrent aspect of Rida’s thought. According to him, the message of Islam had to be articulated in a way that was consistent with scientific discourses in order to survive in the modern era. He confirmed that his own commentary of the Qur’an, which he published piecemeal in *al-Manar*, did include elements of *ta’wil* for the best interests of modern Muslims. Indeed, some of Rida’s interpretations, like those of his mentor Muhammad ʿAbdūh, were far from literal. For example, he denied the reality of sorcery even though it was mentioned in the Qur’an, negated the miracles attributed to the prophet Muhammad, and compared the existence of the jinns to microbes causing diseases.49 Interestingly, Rida mentioned that he wrote to Ibn Saʿud about the necessity of Islamic modernism and that he intended to mail him ten copies of his own *tafsīr* so that Wahhabis could learn from it.50 There is no doubt that the narrow-mindedness of Najdi scholars concerned Rida, but he was hoping that his privileged relationship with Ibn Saʿud would allow him to influence the Wahhabis and help them overcome their self-defeating rigidity.

A Religious Mission to Arabia, 1926-1927

Although Rida considered the Wahhabis’ religious commitment laudable, he was aware that the success of the emerging Saudi state required the kind of expertise and dynamism that many Najdi scholars either lacked or distrusted. The need for modern technology and human resources was a major problem for Ibn Saʿud, whose subjects had

49 See al-Salman, 335-337.
little or no experience in modern statecraft. The matter cried out for planning because, prior to the oil concessions, the kingdom was hardly more than a chieftaincy struggling with a growing debt and meager revenues. Ibn Saʿud only had a limited number of advisors with experience in, or aptitudes for, politics and nation-building. Most of them were from foreign Arab countries. Ibn Saʿud could also rely on a few technocrats who had been educated abroad, or had worked in the Hijazi public sector under Sharif Husayn.

Arabia was in dire need of qualified personnel and it did not take long before Rida addressed the issue in al-Manar. He asked his readers worldwide to help the young Saudi state with their knowledge of industrialization, modern warfare, and economy. But the problems were not merely political or technocratic. Beyond its institutional and economic underdevelopment, the kingdom also suffered from the infamous reputation of Wahhabism outside of Najd. While newspapers in Beirut, Jerusalem, and Cairo regularly criticized Wahhabis, the conquest of Mecca and Medina in 1925 added to the fear and coincided with a decline in the number of pilgrims and the amount of revenue they used to generate. Rida’s campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism clearly intended to

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51 Among them was Yusuf Yasin, a Syrian formerly involved in the mandatory problems of his native country and who was also a former student of Rashid Rida. He had moved to Arabia in 1923. See Harry St. John Philby, Saʿudi Arabia (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1955), 294-296.
52 Two examples are Kamil al-Qassab, a Syrian who had experience in the education system under Sharif Husayn, and Ibrahim al-Shura, who had studied in Dar al-ʿUlum in Egypt. Both eventually became director of the Mudiriyat al-Maʿarif al-ʿAmma, the precursor of the Saudi Ministry of Education. See ʿAbd al-Latif ibn ʿAbdallah ibn Duhaysh, al-Taʿlim al-hukumi al-munazzam fi ʿahd al-malik ʿAbd al-ʿAziz (Mecca: Maktabat al-Tullab al-Jamiʿi, 1987), 33, 35.
counterbalance these adverse effects; but while he publicly invited Muslims to help the kingdom with their modern technical knowledge, he tacitly considered that the nascent state needed religious help as well.

The most revealing clue is the fact that Rida facilitated the transfer of some of his closest students, including Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, to the Hijaz in 1926 and 1927. This episode is relatively unknown and the protagonists themselves have remained discrete about their personal motives and the cause of their sudden move. Yet, through biographical dictionaries and al-Hilali’s memoirs, it is possible to ascertain the significance of Rida’s networking. In most cases, Rida either introduced or personally recommended his students to Ibn Saʻud, who immediately appointed them to various key positions in the religious and educational system of Mecca and Medina. Considering the context in which this transfer occurred, one must understand that Rida was not merely concerned about placement for his pupils; he was rather trying to assist Ibn Saʻud and the Najdi ʻulama’ in situ. The religious mission to Arabia was a complement to his campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism: it served similar objectives and stemmed from the same combination of hopes and doubts toward the Wahhabs that Rida had already expressed. In Mecca and Medina, his students endeavored to advise their hosts and provide them with the credibility they lacked vis-à-vis foreign pilgrims, students, and native Hijazis who feared the Wahhabization of the holy sites.

This was a major concern during the controversial summer of 1926, when the Meccan Congress took place. Ibn Saʿud was then attempting to convince the religious elite of the Muslim world that his conquest of the Hijaz was both legitimate and beneficial to the umma. As Martin Kramer put it: “So began the modern transformation by which the Saudis were to shed their association with schismatic fanaticism, and become for many Muslims the sole keepers of the orthodox flame.” However, the challenge was still considerable in June 1926. Among the delegations that accepted the Saudi invitation, some vehemently opposed Wahhabi control over the holy sites and the pilgrimage. One particularly sensitive question was whether the Saudis would tolerate and guarantee differences of ritual in the Hijaz, or enforce their puristic views on others. The tension in Mecca was palpable: a prominent Egyptian delegate reports how he witnessed a group of Wahhabis abusing a foreign pilgrim who had opened his prayer by invoking the prophet instead of God. In late June, the controversy of the mahmal—the traditional Egyptian procession bringing the black embroidered cloth (kiswa) that covers the kaʿba in Mecca—caused an even greater tension and strained the relations between Egypt and the Saudi polity. Violence had occurred when some Wahhabis assaulted the procession for its use of musical instruments. Several Egyptian newspapers reported the

56 Kramer, 116.
events and criticized the excessive religious purism that was now taking over Mecca and Medina.\(^{57}\)

It was under such circumstances that Rida made the trip from Egypt to attend the Meccan congress as an independent participant. He did not travel alone, for sources indicate that at least three of his students accompanied him in 1926. They all remained in the Hijaz after the proceedings or returned a few months later. Other students moved to Arabia around the same time, but details about their departures and arrivals are unavailable. Like most of their colleagues, they presumably traveled to Mecca for the pilgrimage, which coincided with the congress. Regarding al-Hilali, we know that he arrived in Arabia the following year, in 1927, during the \(\textit{hajj}.\)^{58} Therefore, it is possible to trace the presence of at least seven of Rida’s students in the Hijaz in the late 1920s, though five of them were clearly more important and played a greater role.\(^{59}\)

**Rida’s Disciples in the Hijaz**

This small group of expatriates was cohesive enough to be referred to as Rida’s religious entourage, that is, the younger disciples that were closest to him. In opposition to other Islamic activists such as Ibn Badis in Algeria or Hasan al-Banna in Egypt (both of whom have been considered Rida’s heirs even though they had little or no direct or

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\(^{59}\) These five foreigners have been singled out in a Saudi book that was published for commemorative purposes in 1999. See Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Khamis, \textit{‘Inayat al-malik ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bi-l-agida al-salafiyya wa difa‘ihi ‘anha} (Riyadh: al-Amana al-‘Amma li-l-Ihifal bi-Murur Mi‘at ‘Am ‘ala Ta‘sis al-Mamlaka al-‘Arabiyya al-Sa‘udiyya, 1999), 95. The text mentions a few other foreigners who moved to Saudi Arabia later.
contact with him), the men who went to Arabia were all former pupils of Rida. Four of them had a particularly strong and long-standing relationship with him because they were graduates of his school for the training of preachers and missionaries named Dar al-Daʿwa wa-l-Irshad, which operated on the island of Ruda in Cairo from 1912 to 1914.

Other members of this group knew each other from their master’s majālīs, where friendships developed. In Arabia, these men viewed themselves as a body of Salafi activists and supported each other when tensions occurred between them and the Wahhabis. In other words, they formed a small but relatively influential Salafi avant-garde in the Hijaz.

Perhaps the most famous of these students was Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar (1894-1976), scion of the great Syrian family of Salafi reformists. After studying with Jamal-al-Din al-Qasimi and other major scholars in Damascus, al-Bitar went to Egypt and attended Dar al-Daʿwa wa-l-Irshad. In 1920, he undertook a mission to Najd on behalf of king Faysal, who was then king of Syria and whose advisor was no other than Rida. It was Rida who had nominated the young Syrian man as an envoy to Riyadh to converse with

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61 Details about the school may be found in Charles C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 195-198. I do not include Yusuf Yasin in this group, even though he was one Rida’s former student and a graduate from Dar al-Daʿwa wa-l-Irshad. Though Yasin was one of Ibn Saʿud’s top advisors on political affairs, he was not primarily involved in religious matters. Sources indicate no significant collaboration between him and the other students of Rida in Arabia.

Ibn Sa‘ud about the possible unification of all the emirs of the Arabian Peninsula.\footnote{I thank Dr. David Commins for providing me with this information.} Thus, due to the connections of his mentor, al-Bitar had already met the Saudi leader when, in the summer of 1926, he left for Mecca to attend the Islamic Congress. This may explain why, among all of Rida’s students, he was the one whom Ibn Sa‘ud recruited first. To be sure, Rida held him in high esteem as well. It is worth noting that, when Rida’s brother Muhyi al-Din and older son Muhammad Shafi\footnote{al-Salman, 309, 357. Rida’s relatives managed to publish two additional issues of the journal (numbers 3 and 4 of volume 35). In 1939, Hasan al-Banna, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, revived \textit{al-Manar} again, but this second attempt only lasted until 1941.} briefly revived \textit{al-Manar} in 1936 after the death of its founder, they approached Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar to take over the journal’s Qur’anic exegesis.\footnote{Muhammad ibn ‘Abdallah ibn Sulayman al-Salman, \textit{al-Shaykh Rashid Rida al-salafi al-muslih, 1865-1935} (Riyadh: Wizarat al-Ta‘lim al-‘Ali, 1993), 112, 163.} The fact that they selected al-Bitar to complete one of Rida’s most significant religious legacies is indicative of the trust and affinities that must have existed between the master and his Syrian disciple.

The second student whose name may sound most familiar is Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi (1892-1959). A casual search in the catalogue of any university library will yield at least some of the numerous books of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab that he edited. Born in Egypt, al-Fiqi was the son of one of Muhammad ‘Abduh’s classmates at al-Azhar. Like his father, he studied at this prestigious university from 1904 onward and graduated in 1917. Yet, al-Fiqi is also listed as a student of Dar al-Da‘wa wa-l-Irshad; he was thus one of Rida’s pupils as well.\footnote{In 1926, he founded a puristic Islamic organization in Cairo called Ansar al-Sunna al-}
Muhammad, which still exists today, and whose goals were to call people to \textit{tawhīd} is its purest form, to propagate the Sunna of the prophet, and to purify society from innovative Islamic practices and creeds.\textsuperscript{66} Although information about al-Fiqi is scarce, we know that he left Cairo for Mecca in 1928 and stayed until 1930 or 1931.\textsuperscript{67}

Another member of Rida’s entourage who moved to Arabia was ʿAbd al-Zahir Abu al-Samh (1882-1951), the same Salafi activist whom al-Hilali had met and helped in Alexandria in 1922.\textsuperscript{68} A native Egyptian, Abu al-Samh was slightly older than his colleagues and, therefore, had been able to attend the \textit{majālis} of Muhammad ʿAbduh during his youth. He worked in a primary school in Suez for some time, and then returned to Cairo to become a student and a teacher at Rida’s Dar al-Daʿwa wa-l-Irshad, where he gave classes in Qur’anic recitation (\textit{tajwīd}) and calligraphy. He moved to Alexandria thereafter, became professor in a madrasa, and eventually began preaching in a small Salafi mosque in the precinct of Raml. He went on the pilgrimage in 1926 and soon moved to the Hijaz permanently. He spent most of his life in Saudi Arabia, but died in Cairo.\textsuperscript{69}

The fourth member of the group left for Mecca under similar circumstances. Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza (1890-1972) was an Egyptian who studied at al-


\textsuperscript{68} Sources disagree on Abu al-Samh’s date of birth, which could have been anywhere from 1882 to 1887. Taqi al-Din al-Hilali himself was not sure, but by the time he wrote a short biography of Abu al-Samh in 1946, he believed his friend was in his sixties. See al-Hilali, “Lamha,” 19.

Azhar and at Dar al-Da‘wa wa-l-Irshad. When that school closed, he continued to attend the lessons that Rida gave in his house, while assisting his master as a proofreader for the Manar’s printing press (maṭba‘at al-Manār). He also befriended Abu al-Samh, with whom he undertook the pilgrimage in the summer of 1926. He went back to Egypt afterwards, as he was probably unprepared to remain in Mecca at that moment, but returned to Arabia a few months later and spent the rest of his life there. He died in Mecca.  

It should be noted that at least two more students moved to Arabia either in the late 1920s or later, but it is difficult to document their whereabouts, significance, and links to Rida. For instance, ʿAbd al-Zahir Abu al-Samh had a younger brother named ʿAbd al-Muhaymin Abu al-Samh (1889/90-1979), who was also a disciple of Rashid Rida. ʿAbd al-Muhaymin studied in al-Azhar and, like his brother, briefly attended Muhammad ʿAbduh’s lessons. He assisted Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi in the foundation of Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya in Cairo in 1926 and eventually found his way to the Hijaz.  

Because the time of his departure is unknown, it is difficult to know if Rida was responsible for his transfer. (His older brother may have invited him at an ulterior date, or perhaps Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi recommended him to the Saudi authorities.) Another example of a more discrete disciple who moved to the Hijaz at around the same time...

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70 al-Mu‘allimi, vol. 1, 397.
71 Ibid., 204.
time is ʿAbd al-Rahman Abu Hajar. He reportedly attended Rida’s majālīs in Cairo and is listed as a professor and supervisor at the holy mosque in Mecca in 1928.  

According to the testimony of one Saudi scholar, it was Ibn Saʿud himself who initially asked Rashid Rida to send him qualified ʿulamaʾ for the holy mosque of Mecca. Whether or not the king was the original mastermind, it is clear that the agreement was mutually beneficial. There is no indication that Rida ever pressured any of his students into moving to Arabia, but he certainly encouraged them and paved the way for their transfer. One Saudi biographical dictionary specifies that ʿAbd al-Zahir Abu al-Samh and ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza arrived in Mecca with Rida, who then introduced and recommended both of them to Ibn Saʿud (rashshahahumā ladā jalālat al-malik ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz) as prospective imams and khaṭībs for the two holy mosques. As may have been expected, the king trusted the advice of his foremost Salafi supporter and allowed the nomination of Abu al-Samh in Mecca and ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza in Medina.

The story of al-Hilali is another case in point. In his memoirs, he recalls: “I traveled to the Hijaz for the pilgrimage and Rashid Rida wrote to king Ibn Saʿud requesting him to keep me in the kingdom and telling him: Muhammad Taqi al-Din al-Hilali is one of the best people of knowledge to go to your country.” In another autobiographical document, he reiterates that the gist of Rida’s letter was: “al-Hilali the

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75 al-Hilali, al-Daʿwa, 127.
Moroccan is among the best ‘ulama’ who have come to you from distant lands, so I ask you to make good use of his knowledge.76"

At the time, al-Hilali had already left Egypt. He resided near Basra in southern Iraq, where he claims to have enjoyed a good life. He was supported by an Arab merchant from India, was teaching Arabic and religious sciences in a school that had been established especially for him, earned a good salary with free room and board, had married the daughter of a local Salafi named Muhammad al-Amin al-Shanqiti, and had become a successful preacher.77 Abu al-Samh had sent him several letters suggesting him to join the rest of the group in the Hijaz and help out, but al-Hilali does not seem to have ever requested a recommendation from Rida. This occurrence was incidental. al-Hilali was on his way to the pilgrimage when he traveled through Cairo and met briefly with his mentor. When Rida learned that his disciple was bound for the Hijaz, he wrote to Ibn Sa`ud on his behalf.78

Nevertheless, al-Hilali was still hesitant to remain in Arabia after the pilgrimage was over. He struggled with this dilemma until he finally made a decision and forced his wife to stay in Mecca and abandon the Iraqi comfort, even though the Saudis had not yet promised him any position.79 The fact that his transfer was somewhat improvised further points to the role that Rida and his disciples must have played as instigators and catalysts. al-Hilali was so unprepared to remain in Arabia that the other Salafis, including Abu al-

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76 al-Majdhub, 187.
78 See al-Majdhub, 187.
79 al-Hilali, al-Da`wa, 127.
Samh and ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza, had to intercede on his behalf and convince his Iraq-based patron, who stood ready to go back home, to let him stay with them.80

For al-Hilali, the mission to Arabia began on a disappointing note. He must indeed have missed Iraq when he was given shelter on the unfurnished and torrid fifth floor of a house that belonged to the Saudi royal family and in which his colleague, ʿAbd al-Zahir Abu al-Samh, also resided.81 Fortunately, he was offered a position four months later as teacher and supervisor of the faculty (murāqib al-mudarrisīn) at the prophet’s mosque in Medina. Likewise, all his Salafi colleagues were quickly hired and put on Saudi payroll within a few months of their arrival in Arabia. From 1926 onward, Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar served on the committee for the reform of the education system in the holy mosque of Mecca, became professor and supervisor there, and was chosen to be director of the new Islamic Institute (al-maʾhad al-islāmī) in Mecca.82 ʿAbd al-Zahir Abu al-Samh, the hitherto obscure and marginal imam from Alexandria, suddenly became chief imam and khaṭīb at the holy mosque in Mecca.83 He, too, served as professor and supervisor of the faculty there. So did Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi.84 As for ʿAbd al-Muhaymin Abu al-Samh, his presence was less noticeable, for Ibn Saʿud made him director of a secondary school in the Qasim region. Yet, he was appointed imam at Mecca’s holy mosque in 1950, a few months prior to his older brother’s death.85

80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 128.
83 al-Muʿallimi, vol. 1, 203.
84 Abu Ras and al-Dib, 141.
85 al-Muʿallimi, vol. 1, 204.
In Medina, ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza occupied various positions. He became khaṭīb and imam for the morning prayers at the prophet’s mosque in addition to being professor and head of the supervisors’ committee.86

The striking feature of these promotions is, obviously, the gap between the candidates’ uneven experiences and the facility with which they acceded to important positions. Rida’s recommendations appear to have given them several advantages over their competitors. al-Hilali mentions one rival, a man named Salih ibn al-Fudayl al-Tunisi, who was imam at the great Umayyad mosque in Damascus and had traveled to Medina in hopes of becoming imam and khaṭīb at the prophet’s mosque. Despite his credentials, al-Tunisi only managed to become professor, which amounted to being preacher (wāʿiẓ).87

The Mission’s Role and Some of its Achievements

One must be careful not to overstate the actual influence that Rida’s entourage could exert in the Hijaz. After all, they were a small group and remained subordinate to senior Wahhabi ʿulama. Yet, the nature of their jobs and the tasks they performed reveal an interesting pattern. Not only did they find themselves in the most prestigious and cosmopolitan religious institutions of the Hijaz; they also enjoyed a relatively high degree of authority while keeping a direct contact with both the masses and the lower-rank teachers of the region. By comparison, the leading Wahhabi ʿulama were much more discrete in the haramayn. By 1927, the majority of Al al-Shaykh—the descendants of

86 Ibid., 397; al-Hilali, al-Daʿwa, 128.
Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab—were either teaching in Riyadh or were dispatched to regions other than the Hijaz. The case of ʿAbdallah ibn Hasan Al-Shaykh (d. 1958), with whom al-Hilali and his colleagues interacted the most, is a good example of Ibn Saʿud’s redefinition of the role of prominent Najdi Wahhabis in the holy sites. Ibn Hasan had been the designated qāḍī and imam of Ibn Saʿud’s army during the conquest of the Hijaz. As soon as the Saudi-Wahhabi forces took over Mecca in 1925, the king naturally named him chief imam of the holy mosque, thus confirming that the prestigious position deserved an elite candidate. By 1927, however, we know that Abu al-Samh had replaced Ibn Hasan and that the latter was promoted to the rank of chief qāḍī (raʾīs al-quḍār) for the entire Hijaz.

Ibn Saʿud may never have intended to keep a prominent scholar like Ibn Hasan as imam, but other reasons could have justified this revised division of labor. On the one hand, nominating a foreign student of Rida as imam was politically wise, for it allowed Ibn Saʿud to avoid domestic disputes and bypass the rivalry that existed between Hijazis and Najdis, who competed for offices. On the other hand, considering that Saudi legitimacy in the Hijaz was not yet deeply-rooted, the king was certainly adroit in selecting an Egyptian imam like Abu al-Samh, who was less likely to be perceived as a Wahhabi parvenu or to generate resentment among both the local population and the Muslims who visited Mecca from different parts of the world.

88 Abu Ras and al-Dib, 116-120.
90 Kostiner, 109-110.
Because ʿAbdallah ibn Hasan embodied the Saudi-Wahhabi collusion, it was certainly wiser to remove him from the holy mosque and appoint him to a less accessible but more powerful position. To use an expression commonly found in biographical dictionaries, Ibn Hasan became “the government’s listening ear and keen eye.” He served on high committees, monitored the religious field, and influenced education in the ḥaramayn from behind the scenes. He continued to teach in Mecca, but only in his house and in a private capacity. Interestingly, it took nearly twenty-five years before a native Saudi was again appointed chief imam of the holy mosque in Mecca. The Abu al-Samh brothers—two disciples of Rida—appear to have monopolized the position until King Ibn Saʿud passed away in 1953. The latter’s death coincided with the nomination of ʿAbdallah ibn Muhammad ibn ʿAbdallah al-Khalifi, who became chief imam after having been an auxiliary (imām musāʿid) under ʿAbd al-Zahir Abu al-Samh.

To some extent, Rida’s students were often in a better position than the Najdis to control education in the Hijaz and to call for reforms. Overall, they had a better knowledge of the Muslim world outside of the peninsula and were more familiar with certain modes of Islamic religiosity that did not exist in Najd. It was therefore easier for Rida’s students to deal with detractors and to handle cases of alleged improper teachings. As supervisors of the faculty in the two holy sites, they contributed to breaking the pluralist religious status quo that had existed in the Hijaz prior to the Saudi conquest. In

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91 Al Bassam, vol. 1, 234.
92 Abu Ras and al-Dib, 121.
93 Al Bassam, vol. 4, 473.
his memoirs, al-Hilali provides good examples of the services he could render to the Wahhabi establishment.

**Religious and Educational Assistance to the Wahhabis**

When he was first sent to Medina in late 1927, al-Hilali found out that one of the professors at the prophet’s mosque was a Sufi scholar from Mali named Alfa Hashim (d. 1932). The latter happened to be a *mugaddim* of the Tijaniyya, the order to which al-Hilali had been affiliated in Morocco. al-Hilali immediately wrote a paper in which he expounded thirteen of the Tijaniyya’s errors (*dalālāt*) and handed it to ʿAbdallah ibn Hasan. According to his recollections, the Wahhabi chief *qāḍī* was repulsed: “He read [the paper] and his skin shivered. He said: ‘God forbid! God forbid, there is someone in this world who believes such things.’ I said yes, and he is right here with you in Medina.” al-Hilali reported Alfa Hashim, whom Ibn Hasan immediately summoned to answer charges of deviant beliefs. During the meeting, Ibn Hasan confronted the African Sufi, but due to his own ignorance of the Tijaniyya he chose to let al-Hilali conduct most of the interrogation. Under pressure, the African Sufi eventually repented and agreed to list all the errors of his Sufi order on paper, so that the Wahhabi authorities could print it, distribute it to his disciples, and use it to warn other people against the Tijaniyya. The Saudi chief *qāḍī* naturally put al-Hilali in charge of assessing the validity of that written confession.

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In this case, al-Hilali took on the role of the knowledgeable advisor and acted as a Salafi watchdog on behalf of the Najdis, who were unfamiliar with African Sufi orders. But Rida’s students contributed in many other ways to the transformation of the religious landscape in the Hijaz. In Medina, the Group for Commanding the Good and Prohibiting Evil (hay’at al-amr bi-l-ma’rūf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar), which monitored the population’s mores and religious assiduity, used to report events to al-Hilali and ‘Abd al-Razzaq Hamza, who would then advise the local emir about rectifications.\(^96\) Hamza eventually presided over that group.\(^97\)

Furthermore, both al-Hilali and Hamza were instrumental in the establishment, in 1928, of a program for training the guides for pilgrims. The plan was to inculcate proper tawhīd to these Hijazi guides and teach them proper rules regarding the visitation of local graves and the prophet’s mosque. The head of the Directorate of General Education (mudīrīyat al-ma‘ārif al-‘āmma) in Mecca put al-Hilali and ‘Abd al-Razzaq Hamza in charge of establishing a curriculum, choosing the books, appointing the instructors, and monitoring the classes.\(^98\) As supervisors, both men made sure that the instructors met the standards of the program. al-Hilali personally confronted one of them, who had reportedly adulterated certain passages of a book during his classes; he underlined each of the man’s mistakes until the latter became speechless.\(^99\)

\(^{96}\) Ibid., 163.
\(^{97}\) Al al-Shaykh, 514.
\(^{98}\) al-Hilali, Diwan, 28.
\(^{99}\) Ibid., 103.
This example suggests that the very presence of Rida’s students in the Hijaz must have been helpful for the Saudi rulers who, at the time, lacked reliable teachers and preachers. It was only in 1927 that the new state began sending waves of young Saudis abroad, especially to Egypt, where they studied medicine, commerce, and engineering, but also religious sciences. In the meantime, the Saudi state needed trustworthy men of religion to consolidate the Islamic identity of the new polity, form a religiously-oriented elite, preach to the non-Wahhabi population, and to set up a more modern teaching system in the Hijaz. Over time, Rida’s students became involved in all these activities.

In some instances, the Saudi raison d’état took precedence over the Salafis’ own convictions and agenda. Judging from the writings of al-Hilali, some of Rida’s students (most of whom had never served a government before) were taken aback by the realpolitik of rulers whose priority, they thought, should have been to uphold Islam. When al-Hilali asked for the permission to leave Medina and go preach in rural areas, the chief qāḍī readily approved. However, as al-Hilali prepared to depart, the emir of Medina, ʿAbd al-ʿAziz ibn Ibrahim, suddenly ordered him to change his destination and go to two villages near Medina. This unexpected change of plans did not please the Moroccan Salafi:

This was not my goal, because the people of these villages are Shiʿis and would hardly accept anything from a Sunni preacher; my intention was rather to head for the Sunni bedouins in the region of al-Hanakiyya [between the Qasim and the Hijaz] and others from among the Harb tribes, where some people are

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101 Ibn Duhaysh, 19, 63, 118.
religious [mutadāyīn] while others are still in a state of pagan ignorance [‘alā al-jāhiliyya al-ukhrā].

The conflict between political representatives and some of Rida’s students caused frictions and open disagreements. As months rolled by, the emir of Medina grew inimical toward al-Hilali and his friend ‘Abd al-Razzaq Hamza. The tension reached such an extent that al-Hilali wrote to Ibn Sa‘ud and asked to be transferred from Medina to Mecca’s holy mosque.

al-Hilali and Hamza did move to Mecca, but they were given an unexpected assignment outside of the traditional Islamic institutions. In late 1926, the Saudis had opened their first secondary school in Mecca with specific objectives in mind. On the whole, they wished to form believer-citizens who would be attached to Islam and the Wahhabi doctrine. More specifically, the school was intended to train primary school teachers for the country’s cities and villages; it thus admitted adult students and even offered evening classes to accommodate their work schedules. This school was the Islamic Institute (al-ma‘ḥad al-islāmī), which Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar had headed since its foundation. The Islamic Institute was the first non-traditional school ever established by the Saudis, who hoped it would provide them with an indigenous means for consolidating the new state through education.

Despite its novel character, the school failed to keep its students in the classroom. Most of them dropped out. To encourage registrations and attendance, Ibn Sa‘ud ordered

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102 al-Hilali, al-Da‘wa, 168.
103 Ibid., 169-170.
that an allowance be given to every admitted student. Nevertheless, by 1927, the problems had become so serious that the Directorate of General Education decided to close the Institute momentarily. After important changes, it reopened in 1928 under a different name: the Saudi Scientific Institute (al-maʿhad al-ʿilmī al-saʿūdī). This reorganization took place shortly before the arrival of al-Hilali and ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza in Mecca. As it turns out, both men were invited to join the Institute’s new faculty. Besides these two, the Directorate for General Education had already asked ʿAbd al-Zahir Abu al-Samh and Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar to give classes at the Institute.\footnote{Ibid., 70.}

As director, the latter hired several foreign professors, many of whom were from his native Syria.\footnote{Abu Ras and al-Dib, 149.} For his part, al-Hilali taught Arabic, Qur’anic exegesis, hadiths, “and the unicity of God [tawḥīd] in the manner of the people of hadith, not in the manner of the people of kalām.”\footnote{Anonymous, 25.} Other courses were offered in engineering, history, geography, and English.\footnote{Ibn Duhaysh, 70-71.}

This time, the Saudi Institute thrived. To explain its sudden success, most studies credit the impact of additional financial reforms, which raised the students’ allowances. Indeed, if one relies on official data, it appears that money was the key factor and that the Institute finally succeeded because of its generous grants.\footnote{Ibid., 68.} In his memoirs, al-Hilali offers a complementary explanation that gives credence to the motives behind Rashid Rida’s efforts to rehabilitate Wahhabism. According to al-Hilali, the new Salafi faculty,
with its greater competence and credibility, was responsible for turning the Institute around. In other words, experienced foreign Salafis managed to gain the Hijazis’ trust—something the Wahhabis had been unable to do.

The Najdis had indeed a hard time settling down in Mecca and Medina after 1925. al-Hilali relates the tribulations of a Wahhabi named Ibn Mansur, who had become imam in a village near Medina. Despite much effort, this Najdi had failed to enforce his puristic mores and beliefs in his new community. al-Hilali portrays him grabbing the cigarette off the mouth of a Shi‘i who had refused to drop it and knocking on people’s doors in the early hours of the morning so they would wake up for prayer. Needless to say, the local population did not respond well to this kind of aggressive behavior and lodged several complaints to their emir.110 al-Hilali contends that the difficulties of the Islamic Institute in Mecca were due to a similar aversion toward Wahhabism: the inhabitants of Mecca perceived the original Islamic Institute as nothing but “[…] a Wahhabi institute that teaches the Wahhabi doctrine to its pupils.”111” al-Hilali acknowledges that this was not the only reason behind the failure of the Institute, but he affirms that the decision to hire foreign Salafi professors allowed the Saudi school to overcome its bad reputation and become successful.

There is no denying that the Salafis distinguished themselves from the Wahhabis by their more modern worldview, their broader secular knowledge, and their authority as foreign ‘ulama’ who, in most cases, held diplomas from universities like al-Azhar or the

110 al-Hilali, al-Da‘wa, 178-79.
111 Ibid., 180.
Qarawiyyin. On many theological issues, however, they were often as puristic as the Wahhabis. The key difference is that, unlike their hosts, they did not suffer from a credibility deficit in the Hijaz. It is probably for this reason that ʿAbdallah ibn Hasan, the chief qāḍī, approached al-Hilali and his colleagues regarding a delicate matter. There was, in the open courtyard of the prophet’s mosque in Medina, a well surrounded by bushes and a palm tree.\footnote{See the description by a British traveler who saw the garden in 1925 in Eldon Rutter, The Holy Cities of Arabia (London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1930), 541.} al-Hilali explains that ignorant people called this place Fatima’s garden [bustān Fāṭima], because the daughter of the prophet had allegedly planted the trees. The populace believed that the holy Zamzam spring streamed underground all the way from Mecca and that, every year on the day of ʿAshura, it reached the well in Fatima’s garden. On this particular occasion, people headed to the site and sought blessings by kissing the well and taking water from it. In other circumstances, they also sought blessings from the palm tree, its dates, or the bushes.\footnote{al-Hilali, al-Daʿwa, 129.}

This was exactly the type of behavior that both Wahhabis and modernist Salafis abhorred: seeking blessings from something or someone other than God was a blatant violation of tawḥīd. A modernist Salafi like Rida may have added that such beliefs were irrational and primitive superstitions that did not live up to the sophisticated monotheistic thought of Islam. The Wahhabis, for their part, did not conceptualize the issue in such modernist or scientific terms at the time, nor did they need to. They could limit themselves to a purely scriptural logic and argue that the acts of seeking blessings from a tree or a well were clear cases of shirk that contradicted the Qurʾān and the Sunna—as
shown in chapter nine of Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s *Kitab al-tawhid*, which specifically deals with the offense of seeking blessings from trees and rocks.

Nevertheless, ʿAbdallah ibn Hasan, the Wahhabi chief *qāḍī*, strangely sought the advice of al-Hilali and his colleagues about the proper way to deal with this problem. He wished to know if the Salafis would support his plan, which was to fill the well, uproot the trees, and remove all traces of Fatima’s garden by leveling the ground. When al-Hilali and his friends agreed and confirmed that it was necessary to rid the mosque’s courtyard of any temptation of *shirk*, the chief *qāḍī* took action. al-Hilali relates: “[The chief *qāḍī*] wrote to king Ibn Saʿud, informing him of our opinion and asking him for the permission to carry out [the elimination of Fatima’s garden].” If the story is true, one wonders why the foreign Salafis’ opinion mattered in the first place. It seems that the Wahhabis were not looking for advice as much as they were hoping to legitimize a controversial project. Rida’s entourage was indeed able to corroborate the Wahhabis’ actions and provide an allegedly impartial judgment concerning the destruction of the garden.

**Advocates of Islamic Modernism**

This is not to say that the Salafis had no intellectual disagreements with the Wahhabis. As Rida knew all too well, the Najdis could be so rigorist as to dismiss scientific knowledge out of hand, thus hindering the progress of their society and the *umma* in general. In Medina, al-Hilali became involved in what he referred to as an “odd” altercation. It took place at the prophet’s mosque while he was still supervisor of the

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faculty. A number of teachers were gathered around him and his friend ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza in the supervisors’ office. They were discussing various scholarly questions when, at one point, someone raised the issue of the earth: is it round or flat? al-Hilali and his Salafi colleague proceeded to explain that, without a doubt, the earth was round; they supported their claim by naming some of the ʿulamaʾ who had confirmed this information, including Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya. The answer apparently left the audience puzzled, for the teachers started to whisper among themselves. When a more prominent Wahhabi scholar and former chief qāḍī named ʿAbdallah ibn Bulayhid (d. 1940) came to the mosque, the skeptical group of teachers asked him the same question. Without hesitating, Ibn Bulayhid replied that only untrustworthy Muslims who tamper with the scriptures through rational speculation and metaphorical interpretation could deny that the earth is flat.115

There is indeed a passage in the Qurʾan (88: 20) referring to the earth as a flattened surface (ṣuṭḥat), which many past Wahhabs have understood literally.116 The damaging consequences resulting from the misinterpretation of this verse is an issue that preoccupied al-Hilali for many years. In 1950, he admitted to have heard a professor in Baghdad who, like Ibn Bulayhid, had claimed that the earth was flat. For a modernist like al-Hilali, such a contention was nothing short of a felony against the Qurʾan, science,

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115 Ibid., 164.
116 The former grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, ʿAbd al-ʿAziz ibn Baz (d. 1999), is said to have claimed that the earth is flat. See Antoine Basbous, L’Arabie Saoudite en question (Paris: Perrin, 2002), 128.
Muslims students, and the umma as a whole.\textsuperscript{117} The Qur’anic verse that refers to the earth as a flattened surface, he said, does not contradict the fact that the earth is a round; it rather means that God made the globe a convenient place of rest, where humans can feel at ease, as though they were on a bed or a carpet.\textsuperscript{118} Whereas the earth may seem flat from an eye-level perspective, it is nonetheless a sphere.

However, back in Medina in the late 1920s, Ibn Bulayhid clearly had a different interpretation of the verse. Upon hearing his answer, the crowd of teachers informed him that their two Salafi supervisors had argued the exact opposite. Furious, Ibn Bulayhid fustigated al-Hilali and Hamza for pretending to be knowledgeable and for having taught such nonsense. The two Salafis strove to explain to the Wahhabi scholar why he was wrong. They mentioned several examples: the natural cycle of day and night, the fact that the sun sets in Riyadh half an hour before it does in Medina, and so forth. al-Hilali admitted: “We had another proof clearer than all [the preceding ones], but we were afraid of telling him: if a traveler heads west in a straight or almost straight line and keeps that direction without changing it, he shall return to the place he came from.\textsuperscript{119}”

Without even hearing that last argument, Ibn Bulayhid lost his temper and ordered al-Hilali and ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza to repent. The news of their failure to convince the Wahhabi scholar must have spread, because the previously skeptical teachers started treating the two Salafis with disdain by slapping them and laughing at them. Others made


\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Ibid.}, 18.

\textsuperscript{119} al-Hilali, \textit{al-Daʿwa}, 165.
sure to remind them of their faulty logic, for if the earth was a sphere floating in space, then the seas would be unstable, rocks and animals would slip, and people would be walking upside down.\textsuperscript{120} The altercation with Ibn Bulayhid thus created a highly frustrating and uncomfortable situation for the two Salafis. As supervisor of the faculty, al-Hilali kept on preaching to the teachers and warned them against the threat of obscurantism. Yet, most of the teachers persisted to believe in what Ibn Bulayhid had told them. al-Hilali finally settled the issue when he received his personal library, which had been shipped to him from Iraq. After a careful search, he found proofs supporting his argument in the writings of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim. He underlined the appropriate passages in red and sent them to Ibn Bulayhid, who calmed down but nonetheless refused to admit his error. When al-Hilali later met another prominent Wahhabi named Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Latif Al al-Shaykh (d. 1948), the latter acknowledged that Ibn Bulayhid was mistaken. Probably embarrassed, he assured al-Hilali that not all the ʿulamaʾ of Najd believed the earth is flat.\textsuperscript{121}

This story is most likely authentic. al-Hilali was a professor at the Islamic University in Medina when he wrote his memoirs in 1971, and could hardly have wanted to depreciate the Wahhabis on purpose.\textsuperscript{122} To be sure, the occurrence of a heated debate about the earth’s shape in Medina in the late 1920s was alarming. For one thing, it proved

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 218. It should be noted that other stories circulated concerning Ibn Bulayhid and astronomy. Hafiz Wahba related how the Najdi scholar considered radio communication between the Earth and the planet Mars to be Satan’s deceptive work. See Lawrence P. Goldrup, “Saudi Arabia, 1902-1932: Development of a Wahhabi Society” (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1971), 218-219.
that Rida’s doubts, as well as the uneasiness he sometimes felt toward the Wahhabis, were justified. The fact that a prominent Wahhabi stated that the earth was flat, told the professors of the prophet’s mosque that it was heretical to think otherwise, and incited them to spread this belief in one of the Islamic world’s most cosmopolitan religious institutions, posed a problem. Such a blunder was likely to ruin Rida’s campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism and to undermine the credibility of the emerging Saudi state abroad. Ironically, the same Ibn Bulayhid had previously been portrayed as a modern-looking Wahhabi by the Salafi journal *al-Fath*, published in Egypt by Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib. Ibn Bulayhid may have been one of the first Wahhabis to ride a car in the desert, as the journal reported in 1926, but his retrograde beliefs could easily overshadow his interest for automobiles. This was a problem that pro-Saudi Salafis based in Egypt could only try to cover or deny. Rida’s disciples, however, operated directly in the Hijaz and could try to solve the problem at its root.

In this particular instance, Rida and his pupils seem to have combined their efforts. While his students tried to fight Wahhabi obscurantism in Arabia, Rida sought to control damaging rumors. Members of his entourage presumably informed him of Ibn Bulayhid’s convictions, because Rida referred to the controversy in *al-Manar*. While writing about education and the dangers of stagnation (*jumūd*), he criticized the enemies of science who still believed that the earth was flat and who accused others of being disbelievers if they disagreed. For some reason, Rida deemed it necessary to suggest that

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123 Al Bassam, vol. 4, 145.
the Wahhabis could hardly be counted among these ignorant Muslims and that rumors to the contrary verged on absurdity:

It has come to my ears that one of the most revered and well-read ʿulamaʾ of Najd advocated excommunication [takfīr] against anyone who professes that the earth is round. This has startled me because Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab, the imam of the Najdi revival, as well as other scholars [of this movement], have stipulated that they do not accuse anyone of being an infidel except for a breach of consensus about definite religious questions. Yet, this is not a religious question and there is no [religious] consensus about it. [It also startled me] because the greatest Hanbali imams from whose books the shaykh [Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab] and his successors derived [their] Najdi religious renewal are Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim [al-Jawziyya]. The latter has mentioned, in some of his books, that the earth is round. So, if the rumor about this scholar were true, would he charge [Ibn Qayyim] with unbelief?124

Rida did not say outright that the rumor was false and, once again, a certain discomfort transpires from his writing. Whether or not the unnamed scholar from Najd was Ibn Bulayhid, Rida was fully aware that prominent Wahhabis sometimes opposed scientific knowledge and applications even if, according to him, they had no reason to do so. The famous story of the Wahhabi scholars opposing Ibn Saʿud’s introduction of the telephone, which they viewed as an instrument of the devil, is a classic example.125 The Wahhabis were not religious automats whose beliefs and actions could be predicted, explained, and vindicated on the basis of texts. Ibn Bulayhid, for one, did not seem to have read, remembered, or believed Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya’s arguments about the shape of the earth. But Rida’s campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism worked here

125 Philby, 305.
on two fronts. While he defended Wahhabis scholars through wishful thinking in the pages of *al-Manar*, his own students in the Hijaz strove to make this ideal a reality.

This was not always an easy task, but the mission to Arabia made significant efforts to reeducate the Wahhabis and to bring them closer to Rida’s type of Salafiyya. Following in his mentor’s footsteps, Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi—who had been named president of the Meccan Department of Printing and Publication (*ra’is shu‘bat al-taby‘ wa-l-nashr bi-Makka*)—founded the journal *al-Islah* in Mecca in 1928. This was a Salafi organ in which al-Fiqi, along with his colleagues ʿAbd al-Zahir Abu al-Samh, ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza, and Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar, disseminated a purist religious theology combined with a concern for legal and socio-political reform in a way that was typical of the modernist Salafiyya. The journal’s content was strikingly similar to that of *al-Manar* and *al-Fath*; indeed, *al-Islah* often reprinted texts that had previously been published in these two other Salafi journals. The editor made sure to raise his readers’ awareness to the plight of the whole Muslim world. Each issue contained articles that dealt with such contemporary topics as world population, perception of the Hijaz abroad, Islamic organizations in Egypt, and Islam in China.

*al-Islah* thus sought to integrate Arabia into the transnational network of religious reformism while fostering a broader sense of Islamic identity among the elite of the emerging Saudi state. The journal shared Rida’s belief in the connection between proper religious education and socio-political empowerment. As Abu al-Samh put it in the first
issue, calling to God is the way toward independence and freedom. Rida himself rejoiced at the foundation of such a journal in Mecca. He acknowledged that al-Islah was modeled after al-Manar and said he that had a meeting with Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi during which he gave him advice about editorship.

**Intellectual Consequences on the Salafiyya**

In a letter he sent from Saudi Arabia in 1947 to al-Hilali who was then living in Morocco, Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar praised Ibn Saʿud for his support to Islam and referred to him as the leader of the Salafiyya (imām al-daʿwa al-salafiyya). This interesting statement, though certainly motivated by gratitude, is nonetheless indicative of a broader change. Roughly a decade after Rida’s death, the epicenter of the Salafiyya had already moved closer to Saudi Arabia. By 1947, when al-Bitar made this statement, the Salafiyya had become more decentralized than ever and its leadership was waning. Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib, the editor of al-Fath, was the most legitimate journalistic heir to Rashid Rida and Shakib Arslan, but did not have their stature. Incidentally, the publication of al-Fath came to an end in 1947. The modernist Salafiyya continued to thrive in North Africa at least until the 1960s, especially in Morocco and Algeria, but its representatives had ambitions and objectives that were too local to allow them to command authority in the Arab East or elsewhere. The political and religious authorities

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of Saudi Arabia, with their institutional capabilities, their control of the holy sites and their rejection of traditional Islam, were in a good position to take over the leadership of the Salafiyya and become its new depositories.

This was a reality that al-Bitar and many other Salafis in the Arab East acknowledged, because they were partly responsible for it. Indeed, Rida’s rehabilitation of Wahhabism, of which the Salafi mission to Arabia was an extension, had the twofold effect of increasing the religious authority of the Saudi state while making many foreign Salafis indebted to it. Consequently, the Salafiyya, as a label and a token of religious identity, started to become increasingly interchangeable with Wahhabism. The convergence between the two may have been fully completed in the 1970s, as Khaled Abou El Fadl argued, but it is clear that the transition was already under way as early as the 1920s.\footnote{See Khaled Abou El Fadl, \textit{The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists} (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 79-80.}

The foundation in Mecca of a Salafiyya printing press and bookstore [\textit{maṭbaʿat al-salafiyya}], which emulated the one that Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib managed in Cairo, is a case in point. It began operating in 1928 and printed and distributed many Hanbali and Wahhabi books, as well as local journals including Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi’s \textit{al-Islah}. Its name indicates that the label “Salafiyya” was gaining ground in the emerging Saudi state, though the driving force behind this change did not come from the Wahhabis themselves. One of the two founders of the Salafiyya Press in Mecca was ʿAbd al-Fattah Qatlan, the Syrian émigré and former co-editor of the \textit{Majallat al-Salafiyya} who had previously collaborated with Muhibb a-Din al-Khatib in establishing the original
Salafiyya Press in Cairo. Qatlan had a Hijazi partner, Muhammad Salih Nasif, who came from a famous modernist family of Jidda. He was a Salafi activist under Sharif Husayn and had previous experience in the printing business. Together, Qatlan and Nasif bought an old printing press from Rashid Rida and shipped it from Cairo to Mecca where it became the cornerstone of the new Saudi Salafiyya Press.\(^{131}\)

Rida himself sometimes insisted on placing the Wahhabis under the fold of the Salafiyya. Although he usually referred to the Najdis as Wahhabis, one finds statements where he presented them as Salafis.\(^{132}\) In at least one instance, Rida even dared to do the opposite, that is, to present the Salafis as Wahhabis. In 1927, he wrote that the Wahhabis had become a large group in Egypt, with adherents among the religious scholars of al-Azhar and in other religious institutes, thanks to the guidance of \textit{al-Manar}.\(^{133}\) Though this was highly irregular, it served the same purpose of conflating Wahhabism with Salafism.

In a more retroactive fashion, Rida also wrote that Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab was a Hanbali Salafi.\(^{134}\) Until the 1920s, such terms had been unusual in Wahhabi discourse; it was only at the end of that decade that Najdis began to emphasize the noun “Salafiyya” and its derivatives. Ibn Bulayhid (the prominent Wahhabi scholar who insisted that the earth was flat) provided one example in a 1926 interview with a reporter from \textit{al-Manar}. Denying that Wahhabism was a fifth legal school, he claimed:

\(^{134}\) Rida, \textit{al-Wahhabiyyun}, 63.
“The people of Najd are all following the madhhab of imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, so they are Salafis of creed (a derivative of salaf) [hum salafiyyat al-‘aqīda (nisba ilā al-salaf)] and Hanbalis of rite [hanābilat al-madhhab].”

Assuming that his answer was accurately transcribed, it is interesting to note that Ibn Bulayhid felt the need to specify that the word Salafiyya derived from the Arabic word for pious ancestors. Needless to say, the editor of al-Manar already knew this detail; but Ibn Bulayhid, who was probably unaccustomed with the term, thought it required a brief explanation. Indeed, pre-modern Wahhabis did not refer to themselves as Salafis. In the professions of faith that he sent to other Muslims, Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab usually declared that his creed was that of the Sunnis, without using any specific term derived from the word salaf. This, according to him, was his madhhab (madhhab ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa). A few decades later, while defending the orthodoxy of Wahhabism before the ʿulamaʾ of Mecca, his son ʿAbdallah also failed to refer to a Salafi madhhab. He claimed that the Wahhabis were Sunnis with respect to the foundations of religion (madhhabun fī uṣūl al-dīn ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa) and Hanbalis in terms of substantive law (furūʿ). ʿAbdallah mentioned the Najdis’ reliance on the salaf, but did not insist that they yielded a school of thought per se. Instead, he used the standard formula: “[… and our way is the way of the pious ancestors [tarīqat al-salaf], and its it is the

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135 al-Manar, 27 (1926): 276. The parentheses are in the original.
safest, most learned, and wiser way. One of the most prominent Wahhabi scholars of the early twentieth century repeated this self-definition verbatim in an oft-quoted apologetic work originally published in 1924.

It was in the wake of Rida’s rehabilitation campaign that Wahhabis started using Salafi terms and expressions with increasing recurrence. Evidently, they considered it was more empowering to present themselves as Salafis rather than good Sunnis or “Unitarians” (muwahhidūn), as Wahhabis had often called themselves. Just like the Islamic modernists, twentieth-century Wahhabis were looking for a label that could distinguish them from traditional ‘ulama’ in their bid for religious recognition and ascendancy. Because they had enough in common with Rida’s conservative articulation of Islamic modernism, they could easily resort to the Salafis’ neologisms in order to discard the infamous Wahhabi label, outflank their Sunni detractors, and assert the purity and soundness of their thought. Rida’s rehabilitation of Wahhabism played an important role in this transition.

In the 1920s, however, the Wahhabis do not seem to have appreciated the legal implications of the Salafīyya. In his aforementioned declaration, Ibn Bulayhid equated the Salafīyya with Hanbali theology, but continued to present his people as followers of the Hanbali school of law. By contrast, Rida and his disciple insisted on the importance of legal dynamism and warned against the mistake of following one legal madhhab

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139 The senior Wahhabi scholar Sulayman Ibn Sahman (d. 1930) still used the term “Unitarians” in the mid-1920s. See Ibn Sahman, 7.
blindly. The way Taqi al-Din al-Hilali signed his articles in *al-Manar*, for instance, would have seemed unusual to most Najdis. Below his name, al-Hilali described himself in the following terms: “Independent Salafi scholar who is absolutely not clinging to any of the legal schools.” Rida’s disciples endeavored to explain this legal dimension of the Salafiyya to the inhabitants of the Saudi kingdom. The rehabilitation of Wahhabism sometimes caused Rida to be inconsistent in his description of the Wahhabis’ legal stance. Most of the time, he claimed that they were Hanbalis, which was accurate and showed that the Wahhabis did not exceed the proper bounds of legal orthodoxy. But because Rida was a reformist who strove to overcome the authority of the four Sunni legal schools of law, he was not always enthusiastic at the idea of rehabilitating Wahhabism through the categories of traditional Islam. Therefore, he sometimes contradicted the Wahhabis’ own statements and claimed that they were not followers of the Hanbali school of law, for they followed the Qur’an and the Sunna rather than the books of Ibn Hanbal. Statements of that nature made the Wahhabis appear closer to the Salafis.

In the end, however, the convergence between the Salafiyya and Wahhabism occurred at the expense of Islamic modernism in a way that Rida had probably never wished or expected. The reason he kept striving for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism was because he hoped Saudi Arabia would spearhead the renaissance of the *ummah* and help it

141 See al-Fiqi’s fatwa in *al-Islah*, 1, 3 (September 1928): 9-10; see also the story of Mahmud Shawil, a scholar from the Hijaz who abandoned the Maliki school and embraced the Salafiyya after meeting Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and ‘Abd al-Razzaq Hamza in Medina. al-Hilali, *al-Da’wa*, 167-168.
recapture its past grandeur. He believed that assisting this new state by bringing science and civilization to it was in accordance with the reformist movement of al-Afghani and ʿAbduh. Even in the early 1930s, Rida had obviously not repudiated Islamic modernism. Less than three years before his death, he wrote *al-Wahy al-muhammadi* (The Muhammadan Revelation), whose content reaffirmed his commitment toward a progressive socio-political and religious reform adapted to the reality of modern life and thought. While he engaged the Enlightenment, he accepted many of its underpinnings. Echoing the disenchantment of the world, for instance, he continued to downplay miracles because he considered them unscientific and unconvincing. Instead of proving the inherent rationality of Islam, he wrote, they tend to steer educated people away from religion. Though more conservative than ʿAbduh, Rida’s thought was never as puristic as that of the Najdis.

Why, then, did his campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism lead to the Wahhabization of Islamic modernism and not the other way around? It appears that Rida and his followers lost the upper hand in the process of supporting Ibn Saʿud and assisting the Wahhabis. As the epicenter of the Salafiyya moved closer to Saudi Arabia, the label gradually lost the meaning it had since the early twentieth century and ceased to evoke the creative exertions of al-Afghani, ʿAbduh, or Rida. This turn of events has a number of possible causes. Once Rida and his followers gave their unconditional support to Ibn Saʿud and the Wahhabis, disagreements and constructive criticisms were, for better or

worse, no longer welcome. This does not mean that the Salafis always agreed with the Wahhabis—they did not—but, at least in their writings, they made sure to support the Najdis at all costs and to portray them as positively as possible.

In al-Manar, Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar even had to respond to a senior Salafi, the Iraq-based Muhammad al-Amin al-Shanqiti (d. 1932), who obviously thought that the rehabilitation of Wahhabism had gone too far. In another journal, al-Shanqiti had written an article in which he cast doubt on some of al-Bitar’s assertions regarding Wahhabism and its soundness. According to al-Shanqiti, it was incorrect to pretend that Wahhabis do not excommunicate those who violate God’s unicity (mushrikīn). al-Bitar replied and justified his argument anew through ahistorical evidence, by providing quotes from the Qur’an without any mention of what actual Wahhabis may or may not have done. Rida himself added an unsubstantiated historical proof in an appendix to al-Bitar’s article. According to his explanation, those who were guilty of undue excommunication were the Bedouins of Najd who lived prior to the emergence of Wahhabism and who ignored the sharī’a. In other words, the negative stories that circulated in the Ottoman Empire about the Najdis were true, except that the said Najdis were not Wahhabis but mere ignorants who were later saved by Wahhabism and then stopped excommunicating other Muslims.145

This written exchange is particularly interesting because al-Bitar and Rida were responding to the criticisms of a Salafi interlocutor who was close to their entourage.

145 See al-Manar, 32 (1932): 545-546, 552.
Born in Mauritania, Muhammad al-Amin al-Shanqiti had traveled to Egypt in 1900 and met Muhammad ʿAbduh through a mutual friend, Muhammad Mahmud ibn Talamidh. He taught briefly at al-Azhar and this is probably where ʿAbd al-Zahir Abu al-Samh, who was a teenager at the time, met him.\(^{146}\) The latter claimed that al-Shanqiti was the man who first introduced him to the Salafiyya, even before ʿAbduh or Rida.\(^{147}\) However, due to his comments on Wahhabism and his decision to argue about it publicly, he could hardly qualify as a true Salafi anymore in the eyes of Rida, al-Bitar and, presumably, other members of their group. The fact that al-Shanqiti was al-Hilali’s father-in-law in Basra was irrelevant. Though their tone was polite, al-Bitar and Rida could not overlook such a critique of their campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism, regardless of who the critic was. Out of necessity, one’s reaction to this campaign had, in a sense, become a test for determining if he or she deserved the title “Salafi.” In sum, a true Salafi could not dispute the soundness of Wahhabism or, worse, accuse a member of Rida’s entourage of being too favorable to the Wahhabis, as al-Shanqiti had done vis-à-vis al-Bitar.

As time passed, the standards on which one’s adherence to the Salafiyya was based continued to shift toward religious purism. After his death, Rida himself could not even escape criticism. Although he had been the most dedicated apologist for Wahhabism, some of his modernist inclinations simply raised too much suspicion among

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\(^{147}\) al-Muʿallimi, vol. 1, 203.
the scholars of Saudi Arabia. As an indication that the mission to Arabia had somewhat backfired, one of the Salafis whom Rida had sent to the Hijaz in 1926 officially distanced himself from the religious thought of his former mentor. In a 1958 book defending the integrity and reliability of the science of hadith, Muhammad ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza disapproved of Rida’s lack of religious purism. He criticized him for failing to accept the literal meaning of a number of hadiths about the signs of Judgment Day, such as the coming of the Antichrist and the return of Jesus to this world. In his Qur’anic exegesis, Rida had expressed doubts about these eschatological hadiths whose narrators, he believed, reported them figuratively.\footnote{Muhammad ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza, \textit{Zulumat Abi Rayya amama adwaʾ al-sunna al-muhammadiyya} (Cairo: al-Matbaʿa al-Salafiyya, 1958), 236.}

For Hamza, who was still a professor at the holy mosque, this skepticism was unacceptable because it implied that the pious ancestors could have erred in their comprehension of what the prophet said. In other words, Rida, the late master of the Salafiyya, was guilty of having doubted the authority of the \textit{salaf}. He had been led astray, Hamza explained, because he had studied under Muhammad ʿAbduh, who was himself influenced by the materialist philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from Kant and Nietzsche to Herbert Spencer and Gustave Lebon. Due to their fascination for positivism, ʿAbduh and Rida came to doubt supernatural phenomena and, consequently, were prone to interpret the scriptures metaphorically whenever they seem to contradict scientific thought. Hamza did not speak ill of his former teacher; he thanked
Rida for what he learned from him, but added that he had to oppose him regarding issues for which the truth was manifest.\footnote{149 \textit{Ibid.}, 237.}

In retrospect, it appears that the influence of Wahhabism on Rida’s entourage was greater than vice-versa. After 1935, the foreign Salafis who had moved to Saudi Arabia pursued their scholarly, journalistic, and academic work and continued to support Wahhabism as they had done for years. While some stayed in the kingdom for the rest of their lives, like ʿAbd al-Zahir Abu al-Samh and ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza, others went back sporadically. In any case, they all remained closely tied to the country that had provided them with such rewarding opportunities. Besides their prestigious posts, Rida’s students also benefited from interesting financial retributions. al-Hilali mentioned that, in 1928, he and his colleague ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza earned a monthly salary of ten gold pounds and that life was so cheap in Medina that only three gold pounds were sufficient to sustain an entire household for a month and allow them to live a good life.\footnote{150 Sources also indicate that, of all the supervisors at Mecca’s holy mosque, Abu al-Samh earned twenty gold pounds a month, which was two to three times higher than the other salaries on the payroll.\footnote{151 \textit{Ibn Duhaysh}, 117.} Many other foreign Salafis, including the graduates from al-Azhar who were hired en masse in the 1940s and early 1950s, eventually came to gravitate financially and professionally toward Saudi Arabia.\footnote{152 \textit{Ibid.}, 36-37, 86.}}
Besides the financial advantages that work in Arabia brought them, Rida’s students also became, to a certain extent, the creatures of Ibn Saʿud. Once they integrated the religious and educational system of the Hijaz, they lost some of their intellectual—and at times physical—freedom. They were unable to counsel or reprimand the king with the same distant authority and forceful tone that Rida, who wrote from Cairo, could use in his private letters to Ibn Saʿud.\(^\text{153}\) al-Hilali recounts that, in the late 1920s, he and his Salafi colleagues asked Abu al-Samh to write a letter to the king to protest against the creation of a Feast of the Throne (ʿayd al-julās), which was a blamable innovation unknown at the time of the pious ancestors. There was a clear sense of uneasiness, because al-Hilali, ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza, Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi, and seven other men worked together to tone down Abu al-Samh’s letter and rewrite it with more moderation. Fortunately, Ibn Saʿud read the final version without becoming furious, and al-Hilali praised him for that.\(^\text{154}\)

In the long run, this atmosphere of subservience may have been conducive to the Wahhabization of the foreign Salafis, though it also fostered some tension and frustration. In 1930, al-Hilali became so displeased with the situation in Mecca that he decided to leave. The circumstances leading to his departure—a topic he carefully evaded in most of his writings and interviews—stemmed from a controversy regarding his appointment at the Saudi Scientific Institute in Mecca in early 1929. At the time, he and ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza had been nominated by the Consultative Council (majlis al-shūrā), headed by

\(^{153}\) Rida, _al-Mukhtar_, vol. 1, 28, 40.  
^{154}\) al-Hilali, _Diwan_, 104.
prince Faysal ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAziz, while the king was out of Riyadh fighting rebel Ikhwan forces on the Iraqi border.155 Upon his return, Ibn Saʿud, who must have been in a bad mood, journeyed to Mecca and was informed of the Council’s initiative. For reasons which are not at all obvious, the king summoned the ʿulamaʾ and told them that the two foreign Salafis could not remain professors at the Institute. Both men were dismissed and transferred to the holy mosque as mere teachers.156

The king’s prima facie incomprehensible decision annoyed al-Hilali so much that he decided to leave Arabia. After having been supervisor at the prophet’s mosque in Medina, he could hardly accept being demoted to an inferior status. One local notable suggested setting an appointment with the king on al-Hilali’s behalf, so that he could apologize. al-Hilali refused. He was not guilty of anything, he said, and the king fired him hastily, without proper investigation. al-Hilali decided to leave for Jeddah, where he wanted to board a ship to India. However, he ran into unexpected problems when he found out he was unauthorized to leave the country. For several weeks, he tried to negotiate his departure with the authorities, but the Ibn Saʿud apparently refused to grant the authorization. The chief qāḍī wrote al-Hilali and explained to him that he was not allowed to leave because the king had appointed him as a teacher in the holy mosque in Mecca. Therefore, it was mandatory for him to take up the job. They exchanged more letters, but the conclusion was always the same: al-Hilali had to obey the king and go

155 On Ibn Saʿud’s 1929 campaign against the Ikhwan, see Goldrup, 428-432.
156 al-Hilali, Diwan, 104.
back to work in Mecca for at least a couple of months before thinking of leaving the country.

Exasperated, al-Hilali decided to ask a North African employee of the French embassy for help. The latter, in his official capacity, was able to reach Ibn Saʿud and obtain an authorization for the Moroccan Salafi to leave Arabia. al-Hilali lamented: “I told him that I hated to seek the help of the French against an Islamic government.” It must indeed have been frustrating, if not absurd, to have to resort to the diplomatic services of colonial France in order to regain the right to travel and to extricate oneself from the grip of the very country that was expected to lead the Islamic world forward.

ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza, for his part, decided to obey the king. Because he probably had no better place to go, he swallowed the insult, accepted to stay in Mecca as a mere teacher, and hoped for a positive turn of fate. He did regain the king’s confidence. He became a teacher at Dar al-Hadith in Mecca, a school founded by Abu al-Samh in 1933, which trained young religious scholars for nearly three decades until 1961, when it merged with the newly created Islamic University in Medina. Hamza eventually became director of this institution. In 1952, when a Saudi Scientific Institute was established in Riyadh, he was also hired to teach tafsīr and hadiths.

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157 Ibid., 152.
158 Ibid., 151.
159 Abu Ras and al-Dib, 95-96.
160 al-ʿAbdali, 188.
In 1957, al-Hilali confessed to a reporter that his first stay in the Hijaz “did not please him,” without explaining how or why.\textsuperscript{161} Tensions between the Wahhabis and the foreign Salafis were perhaps more frequent than the individuals themselves were willing to admit. In his unpublished anthology of poetry, al-Hilali confessed that his relationship with ʿAbdallah ibn Hasan, the chief qāḍī, was in fact thorny and ended on bad terms. When al-Hilali departed for India, he heard that the chief qāḍī had backbitten him in an assembly. According to the rumor, Ibn Hasan said that the religion and knowledge of foreign ʿulamaʾ should not be trusted, and that al-Hilali was particularly unreliable because he resorted to the Christians and sided with them against the Muslims. Whether or not the rumor was true, it is likely that Ibn Hasan disliked al-Hilali’s insubordination and recourse to the French embassy. In Mecca, Abu al-Samh lauded his Moroccan colleague, but to no avail. al-Hilali wrote to Ibn Hasan from Bombay and explained himself, but the chief qāḍī apparently never replied.\textsuperscript{162}

It is difficult to know if the other foreign Salafis faced similar distrust. On the surface, all of Rida’s disciples appear to have kept good relationships with the political and religious establishment of Saudi Arabia, even if some did not settle there permanently. Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar stayed from 1926 to 1931, went back to teaching in Damascus and Beirut, but returned to the Hijaz in 1944 for three years to head Dar al-Tawhid, which opened in late 1944 in Taʾif and whose main purpose was to train

\textsuperscript{161} Anonymous, 25.
\textsuperscript{162} al-Hilali, \textit{Diwan}, 153.
the qādis and other religious specialists that Saudi Arabia needed. As for Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi, he stayed in the Hijaz for only three consecutive years, but his intellectual production remained so permeated with signs of Wahhabism that it hardly resembled that of Rida, either in terms of substance or originality. al-Fiqi came to specialize in a specific genre of literature, that is, the commented re-editions (tahqīq wa taʿlīq) of classical Wahhabi and Hanbali texts—a task for which ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza sometimes helped him. Other than that, the only major work he authored was a straightforward praise for Wahhabism and the historical achievements of the Saudi family.

Rashid Rida too had published his share of commented re-editions and apologetic works. It would therefore be unfair to declare, without further ado, that the work of al-Fiqi was ipso facto antithetical to Islamic modernism. But there was an important detail that distinguished al-Fiqi from Rida: he focused almost exclusively on religious purism. While Rida may have encouraged purism in matters of creed, he remained a modernist in terms of politics, ethics, and legal reform. His Wahhabi-inspired pupils, however, came to disregard the modernist part of this equation. On the whole, they gradually lost sight of their mentor’s higher objectives and broad socio-political reform program. Abu al-Samh, among others, wrote very little original material and limited his role to teaching proper creed and rituals. Soon after Rida’s death, he did publish an ode in his honor and praised

his late mentor as a Salafi independent thinker (*mustaqill al-fikr*). He also mentioned *Wahy al-muhammadi*, Rida’s modernist-oriented book, as a source of guidance. Yet, Abu al-Samh himself seems to have had no reformist ambition other than purifying Islam from all its past accretions. Over the years, he came across as a loyal Saudi employee rather than a significant modernist thinker. He is mostly remembered for his loud and melodic voice as well as his oratory talents as a preacher.

As long as Rida was alive, the Salafiyya appeared to have a certain unity of purpose or, at least, a common direction. Some Salafis were, of course, more modernist or more puristic than others, just as some were more concerned with politics, or education, than others. But although different Salafis emphasized different aspects of the broad reformist project, they could all coexist and coalesce under the leadership of Rida, who channeled all these tendencies through *al-Manar* and his personal involvement in public affairs. In a sense, Rida’s death hastened the fragmentation of the Salafiyya. From 1935 onward, each tendency distanced itself from the others and moved toward, or meandered between, different ideal types—secularism, Islamism, and purism. In due course, all the disciples whom Rida had sent to Arabia drifted toward religious purism, though the transition did not necessarily happen overnight. al-Hilali, for instance, was not yet ready to jettison Islamic modernism by 1930 and, as the next chapters will show, it took him several more decades to become a full-fledged puristic Salafi.

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166 *Umm al-Qura*, September 13, 1935, 4.
At the same time, it should be underlined that Rida’s pupils all seem to have emphasized religious purism before they even left for the Hijaz in 1926 and 1927. al-Hilali’s priority was to learn hadiths and spread them, not to emancipate Moroccans or Egyptians from colonial rule. The purpose of Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya, the society that al-Fiqi founded prior to his departure for Mecca, was to spread a puristic form of Islam cleansed of all innovations and misinterpretations. Abu al-Samh, once in the Hijaz, reprinted in al-Islah some of the puristic tracts he had already written in Alexandria a few years before. In sum, the transfer of Rida’s pupils to Arabia did not change their worldview altogether. Instead, it strengthened their prior inclination toward purism and further separated them from the other, progressive side of the Salafiyya.

As time rolled by, disappointments about the state of the umma may have accelerated this process. Not only had the restoration of the caliphate failed, the consolidation of Saudi Arabia proved that its politics were driven by pragmatic considerations of power and were often no different from that of other Arab states. In such a context, the old reformist agenda seemed increasingly outdated and one can understand why some of Rida’s pro-Saudi students became oblivious to the grand ambitions of their predecessors and contented themselves with the status of palace ‘ulama’ in Mecca, Medina, or Riyadh. The ossification of their thought mirrored a growing sense of apathy toward the progressive dreams of the modernist Salafiyya.

Others members of Rida’s entourage, like al-Hilali, chose instead to distance themselves

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168 Dawud, 184-185.
from Saudi Arabia and pursue what was left of their reformist dreams elsewhere. Yet, their intellectual production would henceforth remain deeply influenced by the rehabilitation of Wahhabism.

Conclusion

Through his uncompromising support to Wahhabism, Rashid Rida played a key role in the evolution of the Salafiyya toward purism. To be sure, other Salafis had already defended Wahhabism before him, but no one had, until then, benefited from the wide readership and influence that allowed Rida to organize a major rehabilitation campaign on an unprecedented scale. This is not to say that Rida was a Wahhabi. Whereas his views on creed, intercession, visitation of tombs, and other specific theological issues corresponded with those of the Wahhabis, Rida’s efforts to assert the relative compatibility between Islam and the Enlightenment clashed with the Najdis’ religious ethos. In several instances, his writings show that the obscurantist and rigorist attitude of some Wahhabis perplexed him.

Rida nonetheless continued to defend Wahhabism and the Wahhabis until his death for two basic reasons. On the one hand, due to the vagaries of Middle Eastern history and the growing concern for the preservation of a strong and united umma in the face of European encroachment, he viewed the emerging Saudi state as a successor to the Ottoman Empire. The new polity was rooted in staunch Islamic principles and was free from colonial occupation; it could thus lead the renaissance of the umma, muster the support of all Muslims worldwide, and prove secularist reformers wrong. On the other
hand, Rida determined to support Wahhabism despite its shortcomings, because, above all, he admired Ibn Saʿud. He saw the latter as the epitome of successful Islamic leadership in the twentieth century. Religiously conservative, though pragmatic and reasonable, Ibn Saʿud was the perfect statesman to implement Rida’s conception of Islamic modernism from the top down or, put differently, to become the political arm of the Salafiyya. Following the abolition of the caliphate and Sharif Husayn’s self-appropriation of this office, Rida made the Saudi leader his foremost protégé and this privileged relationship does not seem to have ever faltered. In fact, Rida was coming back from a meeting with the future king, prince Saʿud ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAziz, when he passed away in the Egyptian city of Suez in August 1935.¹⁷⁰

The rehabilitation of Wahhabism was not strictly journalistic or academic, nor was it confined to changing the perceptions of the Muslim populations outside of Arabia. On the contrary, because Rida doubted the Wahhabis’ capacity to implement Islamic modernism and guarantee the religious legitimacy of the Saudi conquests, he took some concrete steps to assist them in the Hijaz. He wholeheartedly recommended several of his own students to Ibn Saʿud and dispatched them to Mecca and Medina. All of them, including Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, were quickly hired and given key positions in the educational and religious system of the Hijaz, that is, the most cosmopolitan area of the country, where pilgrims and students from all over the Muslim world converged each year. Rida’s pupils directly enhanced the Wahhabis’ reputation in the eyes of both local

Hijazis and foreigners, and lent them enough credibility to facilitate the introduction of puristic measures in Mecca and Medina. Meanwhile, Rida’s disciples also tried to bring the Wahhabis, the local Hijazis and the foreign pilgrims in tune with some of the precepts of Islamic modernism.

As it turned out, these Salafis were themselves influenced by the puristic ethos of their hosts. They departed from Rida’s grand socio-political agenda and contributed to the convergence between Wahhabism and the Salafiyya. As a result, the latter term gradually lost its modernist and progressive dimensions and took on a more puristic meaning. Wahhabi-inspired Salafis continued to promote technological modernity and scientific knowledge, but many limited themselves to the puristic endeavor of uncovering and rectifying heresies. From the late 1920s onward, a Muslim who openly raised objections regarding the religious excellence of the Wahhabis (as Muhammad ʿAbduh had done) could hardly be considered a Salafi. On the whole, Rida’s rehabilitation campaign was successful enough to allow the Saudi leadership and its Wahhabi establishment to lay claim over the label “Salafiyya.” Thus, the Salafiyya did not disappear from the Arab East after 1940, nor did it simply mutate into Islamism. Rida’s most puristic and piety-minded followers, as well as the Wahhabis to whom they were close, preserved the Salafiyya in a more puristic and apolitical form and emphasized it more systematically than Hasan al-Banna and his epigones ever did.
Chapter Four

The Struggle For Cohesion I:

Religious Standardization and Conformism

From the 1930s onward, an even higher sense of disillusion and emergency afflicted the modernist Salafis who had hoped to see the young Saudi state play the role of post-Ottoman, post-caliphate defender of Muslim unity and progress. Over time, it became obvious that the Saudis were concerned primarily with their own dynastic interests rather than the higher interests of the Muslim community as a whole. In 1934, for example, the Saudi family chose to go to war with Yemen over a territorial dispute in Asir instead of promoting Muslim unity and independence vis-à-vis Western colonial powers. Not only did the conflict involve two of the few Muslim countries that were still independent; it provided Britain and Italy with a pretext for landing detachments in the Arabian Peninsula and seeking involvement in Yemeni affairs.1 This was precisely the kind of intra-Muslim rivalry that the Salafis had tried to prevent. Although leading Salafi figures were instrumental in negotiating a Saudi-Yemeni treaty and reconciling Ibn Saʿud and Imam Yahya, the conflict had dealt a severe blow to Rashid Rida’s design. Clearly, Saudi Arabia would not always align its policies with the goals of the modernist Salafiyya, nor could it be trusted to bring the umma together and oppose foreign

intrusions. Salafi reformers would have to find other ways of ensuring the cohesion of the Muslim community and the revivification of Islam.

The transformation of the modernist Salafiyya in the mid-twentieth century reflects this context of acute tribulations. Although the intellectual and political challenges of that period were already noticeable in the 1920s, they had become even more pressing by the next decade. The Muslim reformers who continued to gravitate around Rashid Rida (d. 1935) and survived him not only saw the failure to revive the caliphate, they also witnessed the growth of secular nationalism within their own societies; Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1936; the increasing tensions in Palestine; the upheavals caused by the Second World War and its aftermath, and several other trying events. Due to the resilience of European colonialism, the strength and unity of the Muslim community seemed to be regressing.

These new and often worse conditions called for different responses. For some younger activists, the ideas and strategy of the old Salafiyya movement were no longer sufficient to address the cultural and political threats of the time. While Islamic welfare societies, Free Schools, and projects of Islamic theological and legal reform came to be viewed as too passive, a militant ideological alternative—Islamism—gained momentum from the 1928 onward. To be sure, Hasan al-Banna (d. 1949) was inspired by the Salafiyya and, to a certain extent, claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood conveyed a Salafi message; but his mass organization was so unprecedented that its congruence with
the modernist Salafiyya quickly became ambiguous. Over time, the Brotherhood’s political activism, its large-scale indoctrination and implementation of a complex organizational structure tended to overshadow issues of religious reformism per se. As the late Richard Mitchell put it, al-Banna’s movement clearly preferred deeds to ideas.

Because they often lacked solid institutional structures of their own, most Salafis hardly had the means of responding to the umma’s latest challenges in a drastically new fashion. On the whole, they pursued their struggle as writers, preachers and teachers, as they had done for many years. Yet the Salafiyya did not disappear: it remained an identifiable religious and intellectual orientation in its own right. Its activists continued to advocate their own conception of a third way between secular modernity and traditional Islam, which did not always coincide with the Islamists’ theological views.


4 Mitchell, 326.


6 Hasan al-Banna’s theological views, for instance, were technically too lenient to measure to the Salafi standards of the 1930s. In his efforts to de-emphasize religious discord and ensure the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, al-Banna paid tribute to the pious ancestors (the salaf), but did not oppose their successors (the khilaf). See Henri Laoust, *Les schismes dans l’islam: introduction à une étude de la religion musulmane* (Paris: Payot, 1965), 377-378.
Nevertheless, they reassessed some of their prior strategies. The Salafis who belonged to the inner circles of Rida’s *al-Manar* and Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib’s *al-Fath*, for instance, tried to adapt their discourse to the context of the mid-twentieth century.

First, they continued to denounce Western Powers and their colonial politics, but did so with a stronger emphasis on the global dimension of the problem. Faithful to their pan-Islamist heritage (and in keeping with the transnational character of their religious orientation), many Salafis still dreamt of an Islamic bloc, that is, a political-cum-religious united Muslim front capable of pursuing the anti-colonial struggle without regard for artificial political boundaries. European colonialism played a critical part in the development and intensification of this transnational worldview, for it kept reinforcing the quest for Muslim unity even when the dream of an Islamic bloc failed to convert into reality. Plus, because so many parts of the Muslim world experienced relatively similar frustrations under British, French, Dutch or Italian rule, colonialism brought Muslims from various regions closer together on a symbolic—or imaginary—level. The awareness of Muslim interconnectedness across borders, which had grown steadily for several decades, was now reaching a new high point.

Second, these Salafi activists relentlessly targeted the groups and individuals within the *umma* that they held responsible for hindering Islamic integration in the first place. Chief among their *bêtes noires* were the allegedly misguided traditional Muslims whose detrimental influence was supposed to keep the population ignorant, gullible, weak, divided, and ultimately unable to challenge the colonial status quo. To oppose
them, many Salafis advocated religious standardization, which they carried out mainly through missionary activities and print media. The promotion of religious standardization was often as challenging as the quest for Muslim political unity, of which it was a corollary. Unable to rely solely on Saudi Arabia to transcend the political divisions that existed within the umma, prominent Salafis set out to foster cohesion in the religious sphere, over which they exercised more control. They were not alone in succumbing to the temptation of Islamic conformism: many of the anti-colonial activists who were well disposed toward Islam also believed that a minimum of religious unity would strengthen the struggle against Western encroachment. Although this was not an entirely new conviction, the cumulative effects of colonialism over time exacerbated it.

How exactly did these factors affect the Salafiyya? How did they further the changes that had already started to occur by the time of the campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism? In this chapter, I argue that the resilience of Western colonialism unleashed globalizing forces which influential Salafis sought to exploit in order to promote a generic and standardized Muslim identity. This was another attempt at overcoming internal divisions and the lethargic state of the Muslim community in the modern era. In that sense, the Salafis’ ultimate goal remained congruent with their old progressive ideal of improving the umma and allowing it to reach its full potential. However, these noble intentions further alienated the Salafis from their modernist ethos. Because the process of religious standardization often built on scripturalist, literalistic
and anti-syncretistic premises, it contributed to bringing the puristic aspects of the Salafiyya to the fore.

This process could not have occurred without the contribution of individuals who framed a globalizing discourse, made it available, and acted as intermediaries between various groups and individuals from different parts of the Muslim world. Those who most systematically undertook these tasks were self-proclaimed Salafi scholars and activists. al-Hilali was one of them. Between 1930 and 1957, he visited no less than thirteen countries on three different continents, and everywhere he could he invited Muslims to focus on their Islamic identity as a means of defeating both the obvious and subtle faces of imperialism. For him, Salafi Islam alone could provide Muslims from all over the world with the strength, guidance and divine providence they needed to finally regain their freedom and grandeur. This chapter examines in greater details the significance of religious standardization and treats al-Hilali’s role in promoting it.

The Appeal of Islamic Conformism

While the dismantling of the Ottoman state structure transformed the Middle East and preoccupied many in the Muslim world, the Salafis did not despair of preserving the elite’s allegiance to Islamic causes. By 1930, however, their hopes were fading. One of the events that best encapsulated the lack of cohesion among Muslim notables at the time was the General Islamic Congress held in Jerusalem in 1931. From the onset, its organizers, some of whom were Salafis, faced considerable difficulties and opposition in trying to define an acceptable agenda. They also struggled to convince Muslim political
leaders to attend the event. Ibn Saʿud, for instance, declined the invitation for fear of getting involved in discussions that would prejudice Saudi interests. When the Congress finally convened in December, agreements proved virtually impossible to reach, even when the issues under discussion appeared a priori uncontroversial.

Interestingly, one of these issues was religious standardization. Because the Congress promoted the reinforcement of a common Islamic identity, its Draft Organic Law recommended the establishment of a modern and international Islamic University in Palestine “[…] to create conformity in Moslem culture.” Yet, it was easier to call for Islamic conformity than to agree on the actual religious standards with which all Muslims would have to comply. When Rashid Rida presented a series of recommendations as chair of the Subcommittee for Religious Propagation and Guidance, other delegates reportedly opposed his report on the ground that it was Wahhabi-inspired. Evidently, the longing for unity and the synergy that existed among Sunni activists had not dissipated lingering religious disagreements. Judging from the Congress’ Draft Organic Law, it seems that a number of delegates did support, in principle, the promotion of a uniform Islam devoid of divisive attributes. But Rida’s increasingly puristic definition of Salafi Islam aroused too many suspicions to serve as a religious paradigm.

In a sense, the outcome of the General Islamic Congress of Jerusalem brought to light the limits of the campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism. While Rashid Rida

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9 Nafi, 266.
and his followers had enhanced Saudi legitimacy in the Hijaz, shed a favorable light on the Wahhabis and contributed to “the taming of Wahhabi zeal,” as historian David Commins put it, they had not been able to convince the entire Sunni elite that Wahhabism was nothing but true Islam, or that it was fully compatible with Islamic modernism. As we have seen in the last chapter, some Muslims either refused to abandon their traditional interpretation of Islam or felt uncomfortable with the puristic ethos that was building momentum. Rida’s efforts to conflate the modernist Salafiyya with Wahhabism had not gained instant acceptance from the reform-minded Muslims who sensed a contradiction in terms. Indeed, one wonders how the francophone audience of Shakib Arslan (d. 1946) reacted when he wrote in *La Nation arabe* that the doctrine of Rashid Rida and *al-Manar* was: “[…] a true Wahhabism, but enlightened and moderate.” Given the reaction of the delegates at the General Islamic Congress of Jerusalem, it appears that many Muslim notables could not easily make sense of, or buy into, such a discourse. They were ready to tolerate the Wahhabis and their presence in Mecca and Medina, but remained unwilling to fully embrace some of the religious beliefs that Rida harbored during the last years of his life. In other words, the rehabilitation of Wahhabism had been successful insofar as it contributed to normalize the status of the Wahhabis who now supervised the holy cities, but it had not turned all the readers of *al-Manar* into enthusiastic supporters of Wahhabism. Nor had it fully convinced them that the Salafiyya ought to be an “enlightened Wahhabism.”

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Rida nonetheless believed that his understanding of Salafi Islam deserved to become a benchmark for modern Muslims everywhere. He therefore defended the soundness of the recommendations he made in 1931 to the General Islamic Congress in Jerusalem. At a time of heightened fragmentation within the Muslim community, there was indeed something appealing about a puristic ethos that lent itself well to religious standardization. The idea of a unique and generic Islam, as well as the condemnation of religious diversity, could serve as powerful engines of global Islamic conformism. ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza (d. 1972), one of Rida’s disciples in Saudi Arabia, provides a good example of how Salafis linked a puristic conception of Islam with Muslim uniformity and unity. In a text written around the year 1932, Hamza outlined early Islamic history in the following terms:

[…] God’s religion spread to all cardinal points and covered the entire world, east and west, from the borders of China to the shore of the Atlantic Ocean, and south and north, from southern India to the Caucasus, at an outstanding speed never seen in ancient or modern history. Even some Western scholars considered this a miracle. Then peoples with various languages and ideas converted to Islam; they [knew] the civilizations, religions and philosophies of Persia, Byzantium, India, and China. Therefore, illuminative philosophy deriving from Greek or Persian [neo-?] Platonism spread under the guise of Sufism and spirituality. Aristotelian philosophy also circulated in the garb of speculative theology (kalām), logic, wisdom, and religious debates. [This led to] the emergence, within the population, of creeds that differed from the Qurʾān and the Sunna and contradicted what the prophet, his companions and their best followers clearly transmitted.

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12 al-Manar, 32 (1932), 284-292.
13 Muhammad ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza, “Taqdim” in Ahmad ibn ʿAbd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyya, al-Fatwa al-hamawiyya al-kubra (Cairo: Matbaʿat al-Madani, 1983), 3. It can be deduced that this introduction was written around 1932 because of internal evidence. On pages 6 and 7, Hamza mentions that the book was then in its fourth printing (whose corresponding year of publication was 1932) and expresses his
Hamza then explained that theological divisions were conducive to political divisions. To illustrate his point, he referred to the civil war (fitna) that took place under the caliphate of ʿAli ibn Abi Talib. Although Hamza did not extend the chronological scope of his argument, his readers could not have failed to make the connection with the colonial context and the state of the umma in the early 1930s.

What is interesting about this text, therefore, is not so much the fact that it bemoans the loss of original Islamic unity. Rather, it is the underlying assumption that pristine Islam was monolithic, and that any solution to both religious disparity and political fragmentation required a return to this unique and pure creed. This line of thought thus rejected Islamic ecumenism as a means of regaining strength and unity. Also interesting is the fact that Hamza linked his argument to the work of Ibn Taymiyya, as though the views of the latter validated the views of the former.\(^\text{14}\) Indeed, Hamza wrote these lines as an introduction to Ibn Taymiyya’s *al-Fatwa al-hamawiyya al-kubra*, in which the medieval scholar strongly condemns allegorical interpretations of divine attributes (*taʿwīl ṣifāt Allah*) and criticizes innovative Muslims who, under the influence of foreign cultures and religions, pondered undue theological questions that the pious ancestors had never asked.\(^\text{15}\) By reissuing this fatwa in the early 1930s and presenting Ibn Taymiyya’s position on divine attributes as a remedy to religious and political disunity in

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\(^{14}\) This is, however, a debatable assumption. Both politically and religiously, Ibn Taymiyya was at times more flexible than Hamza suggests. On his religious tolerance, see George Makdisi, *L’islam hanbalisant* (Paris: Geuthner, 1983), 58, 63-67. On his position regarding political division, see Henri Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taki-d-Din Ahmad b. Taimiya* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1939), 259.

\(^{15}\) Ibn Taymiyya, 11-20.
general, ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza was making the case for Islamic conformism along puristic lines. His implicit argument was that all Muslims could still form a single community from the borders of China to the shore of the Atlantic Ocean if only they abandoned theological innovations and abided by the only true creed, namely, that of the salaf.

It was not Hamza’s deference to Ibn Taymiyya that signified a change in the Salafi ethos, but rather the specific way in which he understood and made use of the medieval scholar’s work. For decades, Ibn Taymiyya had been a favorite of Islamic modernists, who saw in him a model mujtahid (someone engaging in ijtihād) whose scholarship both justified and nurtured their reformist agenda. Earlier in the twentieth century, modernist Salafis often found Ibn Taymiyya’s methodology and fecund intellect more stimulating than his theological views per se. In 1906, for instance, Rashid Rida had no problem praising Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) along with Ibn Taymiyya while inviting all Muslims to take them both as religious guides.16 The important theological and epistemological differences that existed between these two medieval figures—especially with respect to Sufism and fiqh—were in large measure irrelevant. Both men had endorsed reform and renewal in their own times, though in different ways, and this is what mattered most to Rida in the early twentieth century. Above all, Ibn Taymiyya was

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an authoritative and independent religious intellectual from whom Rida could draw inspiration to devise and implement reforms, especially in matters of law.¹⁷

By 1930, however, mentioning of al-Ghazali in *al-Manar* had clearly decreased. His gradual demise in the eyes of the Salafis was symptomatic of the turn to religious purism. The campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism, as well as the rationale behind it, also contributed to the Salafis’ change of heart. As for Ibn Taymiyya, he retained his elevated status, but now lent force to a more puristic agenda that went beyond the call for *ijtihād*. As Hamza’s text indicates, the Salafis who set a high value on religious standardization found in the works of Ibn Taymiyya (and other scholars with strict theological views) arguments whereby they could pressure fellow Muslims into conforming to one purified and standardized Islam. Hanbali theology gradually ceased to serve as the religious anchor of Salafi reformism and became one of its primary features. The idea of a true original Islam, which knew no subdivisions and virtually no diversity, encouraged many Salafis to call for unity by actively propagating a puristic theology. The

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¹⁷ For an insightful analysis of Rida’s expedient understanding of prior Islamic scholarship, see Ahmad Dallal, “Appropriating the Past: Twentieth-Century Reconstruction of Pre-Modern Islamic Thought,” *Islamic Law and Society*, 7, 3 (2000), 325-358. Although the article focuses on Rida’s understanding of Muhammad al-Shawkani (d. 1834), the key notions of “appropriation” and “reconstruction” that Dallal uses remind us that the Islamic scholarly heritage can be read in various ways, and that the towering figures of Islamic thought are never one-dimensional. There is nonetheless a tendency today among scholars and journalists alike to assume that Ibn Taymiyya is the utmost embodiment of Islamic extremism at large. One perplexing example is Natana Delong-Bas’ recent attempt at demonstrating that Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab was a moderate and proto-modernist scholar because, among other reasons, he did not cite or mention Ibn Taymiyya very often in his work. Not only is Delong-Bas’ reasoning highly debatable, she also attempts to fight one assumption by means of another. She uncritically assumes that any borrowing from Ibn Taymiyya, or any citation of him, is inherently suspicious. If that were the case, most Islamic modernists of the early twentieth century would ipso facto become guilty of potential extremism. See Natana Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21, 53,108-109, 200, 247-256.
case for a Salafi approach to Islamic law that would circumvent rather than reconcile the traditional madhāhib was also gaining ground.

These were significant changes. As we shall see, the ecumenical call for Islamic solidarity, which was typical of the early twentieth-century Salafiyya, was now being replaced by a call for Islamic conformism based on peremptory assertions of a unique truth. Contextual considerations led modernist Salafis to further disregard the possibility of promoting a cordial solution to the problem of Islamic diversity. At the very beginning of the century, Rashid Rida had attempted to overcome the umma’s lack of unity by supporting a rapprochement between its existing theological branches—Wahhabis, Ashʿaris, Maturidis, Shiʿis, and ‘Ibadis—none of which he condemned outright. As we have seen, his attitude changed a few years later, especially after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the advent of European Mandates, the abolition of the caliphate and the rise of Ibn Saʿud in Arabia. With the resilience of Western colonialism in the mid-twentieth century, many Salafis followed suit and adopted a more confrontational attitude toward their non-Salafi coreligionists. Tolerance was not the cornerstone of their quest for Islamic conformism. Rather, their objective called for the elimination of the most blatant signs of diversity within the community, which they presented as innovations that weakened the umma.

As a result, the Salafis’ call for Islamic conformism sometimes lapsed into religious intimidation and harassment. Persuaded that their beliefs were the most

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18 al-Manar, 8 (1905): 5.
19 For geographical and contextual reasons, this development had a lesser impact on Salafi networks in North Africa. It was more obvious in the Arab East.
orthodox and that their cause was noble, the Salafis were willing, when necessary, to
initiate intra-Islamic polemics in order to counter the traditional Muslims they deemed
responsible for preventing Islamic unity and conformity in the first place. Time and
again, al-Hilali accused his various religious adversaries of causing dissension (fitna) by
clinging to a particular interpretation of Islam and by refusing to accept the Salafiyya. His
adversaries, for their part, claimed that his accusations were in fact the real source of
dissension.

Missionary Work and the Salafi Movement

Calling people to Islam (daʿwa) is, without a doubt, the activity that occupied
most of al-Hilali’s time throughout his life. It was in 1922, when he was in Egypt, that he
became aware of the importance of sharing his newfound religious convictions. As a
traveler, he quickly realized that proselytism must neither account for distance nor
boundaries. In due course, his numerous trips and contacts all over the Muslim world
allowed him to become an active agent of religious globalization.

In 1922, however, al-Hilali was inexperienced and did not know how to spread
the Salafiyya. At first, he considered deception as a means of converting fellow Muslims.
To a group of Moroccan Tijanis who supported him financially and hosted him in
Alexandria, he pretended that he was still a Sufi, thinking that a noble lie would provide
him with better opportunities to spread his message. But it did not take long before he
understood that the moral duty of a Salafi was to be true to his own beliefs: “I made the
decision not to cheat, nor to act like a hypocrite when it comes to God’s religion, for as
long as I live. Rather, I [chose] to tell the truth right away, for the better or the worse.\textsuperscript{20}

By choosing integrity over subterfuge, he lost the favor of his Tijani benefactors.

Short of income, al-Hilali reached a dead end. His projects were brought to a standstill until someone advised him to head south to preach to the fellahs of Upper Egypt, where he would gain some respect and money. This proved to be his first real experience as a Salafi missionary. Once in the city of Mallawi, near Asyut, he met a local Salafi named ‘Abd al-Zahir al-Rirmuni who preached in a nearby village. al-Hilali accepted to join him and began visiting the peasants of that community with the purpose of teaching them Salafi Islam.\textsuperscript{21} This endeavor entailed greater challenges than expected. On the one hand, the few villagers who had already embraced Salafi orthodoxy and orthopraxy were in a precarious position. According to al-Hilali, they were struggling against inimical Sufis who commended much authority within the rest of the population. On the other hand, al-Hilali became victim of his sudden popularity. By managing to attract significant crowds of fellahs to his lessons, he stirred a level of envy and resentment that was proportional to his own success. Even al-Rirmuni, whose ego was hurt, turned his back on him. In short, al-Hilali quickly felt surrounded by older, more powerful and intimidating rivals who were either opposed to the Salafiyya or half-heartedly devoted to it.\textsuperscript{22}

In an attempt to humble the Moroccan Salafi and prevent him from gaining influence, the village’s mayor and a prominent Sufi shaykh invited a professor from al-
Azhar to confront him. Pressured by the local elite, al-Hilali had no choice but to participate in a public debate with the prestigious visitor from Cairo. We do not know exactly what the debate was about; we can only surmise that it dealt with Sufism and revolved around issues of *tawḥīd*. In any case, al-Hilali alleges that he dominated the discussion and managed, in less than half an hour, to prove the orthodoxy of his beliefs and to triumph over the renowned but bedazzled professor. It is impossible to prove whether al-Hilali embellished the story or not. What is clear, however, is that he presented the event as the resounding victory of a modest Salafi over the traditional and powerful religious establishment of Egypt, which al-Azhar symbolized. Evidently, this prowess boosted his popularity and self-confidence. When a delegation from another village requested his services, al-Hilali accepted to visit them and claims to have converted half of the population to the Salafiyya within eight days.\(^{23}\)

Despite the mythical tone of al-Hilali’s autobiographical accounts, there is no doubt that his debut as a Salafi proselyte bore fruits. Though he did not stay in Upper Egypt for very long, many of the inhabitants to whom he preached remained Salafis after his departure. In early 1927, al-Hilali returned briefly to the region and was pleased to notice that an even greater number of villagers had abandoned Sufism and begun abiding by the Sunna. al-Hilali rejoiced when one Salafi convert told him how he successfully defended the community’s adherence to true Islam in the face of an inspector from the Egyptian Ministry of Religious Endowments, who had been dispatched to the village to

investigate rumors of religious irregularities and to recommend corrective measures.\textsuperscript{24} al-Hilali’s second visit to Upper Egypt seems to have been his last, but he never lost contact with his former flock. They were now part of a broad transnational Salafi network and al-Hilali kept underlining their integration, all the way to the 1940s, by writing articles about his south Egyptian brothers in Salafi journals.\textsuperscript{25}

Thus, al-Hilali rapidly took on the role of globetrotter Salafi missionary. His stay in Upper Egypt, plus the three years he spent in Mecca and Medina to assist and guide the Wahhabis, were only the first episodes of his international \textit{daʿwa}. The experiences that truly shaped his reputation as a successful and significant proselyte took place after 1930, that is, after his departure from the Saudi state. In all of his subsequent destinations, al-Hilali pursued the same goal: to implement the Salafiyya and undermine the potency of any discourse or belief that contradicted it. He strove to erase all local religious particularities and to replace them with a unique Salafi Islam that would be identical from one region of the Muslim world to another.

Such global proselytism was a typically Salafi endeavor. When al-Hilali traveled to preach proper religious norms and beliefs, he was fulfilling a task that Rashid Rida had long considered essential for revitalizing the \textit{umma}. As early as the late nineteenth century, when Rida encountered Christian missionary schools in Lebanon, he had deemed it necessary to establish an institution that would train young Salafī to respond to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, 27.
\item \textsuperscript{25} For example, see the long obituary he wrote when a prominent member of the Salafi community of Upper Egypt passed away. Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, “Musab alim bi-wifat akh karim,” \textit{Lisan al-Din}, 1, 8-9 (March-April 1947): 85-87.
\end{itemize}
this challenge. The idea was also dear to Muhammad ʿAbduh. It became a reality in 1912 with the official opening of Dar al-Daʿwa wa-l-Irshad in Cairo, of which Rida was the founder and director. The project proceeded from the awareness that Islam was endangered by Western intrusions in many countries.

Although al-Hilali never attended the short-lived Dar al-Daʿwa wa-l-Irshad, he he came to embody the type of missionary that Rida had wished to foster. In his school, the latter intended to train young and committed Muslims who would know European and oriental languages (other than Arabic), modern sciences, logic, as well as exoteric religious sciences; they would then be dispatched all over the world to defend Islam, reform it, and perhaps even convert pagans and Christians alike from America to China. Dar al-Daʿwa wa-l-Irshad was originally conceived as the spearhead of a global mission to spread a modernist and ecumenical Salafi Islam. Rida had specified that any student who displayed signs of madhhabiyya (exclusive allegiance to an Islamic school of law), ʿaṣabiyya (group feeling, or sense of belonging to anything other than Islam) or jinsiyya (citizenship, or allegiance to a particular state), would be expelled from the school. At the time, however, Rida did not aim at imposing a standardized Islam. He was still willing to accommodate sharīʿa-abiding Sufism and insisted on the need for Muslims to respect differences and forgive one another, as the pious ancestors had done.

27 al-Salman, 449-450.
28 Ibid., 455-461.
29 al-Manar, 14 (1911): 806-809.
However, Dar al-Da‘wa wa-l-Irshad promised more than it delivered. The school had had financial difficulties from the onset and closed in 1914, two years after its opening. Rida had trouble finding private investors: at the time, his project generated virtually no political interest among the rulers in Cairo, Istanbul, and Riyadh.\textsuperscript{30} Evidently, they did not feel the need for such an institution in the mid-1910s, nor did they think they could reap much political benefit from supporting it. The time was not yet ripe for a missionary school. But in the following decades, the objectives of Dar al-Da‘wa wa-l-Irshad appeared more critical and justified than ever before. Though the school never reopened, Salafis like al-Hilali set out to accomplish—though with a puristic tinge—the same kind of global mission that Rida had imagined years before.

Let us now return to al-Hilali’s journey and examine how he promoted a standardized Salafi Islam in India, Afghanistan, and Iraq. More often than not, missionary work entailed heavy sacrifices that took their toll on al-Hilali’s financial well-being, health and peace of mind. Proselytism, he wrote, was a constant trial that reflected his degree of faith, patience and endurance.\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{India: Salafi Integration and the Question of Languages}

Considering the unfortunate circumstances under which al-Hilali left the Hijaz in 1930, it is plausible that he felt somewhat disoriented at the time. As mentioned in the previous chapter, his presence among the Wahhabis had been both rewarding and

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{al-Manar}, 35 (1940): 712.
\textsuperscript{31} al-Hilali, \textit{al-Da‘wa}, 8.
frustrating. Whereas al-Hilali had witnessed their unparalleled devotion to religious purity, he also coped with a perplexing display of ignorance, religious intransigence and political arbitrariness. In this mixture of fascination and disappointment, there are reasons to believe that negative impressions dominated al-Hilali’s memory of the Saudi state. It is worth recalling that in 1957, he declared to a Moroccan journalist that his stay in the Hijaz had not pleased him very much. His understanding of the Salafiyya was most certainly affected by his three-year experience in Arabia, but he did not want to remain in the highly puristic Wahhabi environment of the 1930s and would not content himself with a career in Mecca. al-Hilali want to move out of the Hijaz and guide other Muslims toward progress and unity.

For his next destination, al-Hilali hesitated between Indonesia and India. He had corresponded with scholars from both countries, but finally opted for colonial India. Professionally, it was a sensible choice because Sulayman al-Nadwi (d. 1953), then head of the Nadwat-ul Ulama in Lucknow, had invited him to teach in the department of Arabic at Dar al-ʿUlum. On a pragmatic level, colonial India was also the easiest choice, because al-Hilali was already familiar with the country. Indeed, he had already gone to India in 1923 following his year in Egypt. One must remember that al-Hilali’s primary objective in the wake of his conversion to the Salafiyya was to acquire religious sciences and, above all, the science of hadith. This was the reason behind his departure from Morocco in the first place. Unfortunately, he had been unable to find this

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33 al-Hilali, al-Daʿwa, 181.
knowledge in Egypt, as he had first expected. A scholar from al-Azhar reportedly shattered his hopes during a private conversation that took place in 1923 in Cairo. After estimating that al-Hilali already knew at least 300 hadiths by heart, the professor declared that none of the ʿulamaʾ who taught at al-Azhar knew more than twenty.34 Despite the exaggeration, al-Hilali trusted the man’s judgment and chose to go to India, where some of the most eminent specialists of hadith could be found.35

Despite meager financial resources and limited assistance, al-Hilali spent fifteen months in India between 1923 and 1924 and managed to study under several ʿulamaʾ who belonged to the Ahl-i Hadith movement.36 Upon his arrival in Delhi, he met Nawab Sadr al-Din, who ran a local madrasa. A rare Arabic speaker, Sadr al-Din first brought forward the question of languages. He explained to al-Hilali that the majority of Indian Muslims had such a poor command of Arabic that they had no choice but to rely on Urdu translations of the scriptures.37 He also told al-Hilali that he would need to learn this vernacular, or else the linguistic gap would drain his energy and prevent him from fully benefiting from his studies in India. To help the Moroccan Salafi overcome this hurdle, Sadr al-Din invited him to stay in his madrasa for a year, during which period al-Hilali could learn some Urdu while earning a salary by teaching Arabic. al-Hilali accepted the

36 Ibid., 187. For a brief presentation of the Ahl-i Hadith and a comparison with other trends of Islamic thought in India, see Barbara D. Metcalf, “Traditionalist Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis, and Talibs” in Islamic Contestations: Essays on Muslims in India and Pakistan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 265-284.
offer and taught Arabic literature and poetry for six months until classes recessed for Ramadan, as was customary in schools affiliated with the Ahl-i Hadith.\(^{38}\) As free time was precious, he decided to leave Delhi and embarked on a tour of various Indian cities to meet scholars and pursue his quest for religious knowledge. While this was supposed to be a momentary departure, al-Hilali eventually reassessed his priorities and never went back to Sadr al-Din’s madrasa.

An overview of al-Hilali’s itinerary and successive achievements reflects the extent of his motivation. In Lucknow, he met an older scholar of the Ahl-i Hadith named Husayn ibn Muhsin al-Ansari al-Yamani (d. 1925), under whose guidance he studied sections from all six canonical collections of hadiths. In Benares, he met ʿAbd al-Majid al-Hariri, a graduate of the very modernist Anglo-Oriental College of Aligarh, who offered him a teaching position and a higher pay; al-Hilali would later return to Benares and work for ʿAbd al-Majid for three months. In Mubarakpur, located in today’s state of Uttar Pradesh, he studied with ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri (d. 1935), a major figure of the Ahl-i Hadith movement and author of many works including a famous commentary on al-Tirmidhi’s collection of hadiths.\(^{39}\) al-Hilali held al-Mubarakpuri in such high esteem that he listed him as one of the six scholars who most influenced him.


throughout his life, along with Muhammad ibn al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi in Morocco, Rashid Rida in Egypt, and the prophet Muhammad himself.\textsuperscript{40}

Relentless, al-Hilali also visited scholars in Mau, wrote articles in Calcutta, and continued to study the science of hadith while a houseguest of the queen (begum) of Bhopal.\textsuperscript{41} He also stopped in the city of Lucknow, the institutional center of the Nadwat-ul Ulama, where he met Sulaḥman al-Nadwi for the first time.\textsuperscript{42}

\textbf{Arabic and the Nadwat-ul Ulama}

The Nadwat-ul Ulama had begun its activities in 1892 as an association of some thirty “ulama” who wished to reform Islamic education in British-ruled India while avoiding either excessive Westernization or religious conservatism. Its famous seminary, Dar al-ʿUlum, was founded six years later in Lucknow, where it remains, to this day, a major institution of Islamic higher learning. From the onset, the Nadwat-ul Ulama set goals that were fully compatible with those of the modernist Salafiyya in the Arab world. It aimed at introducing its pupils to notions of modern science such as history, geography and mathematics, but also attempted to overcome religious divisions within the Indian Muslim community. Hence, Dar al-ʿUlum was accessible to any Sunni student affiliated to any legal school.\textsuperscript{43} This similar approach to Islamic reformism had thus fostered

\textsuperscript{40} al-Majdhub, 191.
\textsuperscript{41} al-Hilali, \textit{al-Daw̱a}, 141-142.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Ibid.}, 145.
personal relationships between Nadwis and Arab Salafis. Shibli al-Nuʿmani (d. 1914), who preceded Sulayman al-Nadwi as head of the Nadwat-ul Ulama, had invited Rashid Rida to Lucknow in 1912; the latter accepted the offer and made the trip to meet his Indian homologue. Some scholars have even referred to Dar al-ʿUlum as a “Salafi school,” but it is unclear whether the seminary’s representatives ever used that label in the early twentieth century. In any case, its curriculum accorded with the objectives of the modernist Salafiyya, and al-Hilali was by no means the first Arab Salafi to have contacts with this Indian institution.

During his first visit in the 1920s, al-Hilali only spent a few days with Sulayman al-Nadwi and then continued his tour of India. But this brief encounter later proved helpful when he decided to leave Arabia and started looking for a new position. It was indeed at the personal invitation of Sulayman al-Nadwi that al-Hilali returned to the Indian subcontinent in 1930 to teach Arabic at Dar al-ʿUlum. This time, he settled down in Lucknow until the end of 1933. Overall, it is fair to say that his second stay in India was a defining experience, not only because he gained the recognition of his peers and established new contacts, but also because he developed skills that opened his mind to new horizons. Indeed, it was during that period that al-Hilali learned English and began to insist on the necessity for Muslims to master both Arabic and foreign languages.

Thereafter, multilingualism never ceased to play a major role in his intellectual life and to orient the nature of his religious work.

The revivification of Arabic was, of course, an important theme within the modernist Salafiyya. Because it was the linguistic key that gave access to the true meaning of the scriptures, modernist Salafis argued that no Islamic renaissance would ever occur without a reemphasis on classical Arabic (al-fuṣḥā). Some asserted that there was a direct causal link between the decline of classical Arabic and the general decline of the Muslim World since the Middle Ages.⁴⁶ al-Hilali held such views. For him, the Indian Muslims’ lack of familiarity with the language of revelation rendered them particularly gullible and prone to accept innovations and join heretical movements.⁴⁷ Moreover, al-Hilali was convinced that a vehicular language was better suited for the globalizing Muslim world than a series of local dialects. According to his own analysis ex post facto, the popularity of his lessons in cosmopolitan Mecca and Medina in the late 1920s was due to the fact that he delivered his lectures in classical Arabic. Whereas reputed teachers could barely get more than ten students to attend their lessons, al-Hilali’s classes attracted hundreds of them: “I did not understand the reason behind this, except that I was speaking a language which all Arabs from various regions could understand whereas the professors who critically lacked an audience all spoke in their own particular dialect.”⁴⁸

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⁴⁷ The movement he had in mind was the Ahmadiyya. See Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, Sabb al-Qadiyaniyyin li-islam wa tasmiyathi al-shajara al-mal’una wa jawabihim (Cairo: al-Matba’a al-Salafiyya, 1933), 5.
⁴⁸ al-Hilali, al-Da’wa, 180.
In 1930 in Lucknow, al-Hilali held on to the method that had proven successful in the Saudi state. There would be no dialectal Arabic and no Urdu in his classroom.

Many decades later, al-Hilali suggested that he drew inspiration from the German pedagogue Maximilian Berlitz (d. 1921) and his famous method for teaching modern languages in a lively manner, without ever using translations.\(^49\) To be sure, this unusual pedagogy raised concerns among senior members of the Nadwat-ul Ulama. Some of them demanded that al-Hilali be fired and replaced by a professor who would use Urdu in class. Although Sulayman al-Nadwi took the Moroccan Salafi’s defense, the protesting ʿulamaʾ gained the upper hand and dismissed al-Hilali. However, instead of moving out of Lucknow, al-Hilali decided to turn his own house into an Arabic school for children. The results were apparently so stunning that, four months later, skeptical members of the Nadwat-ul Ulama submitted al-Hilali’s pupils to an oral and written examination, only to realize that the children “[…] had learned more in four months [at al-Hilali’s house] than the older students had learned in fifteen years of translation.\(^50\) The ʿulamaʾ yielded, and al-Hilali returned to Dar al-ʿUlum.

In due course, Sulayman al-Nadwi suggested that al-Hilali establish an Arabic journal to provide his students with an opportunity to apply their newly-acquired linguistic skills. This project led to the publication of \textit{al-Diyaʾ}, which is regarded as “[…] the first Arabic periodical in India with some circulation.\(^51\)” Not unlike the journal \textit{al-}

\(^{49}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 181.
\(^{50}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 183.
\(^{51}\) Jan-Peter Hartung, “The Nadwat al-ʿUlamaʾ: Chief Patron of Madrasa Education in India and a Turntable to the Arab World” in \textit{Islamic Education, Diversity, and National Identity: Dini Madaris in...
*Islah*, which Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi had founded in Mecca in 1928, *al-Diya* became a channel through which the modernist Salafiyya could reach India. Published from 1932 to 1935, it discussed the ideals of the Salafiyya and encouraged Indian Muslims to transcend their territorial and cultural enclave and to embrace a reformist project that involved the entire umma.\(^{52}\) To increase the pan-Islamic visibility of the journal, al-Hilali sent copies of it to his mentor, Rashid Rida. As a result, the editorial to the first issue of *al-Diya* was reprinted and published in *al-Manar*.\(^{53}\)

**al-Hilali’s Impact on Two Famous Nadwis**

One of al-Hilali’s greatest legacies in India was that many of the students who attended his Arabic classes at Dar al-ʿUlum and wrote in *al-Diya* later became religious leaders whose influence crossed boundaries.\(^{54}\) The most renowned among them was Abu al-Hasan ʿAli al-Nadwi (d. 1999), the great activist and scholar who not only headed the Nadwat-ul Ulama after Sulayman al-Nadwi’s death in 1953, but also acquired fame through his numerous publications. He became well-known, among other reasons, for translating the work of Abu al-Aʿla al-Mawdudi (d. 1979) from Urdu into Arabic, thus acting as an intermediary who brought al-Mawdudi’s Islamist ideas to the Arab world in general, and to Sayyid Qutb in particular.\(^{55}\) al-Hilali never lost contact with this student;

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\(^{52}\) Hartung, 144.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.

\(^{54}\) al-Hilali, *al-Daʿwa*, 182.

the two men continued to correspond for many years and seem to have kept a cordial
and respectful relationship. Nevertheless, it is likely that they disagreed on a number of
religious issues. For all his success as a Muslim activist, Abu al-Hasan ʿAli al-Nadwi
embodied the paradox of the Salafi quest for religious standardization.

On the one hand, there is no doubt that al-Hilali was responsible for introducing
his Indian pupil to a transnational Salafi network and instilling in him an awareness of
global Islamic issues. In his memoirs, Abu al-Hasan recalled a trip to Damascus in 1951
during which he wanted to visit Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar, the Syrian-born Salafi and
foremost disciple of Rashid Rida: “I heard the name [al-Bitar] from our teacher Taqi al-
Din al-Hilali, and I came across it from time to time in scientific and religious journals. I
thus knew him as a strong Salafi scholar.” Because of al-Hilali, Abu al-Hasan explains,
he had followed the career of al-Bitar over the years and learned of his achievement. In
1951, Abu al-Hasan also traveled to Egypt and met Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib (d. 1969),
Rashid Rida’s greatest journalistic collaborator and emulator: “Our knowledge of [the
journal] al-Fath and his editor [al-Khatib] went back roughly twenty years and dated

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57 For example, al-Nadwi became a full-fledged supporter of the Tabligh movement whereas al-Hilali evolved into a puristic Salafi who condemned the very same group, which he accused of promoting religious innovations (bidʿ). See Abu al-Hasan al-Nadwi, al-Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥāfiz al-Kandhalawi muʿassis jamaʿat al-Tabligh: hayātuḥu wa ṣukruḥu, trans. Nur al-Munir al-ʿAmin (Rabat: Dar al-Qarafi li-
Nashr wa-l-Tawziʿ, 1994). Compare with Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, al-Siraj al-munir fi tanbih jamaʿat al-

from the days when we were the students of the great professor Taqi al-Din al-Hilali. 59

In the early 1930s, *al-Fath* was a distinguished and international Salafi journal that boasted columnists such as al-Hilali and Shakib Arslan. The journal and its reformist message had clearly struck Abu al-Hasan’s imagination. 60

On the other hand, Abu al-Hasan did not turn out to be a model Salafi who valued all of the religious standards set by al-Hilali and his colleagues. More specifically, he did not respond well to the peremptory religious standardization that some Arab Salafis promoted. A revealing example of Abu al-Hasan’s reservations appears in his memoirs. During his trip to Egypt, he met with yet another friend of his former Moroccan teacher, namely, Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi. Abu al-Hasan was hoping that al-Fiqi would introduce him to three other scholars: the famous Salafi judge Ahmad Muhammad Shakir (d. 1958), who had studied under Rashid Rida; ʿAbd al-Majid Salim (d. 1954), a former student of Muhammad ʿAbduh who was then rector of al-Azhar University; and Muhammad ibn Ibrahim Al al-Shaykh (d. 1969), the prominent Saudi qāḍī who was temporarily staying near Cairo. 61 Judging by the diversity of al-Fiqi’s contacts and connections, Abu al-Hasan may have expected to meet a lenient Salafi. But he rather found out that al-Fiqi was capable of condescending self-righteousness and sectarianism. One lecture that the latter delivered at the headquarters of his pietistic association—Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya—did not sit well with his Indian guest:

I did not like his tirade about the followers of the [various] schools of law (*ahl al-madhāhib*). It was an offensive, contemptuous and mocking speech. He referred to them as blind, deaf and dumb in this world and the next, and so forth. Such a speech does not befit a sincere reformist; it is repulsive and does not serve the interests of [our] religion. I wish [al-Fiqi] had displayed as much heart during his lecture as he displayed reason.

Although Abu al-Hasan was himself a product and an agent of Islamic globalization, he did not envision religious unity as a stringent campaign for conformism. As an activist who belonged to a Muslim minority in a country dominated by Hindus, he was more inclined toward an Islamic solidarity that strengthened the community without condemning its religious diversity. In 1943, he actually left the ranks of Mawdudi’s Islamist movement—the Jama‘at-i Islami—due in part to his disapproval of the criticism that some members of the organization aimed at other Muslims. Abu al-Hasan was a reformist of milder disposition. He never lost the respect of the Salafis, but he was much more sympathetic to Deobandis and Sufis, among others groups.

This more lenient attitude may explain why Taqi al-Din al-Hilali seems to have preferred another of his Indian students, namely, Mas‘ud Alam al-Nadwi (d. 1954). Close to the Pakistani Islamist movement, Mas‘ud became head of Dar al-‘Uruba, the branch of Mawdudi’s Jama‘at-i Islami that was located in the city of Rawalpindi. As its name indicates, this branch was devoted to spreading the Jama‘at’s message in Arabic

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rather than Urdu. When al-Hilali visited Masʿud al-Nadwi in Pakistan in 1951, the former proudly claimed that Dar al-ʿUruba was the fruit of his own work in northern India in the early 1930s. al-Hilali claimed responsibility for bringing the full benefits of Arabic to these erstwhile withered Muslims.65

In addition, al-Hilali was particularly proud of Masʿud al-Nadwi because the latter turned out to be a good Salafi. He had been a brilliant student of Arabic, and al-Hilali saw no flaw in him except for his fanatical devotion to the Hanafi school of law (which is still dominant in the Indian subcontinent). In the late 1940s, however, Masʿud recanted, abandoned Hanafi fiqh, and began following the Qurʾan and hadiths alone. al-Hilali seems to have played a pivotal role in this process.66 Masʿud later visited Saudi Arabia and developed a good rapport with some of the most prominent Wahhabi scholars.67 He even wrote a book in Urdu devoted to the rehabilitation of Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab. The Arabic translation of this book includes an introduction by al-Hilali, who initially brought the manuscript to the attention of shaykh ʿAbd al-ʿAziz ibn Baz in Saudi Arabia and recommended it for publication.68 Like his Moroccan mentor, Masʿud al-Nadwi came to conceive of Salafi Islam as a unique, simple and standardized message that must transcend political and cultural boundaries: “In my view, the truth lies only in following the Book and the Sunnah. We do not regard guidance and teaching as the

68 The introduction is al-Hilali, “Muqaddima,” 5-7.
monopoly of any special organisation of fiqh, [...] school or country. Neither is it a monopoly of Najd nor of India.69,

**English and Foreign Languages**

Despite his dedication to teaching classical Arabic as a means of promoting religious integration and standardization, al-Hilali was too cosmopolitan to forbid modern Muslims from expanding their linguistic scope. Like Rida, al-Hilali realized that the potential benefits of foreign languages were such that it would have been unreasonable to condemn their acquisition in the name of religious purity. The linguistic balance that he hoped to strike clearly comes through in one article that appeared in *al-Fath* in 1932, while he still resided in India. This text, which al-Hilali forwarded to Cairo for publication, pertained to the Ahmadiyya, that is, the Islamic messianic movement founded in the Punjab by Ghulam Ahmad al-Qadiyani (d. 1908). Like all other Salafis, al-Hilali despised this movement whose followers broke from Sunni orthodoxy by lending credence, among other things, to Ghulam Ahmad’s claim that he was at once the messiah (*masîḥ*) and the *mahdî*. According to al-Hilali, such a movement could only thrive on the linguistic lacunae of the Indian Muslim population. Anyone who knows Arabic, he claimed, would realize that neither the Qurʾan nor the hadiths validate the Ahmadi interpretation of Islam: “The existence [of the Ahmadiyya movement] is a consequence of the ignorance of the Arabic language and the reliance upon translations

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of religious books. I can affirm this to be true by [pointing out] that no one is inclined to believe this sect (*nihla*) in the civilized Arab countries, despite its proselytes’ efforts and in spite of the weakness of [our] religion in this era.  

But al-Hilali also admitted that he never before considered writing an article about the Ahmadiyya. What suddenly prompted him to focus on this particular movement was its recent publication of an English translation of the Qur’an. The Ahmadis’ willingness to convey the scriptures in other languages and to reach new audiences was alarming, al-Hilali wrote, because they had become extremely efficient at propagating their false views. This perplexing situation left al-Hilali with mixed emotions. As much as he condemned the translation of Islamic scriptures and despised the theology of the Ahmadiyya, he could not help but be amazed by the movement’s achievements. The Ahmadis spoke loud and clear, even in English, in many regions of the world. They had opened religious centers in Asia, Europe, America and Africa that put them on a par with Christian missionary enterprises. For better or worse, al-Hilali refused to sweep these facts under the rug. In a remarkable display of temperance, he went as far as to claim that true Islam had, in a sense, benefited from the Ahmadiyya movement. For example, the Ahmadis had brought Islam to the attention of many Westerners who previously knew nothing about it. The movement’s indefatigable missionaries, al-Hilai argued, set an

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71 A contemporary account of their activities in Britain that includes a list of Ahmadi sources in English is John Thayer Addison, “The Ahmadiya Movement and Its Western Propaganda,” Harvard Theological Review, 1, 22 (January 1929): 1-32.
example that Salafi reformists ought to follow. The latter could save the umma if they proved as ambitious as the Ahmadis.72

This reasoning had obvious linguistic implications which al-Hilali did not deny. During his stay in India between 1930 and 1933, he became convinced that one’s intellectual journey could not be complete without mastering a foreign language. He thus embarked on several more years of study, which he devoted to English rather than religious sciences. As a modernist Salafi who was at once impressed by the achievements of Europe and opposed to the colonial policies that compromised the Muslims’ political and cultural integrity, al-Hilali dismissed Urdu and chose instead to learn the British colonizers’ language.

He began by learning from his students at the Nadwat-ul Ulama, but soon realized that their pronunciation was faulty and that he should learn from a native speaker.73 Interestingly, he approached a middle-aged Canadian pastor who headed a Christian evangelical mission in Lucknow and asked him for English lessons. Because the pastor was himself a missionary who would not accept financial compensation, he agreed to give three free lessons a week if, in exchange, al-Hilali accepted to attend Christian sermons conducted in English.74 al-Hilali was so committed to learning English that he agreed to the pastor’s deal, even though the latter was most likely trying to convert him to Christianity in the process.

72 Ibid., 10.
74 Ibid., 20-21.
This religiously-charged environment further motivated the Moroccan Salafi to learn English well and fast. His presence at the Christian sermons caused him to engage in sectarian discussions with a young American minister named Smith, who happened to have some knowledge of the Qur’an and strongly criticized it from a biblical perspective.\(^75\) In an attempt to overcome the language barrier and prove his points, Smith ordered an English copy of the Gospel from London and gave it to al-Hilali—who had never read it before—for him to examine. A month later, when the Gospel arrived, the Moroccan Salafi spent hours reading it over and over again, looking up every unfamiliar word in the dictionary, and writing down polemical commentaries to respond to Smith and like-minded Christians.\(^76\) In addition, al-Hilali set out to learn English words by heart from vocabulary books. Within two years, he was able to translate whole articles, but could not yet speak the language. He developed his oral and aural abilities later, when he traveled to Europe.\(^77\)

From the onset, al-Hilali had studied English with a religious purpose in mind and for the good of the umma. In a series of articles published on this topic in 1949 and 1950, he claimed that learning languages was an Islamic ruling (ḥukm).\(^78\) Though it was necessary to learn Arabic and stop relying on translations of the scriptures, he argued that it was also mandatory, at least for some Muslims, to learn foreign languages. In his own

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\(^{75}\) *Ibid.*, 22.


words, it was a *farḍ kifāya*—a religious obligation that is not incumbent on every individual so long as some Muslims carry it out on behalf of the community.\(^7^9\) First, learning European languages was necessary for Muslims to defend their religion, as his own altercations with the American minister had shown. Second, it was also a means for the *umma* to stand on its own feet and better serve God in the modern era. For al-Hilali, knowing European languages would allow Muslims, at the very least, to read the label of their Western-imported medication, or to know the actual content of the imported food and beverages they ate and drank.\(^8^0\) Third, foreign languages were essential for global proselytism. Every language leads to a new part of the world, al-Hilali wrote, and one cannot hope to bring Islam to other people without knowing foreign tongues.\(^8^1\) English was, of course, his favorite one. In 1946, he was already well aware that it was “[…] the only international language in this era.”\(^8^2\)

To be sure, the study of foreign languages had to be approached from a Salafi perspective. al-Hilali warned his fellow Muslims that learning foreign languages should never be a token of weakness, nor should it proceed from a desire to adopt the Other’s identity. Yet, he tried relentlessly to explain that such studies were fully in accordance with true Islam. To buttress his point, he referred to a hadith found in Ibn Hanbal’s collection, and according to which the prophet had asked his companion Zayd ibn Thabit to learn Syriac because the Jewish community sent letters in that language and a Muslim

\(^{80}\) Ibid., 8-9. Here, al-Hilali seems particularly concerned about Muslims eating foreign food that is not *halāl*.
\(^{81}\) Ibid., 7.
had to be able to read them. al-Hilali explained that learning foreign languages could not be antithetical to Islam, for the prophet himself had ordered someone to do it. In short, all languages other than Arabic were tools (ālāt) that were neither good nor bad per se, but could serve to further the cause of Islam.\(^8^3\) al-Hilali practiced what he preached: he not only studied foreign languages, he also taught them in writing. In the journal *Lisan al-Din*, which he founded in Morocco from 1946 (and about which more will be said in the next chapter), al-Hilali devoted a few pages of each issue to a written English lesson with explanations and phonetic translations in Arabic. His readers could thus learn basic words and phrases in the language of Shakespeare.\(^8^4\)

What these observations indicate is that al-Hilali, besides being dedicated to Islamic conformism, was not stringent in every respect. He was still at the forefront of a modernist type of reformism. At times, he even showed signs of religious laxity from which he would later try to stay clear. As concerned as he was with hadith literature, al-Hilali did not yet consider it mandatory for modern Muslims to follow all of the prophet’s recommendations, especially in the realm of etiquette (ādāb). Hence, he did not let his beard grow. When a scholar from the Nadwat-ul Ulama advised him to stop shaving, al-Hilali impetuously told the elder man to mind his own business and to worry about his

\(^8^4\) His written lessons sometimes included words of German as well. In 1947, al-Hilali claimed he knew a total of nine languages, whereas he only knew Arabic and a few rudiments of French back in 1930. It is unclear what some of these languages were, but sources suggest that he was not equally fluent in all of them. The three languages he truly mastered were Arabic, English and German. Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, “Mas’ud al-Nadwi: afdal talamidhi al-hindiyin,” *Lisan al-Din*, 1, 7 (January 1947): 33.
own facial hair. In some rare cases, al-Hilali even departed from the Salafi epistemological framework altogether. When he realized that he had contracted malaria in India, he was so desperate that he decided to write incantations on pieces of paper and almond shells and to burn them in order to stop his fever attacks. At the time, he did not know whether such a practice was religiously allowed or not. It apparently gave temporary results, but al-Hilali later surmised that the hot vapors (rather than any supernatural phenomenon) were responsible for making him feel better. He recounted these events by saying: “I was in my period of ignorance.”

Afghanistan and the Salafi Approach to Islamic Law

After three consecutive years in India, al-Hilali was ready for a new destination. Preoccupied with the condition of Muslims all over the world, he decided to travel to nearby Afghanistan to assess the situation of Islam in the wake of recent political changes that had taken place in Kabul. Much to his disappointment, al-Hilali had heard of the radical reforms undertaken by King Amanullah (d. 1960) who sought to modernize Afghanistan along the secular and Westernizing, as Mustafa Kemal and Reza Khan had done in Turkey and Iran respectively. In 1929, however, a tribal revolt ousted King Amanullah and, soon after, King Nadhir Shah (d. 1933) acceded to the throne. al-Hilali was curious to find out for himself how these events had affected religious life in

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85 al-Hilali, al-Daʿwa, 183
86 Ibid., 194.
Afghanistan. But he never intended his investigation to remain private: by mail, he shared his findings and observations with Rashid Rida who, in turn, informed Shakib Arslan.\(^{88}\)

To obtain a visa, al-Hilali first went to the Afghan embassy located in the city of Simla, in northwest colonial India. There, he noticed first hand the impact and diffusion of his \(da`\text{w}a\) at the Nadwat-ul Ulama. One local family was thrilled to discover that the Arab traveler they had graciously invited to their house for lunch was no other than Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, the editor of the journal \(al-Diya`\), of which they were avid readers.\(^{89}\)

Passing through Lahore and then Peshawar, al-Hilali reached Kabul by car in 1933, where he spent fifty days.

The first local religious custom that shocked him was the widespread influence of Sufism: it seemed to him that the only Afghans who were not involved in a Sufi order were the Westernized ones.\(^{90}\) However, he was pleased to notice that Nadhir Shah reverted some of the Kemalist rules of his predecessor. Whereas King Amanullah had forbidden the veil and promoted Western clothing, Afghan women were now wearing the \(\text{hijab}\) again and only left their houses when necessary.\(^{91}\) al-Hilali applauded this behavior. Incidentally, it was in Karachi, on his way out of Kabul, that he wrote a tract on the importance of veiling.\(^{92}\)

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\(^{88}\) Shakib Arslan, \(al-Sayyid Rashid Rida aw ikha` arba`in sana\) (Damascus: Matba`a Ibn Zaydun, 1937), 722.

\(^{89}\) al-Hilali, \(al-Da`\text{w}a\), 185-186.

\(^{90}\) Ibid., 188.

\(^{91}\) Ibid., 195.

\(^{92}\) Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, \(al-Isfar `an al-haqq fi mas`alat al-sufur wa-l-hijab\) (Bombay: Maktabat al-Ma`arif, 1933). al-Hilali contended that all of the woman’s body, except her face and hands, was `awra (literally, “genital”). Details on the circumstances under which al-Hilali wrote this short book are found in Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, \(Diwan shi`r al-Hilali\) (unpublished typescript), 134.
The population’s blind devotion to the Hanafi school of law is another issue that preoccupied him while in Afghanistan. As soon as he detected signs of legal sectarianism, al-Hilali took upon himself to explain to local inhabitants that the truth about Islam did not reside in the Hanafi school alone. A central objective of the modernist Salafiyya had always been to bypass or deny the authority of the traditional schools of law, and it is interesting to note that Salafis had previously singled out Afghanistan as a counterproductive Hanafi stronghold. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Rashid Rida had deplored a rumor to the effect that some Afghans had broken the index finger of a fellow Muslim who had raised it during prayer while uttering the profession of faith (a gesture that many Hanafis do not perform). For Rida, this kind of legal fanaticism (*taʿṣṣub*) was an unacceptable source of division among Muslims. Back in 1901, his proposed solution to the problem was a lenient one: only by cultivating the indulgence (*tasāhul*) that the pious ancestors showed toward each other would the *umma* remain united and strong enough to resist the onslaught of foreign intrusion. al-Hilali concurred with Rida about the roots of the problem. He too believed that religious bickering and divergences with respect to Islamic law were opening the door to colonialism. However, in the context of the 1930s, indulgence was no longer seen as an appropriate remedy. The *umma* was in such a predicament that conformism to Salafi Islam had to be enforced.

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93 This school was also dominant in colonial Indian and al-Hilali relates how Hanafi zealots had already caused him problems during his first trip there in the 1920s. See al-Hilali, *al-Da‘wa*, 142-143.
94 Rida, 206.
On his way to Kabul, al-Hilali prayed for the first time with a few Afghan Hanafis. When they noticed that he systematically raised his hands before bowing (as contemporary Salafis do), they became very upset and stopped praying with him. If we are to believe the account that al-Hilali later wrote, he told the Afghans that sound hadiths must have precedence over the rulings of any given madhhab, and that the only proper way to pray is by raising one’s hands, as the prophet did, and as many irrefutable reports attest. Clearly, al-Hilali addressed the issue from the perspective of a muḥaddith who knew a superior truth about very specific matters. Instead of promoting indulgence and tolerance of Islamic diversity, he tried to inculcate a standardized Islam and to replace one peremptory religious discourse by another. In other words, al-Hilali’s attitude was as sectarian as the Afghan Hanafis he lectured; like them, he was convinced of holding the truth. The difference is that his lack of indulgence served the Salafiyya and its global ambitions rather than a local and particular interpretation of Islam. He also had the advantage of claiming a more powerful and authoritative textual knowledge than his Hanafi interlocutors, who mostly relied on secondary sources of jurisprudence.

al-Hilali’s approach to legal methodology was a sign of changing times. Unlike Abduh and Rida, he was opposed to a selective amalgamation (talfiq) of the various

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Having studied under the scholars of the Ahl-i Hadith in India and having worked with the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia, he was already too predisposed toward scripturalism and literalism to consider any kind of Islamic Esperanto. For him, the best legal methodology was simply to follow the Qur’ān and, to an often greater extent, the Sunna. Qur’ānic verses superseded the hadiths in the epistemological hierarchy (tartīb al-adilla), but the corpus of hadiths yielded a greater amount of legal material and valid proofs for determining what is permissible and what is not. In cases of uncertainty, al-Hilali often justified his views by relying on the work of medieval scholars he deemed trustworthy and knowledgeable, especially Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (d. 1070) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350).

Like many other Salafis of his generation, al-Hilali thought rather poorly of traditional jurisprudence (fiqh) as a legal discipline and a body of laws. In the Arab East, especially, the Salafiyya evolved into a religious orientation so opposed to blind imitation (taqlīd) that the very existence of legal doctrines, each with their own imam, their own methodology and their own corpus, however reformed, was seen as a fraudulent innovation that crippled the religion and the community. Three decades earlier, Rida had

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99 For one example where al-Hilali puts his trust in Ibn Qayyim’s opinion about duʿāʾ without further ado, see Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, Mukhtasar hady al-khalil fi-l-aqaʾid wa ʿibadat al-jalil, 3rd edition (Casablanca: Dar al-Tabaʿa al-Haditha, 1977), 35. It should be noted that when necessary, or for reasons of expediency, al-Hilali was also willing to use and quote a variety of Islamic scholars he did not particularly admire. In another instance dating from 1947, he used several Maliki references to prove to his fellow Moroccans that they were wrong to read out loud in the mosque at the time of the Friday prayer. al-Hilali went as far as to quote Khalil ibn Ishaq (d. 1374)—the author of the famous compendium (mukhtasar) of Maliki law—as well as Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) to show that many exponents of the Maliki school corroborated his Salafi claim (at least partially). See Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, “Hukm al-qiraʾa bi-rafʿ al-sawt yawm al-jumʿa wa-l-nas yantaziruna khuruj al-imam fi madhhab al-malikiya,” Lisan al-Din, 8-9 (March-April 1947): 70-72.
already declared that the best Islam ever practiced in history was the Islam that existed prior to the four imams (Abu Hanifa, Malik, al-Shafiʿi, and Ibn Hanbal). To be sure, this was a critique of the casuistry of medieval Islamic law. But Rida had not let his legal reformism go to extremes. He also emphasized that freedom of opinion (istiqlāl al-raʿy) was inherent to fiqh, and that divergences had never been a pretext for enmity among the pious ancestors. Thus, in the very first decade of the twentieth century, Rida did not jettison fiqh. He was rather calling Muslims to accept a minimum of legal discrepancies among themselves and to respect each other’s differences.

al-Hilali’s own legal stance was an exacerbated version of this prior Salafi thought. Because he conceived of the golden age of Islam as an era devoid of jurisprudential partisanship and major discrepancies rather than an era of religious indulgence per se, he was far more radical in his rejection of fiqh than Rida had been in 1900. Indeed, al-Hilali even lauded the Almohad caliph ʿAbd al-Muʿmin ibn ʿAli (d. 1163) for ordering all the compendiums of fiqh to be burnt, thus forcibly putting an end to taqlīd and to people’s engrossment with schools of law. This surprising praise for the Almohads, which was written in 1946, reflects the extent of al-Hilali’s distaste for traditional jurisprudence. On that same page, as well as in many other books and articles, he strongly condemned Ibn Tumart (d. 1130)—the religious architect of the Almohad

100 Rida, 69.
101 Ibid., 217.
dynasty—for having brought Ashʿari theology to an erstwhile orthodox Morocco. In spite of their detestable creed, the Almohads nonetheless won the respect of al-Hilali for their exemplary approach to Islamic law.

A subtler but no less instructive indication of al-Hilali’s conception of the law is that he appreciated Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr’s affiliation with the short-lived Zahiri school, which was founded in the ninth century. Though overly literalist at times, the exponents of Zahirism relied heavily on hadiths and advised Muslims against resorting to speculative hermeneutical methods in order to guess God’s legal intentions. In short, their approach to Islamic law was largely compatible with what al-Hilali considered “Salafi” in the mid-twentieth century. He admired them because they precluded blind imitation and relied on irrefutable proofs rather than the legal exertions of previous jurists. For al-Hilali, the Zahiris (ahl al-ẓāhir) were no different from the people of hadith (ahl al-ḥadīth). With their legacy in mind, he suggested that the all the particulars of religion (furūʿ) should derive from hadiths rather than from traditional jurisprudence.

**Iraq: Shiʿism and the Cult of Abu Hanifa**

After his stay in Afghanistan, al-Hilali returned to India. Struggling with bouts of malaria, he chose to leave for Iraq, which was his third destination since leaving the Hijaz in 1930. Once there, al-Hilali continued to oppose the legal schools as he had done

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elsewhere. It should be noted that Iraq, much like India, was far from unknown to him. As we briefly mentioned in the preceding chapter, al-Hilali had already lived near Basra between 1924 and 1927. He had married there and had a child. His second stay in the country lasted for another three years, between 1933 and 1936. But al-Hilali would later make Iraq his legal domicile for eleven years, from 1947 to 1958. Though he continued to visit India almost every year during that period, Baghdad became his home and he acquired Iraqi citizenship.\(^\text{105}\)

During his first trip to Iraq in the mid-1920s, al-Hilali had already found an opportunity to put his scripturalist convictions to the test and to oppose one of the main subdivisions of Islam. He intentionally traveled to a village on the eastern side of the Shatt al-ʿArab and asked to meet a qualified and reasonable Shiʿi scholar. Clearly, his intention was not to find a basis for mutual understanding and tolerance, but to prove Shiʿism wrong. His guide led him to ʿAbd al-Muhsin al-Kazimi, one of the local religious scholars and an adherent of the Akhbari school, which is the most scripturalist approach to Twelver Shiʿism.\(^\text{106}\) The debate that took place between al-Hilali and al-Kazimi revolved around epistemological issues.\(^\text{107}\) For example, al-Hilali endeavored to demonstrate that Shiʿi hadiths were not a reliable source of knowledge and could not be used to reach the truth about Islam. He dismissed the validity of their oldest and most esteemed collection of hadiths, that of al-Kulayni (d. 940), which al-Kazimi presented as


\(^{107}\) A rendition of this debate is found in al-Hilali, al-Daʿwa, 150-158.
the Shiʿi equivalent of al-Bukhari’s collection. Al-Hilali argued that the reports it contained could not be taken at face value, because the ultimate criterion for determining their soundness was the infallible character of their transmitters, namely, the Shiʿi imams. Shiʿi scholars do not assess hadiths on the basis of rational, biographical, and grammatical criteria, he claimed, but blindly relied on the unsubstantiated esoteric science that certain descendents of the prophet allegedly possessed.

In addition, al-Hilali strove to reject the Shiʿi claim that the Qurayshis—those who belonged to the prophet’s tribe—might somehow have altered elements of the Qurʾan to suppress the truth about ʿAli, his esoteric science and his right to rule the Muslim community. Not unlike the dialectical method that Muhammad ibn al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi had used in Morocco to convert him to the Salafiyya (see chapter two), al-Hilali confronted his interlocutor with logic and hypothetical scenarios. Had God wanted to designate ʿAli as a successor to the prophet, why did He never mention his name at all in the Qurʾan? If this passage of the revelation ever existed and was later suppressed, why did ʿAli not impose the true version of the Qurʾan during his caliphate? Why did only one copy of this allegedly authentic Qurʾan circulate? Why did it strangely disappear with the twelfth imam? Each time, al-Hilali claimed that his opponent’s answers were excuses that defied reason (ʿaql). He also made clear that whatever information al-Kazimi could find in Shiʿi exegesis (tafsīr) could not be used as a proof. First, hadiths were superior to exegesis. Second, only Sunni hadiths could be epistemologically

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108 On al-Kulayni, see Corbin, 61.
considered valid. Third, no sound Sunni hadith corroborated Shi‘i claims. In sum, al-Kazimi was wrong on all accounts. Soon after the debate, al-Hilali’s guide returned to the Western side of the Shatt al-ʿArab and reportedly proclaimed to the Sunni villagers: “I swear to God that your ʿālim defeated our ʿālim.  

A few years later in Basra, al-Hilali debated another Shi‘i scholar, Mahdi al-Kazimi al-Qazwini (d. 1939). The latter did not believe that the Quryashis had altered the Qur’an, but nonetheless insisted that it was lawful to upkeep and visit shrines, particularly the tombs of the Shi‘i imams, provided that the buildings themselves were not the object of any worship.  

al-Hilali, who was highly disturbed by such practices at the mausoleums of Najaf and Karbala, dismissed this kind of reasonable accommodation. For him, there could be no lenient interpretation of the numerous hadiths that forbade the erection of buildings over tombs. In 1927, in the midst of the campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism, he wrote a series of article on this matter in al-Manar.  

By then, Rashid Rida had himself given up his earlier hopes of operating a rapprochement between the Sunnis and the Shi‘is. A more puristic and intransigent Salafiyya would have to prevail.

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109 al-Hilali, al-Da’wa, 158.
110 Ibid.
111 Yitzhak Nakash, “The Visitation of the Shrines of the Imams and the Shi‘i Mujtahids in the Early Twentieth Century,” Studia Islamica, 81 (1995): 158, 161. For the original source, see the first article of the series in al-Manar, vol. 28 (1927), 349-363. Note that al-Hilali signed these articles under the name Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Qadir al-Hilali, but there should be no confusion as to his authorship, even though he is registered under two different names in the index of al-Manar. These articles also led to the publication of a short and somewhat harsher tract. It is Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, al-Qadi al-ʿadl fi hukm al-bina’ ʿala al-qubur (Cairo: al-Matba’a al-ʿArabiyya bi-Misr, 1927). Ibn Saʿud subsidized its printing.
This intellectual foray into Shi‘ism, however, was only circumstantial and did not last long. During his other two sojourns in Iraq between the 1930s and the 1950s, al-Hilali preferred to join Salafi networks and to return to his favorite task: that of propagating the Salafiyya among misled Sunni Muslims. Whenever possible, he moved about the country to share his convictions. In 1947, for instance, he spent seven months preaching in Mosul. But thereafter, he spent most of his time in Baghdad, where he resided and worked. The city had a special significance for him, because it once was the hometown of some of the most pious ancestors, namely Ibn Hanbal and Abu Hanifa. At the same time, al-Hilali found it utterly distressing to notice that the Salafiyya had virtually died in the city where so many salaf had lived.\footnote{al-Hilali, \textit{al-Da‘wa}, 108.} Therefore, beyond his work as a professor of Arabic literature, Qur‘anic and hadith studies at the University of Baghdad, al-Hilali spent most of his free time inviting local inhabitants to the Salafiyya.\footnote{al-Hilali was first appointed in 1948 and taught in several academic departments, including those of literature, shari‘a and education. Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, \textit{Qabsa min anwar al-wahy} (Rabat: Maktabat al-Ma‘rif, 1985), 3-4.} He gave sermons and lessons in the city’s mosques several times a week.

In Iraq, as elsewhere, al-Hilali strove to homogenize Islamic beliefs and practices. In Baghdad, he gained several Salafi converts but also stirred a lot of opposition. His primary target was, once again, the population’s fanatical devotion (\textit{ta‘ассуб}) to the Hanafi school of law. Beyond the purely legal dimension of the problem, he blamed such devotion for fostering additional innovations. One example was the exaggerated deference to Abu Hanifa which, according to al-Hilali, verged on worship. One thing that
particularly irritated him was the dome (qubba) that had been built over the tomb of Abu Hanifa in the eleventh century, and around which a mosque was later constructed.\\footnote{114} al-Hilali systematically refused to pray in this popular mosque because he considered it unlawful.\\footnote{115}

In the late 1940s, he became imam in a newly-built mosque located about one mile away from the Abu Hanifa mosque, in a mostly Shi‘i part of town. From there, al-Hilali launched his Salafi campaign against innovations and blind imitation. He was keen to remind his audience that Abu Hanifa had forbidden anyone to follow his legal opinions uncritically. The master was irreproachable; only his fanatical devotees were to blame. Likewise, al-Hilali alleged that Abu Hanifa was a Salafi of creed who forbade allegorical interpretations of the scriptures. Therefore, the people of Iraq were utterly wrong to adopt the Ash‘ari creed while pretending to follow the example of Abu Hanifa. Finally, al-Hilali strove to eradicate specific innovations in the realm of worship, such as unjustified prostrations, irregular mode of reading the Qur’an in the mosque, chanted recitations, or the performance of an extra call to prayer (adhan). He lectured extensively on the proper way to pray and even wrote a short book on this topic.\\footnote{116} He had already addressed such technical religious matters during his previous stays in Iraq.\\footnote{117}

\\footnote{114} According to the medieval Hanbali scholar Ibn al-Jawzi, Sharaf al-Mulk, the Seljuk minister who ordered the construction of the dome in circa 1065, clearly intended to turn it into a pilgrimage site. See Makdisi, 31.
\\footnote{115} al-Hilali, \textit{al-Da‘wa}, 110.
\\footnote{116} \textit{Ibid.}, 111-112.
\\footnote{117} \textit{Ibid.}, 148.
As usual, al-Hilali claims to have been highly successful. The mosque where he was imam soon became crowded and his students set out to eliminate one innovation after another in the city. However, al-Hilali describes how his call to the Salafiyya generated resistance. This is a recurrent theme in his memoirs: in most of the countries where he preached, he apparently encountered the same oppositions and experienced the same ordeals. In Baghdad, his opponents accused him of being a Wahhabi bent on causing dissension (fitna) and destroying the Hanafi madhab. They dispatched hecklers to disturb al-Hilali during his sermons. In one case, a fight broke out between angered Hanafis and some of al-Hilali’s Salafi students. The police had to intervene and arrest those who were involved in the brawl.\textsuperscript{118} In another instance, the mufti of Baghdad allegedly allied with Sufis and Hanafis and complained about the Moroccan Salafi to the Iraqi director of religious endowments. The director summoned al-Hilali, scolded him and told him to concentrate on his work as a university professor instead of preaching in mosques. He dismissed al-Hilali and issued a decree that nominated a new imam in his place.\textsuperscript{119}

**Conclusion**

By the mid-twentieth century, the promotion of religious standardization and conformism had become a significant ideal within the Salafi networks of the Arab East. Its purpose was to remedy the fragmentation and weakness of the entire umma in the

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 110.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 113.
colonial period. Although it did not feature so prominently on the agenda of other Salafi groups in other parts of the Muslim world such as Morocco and Algeria, it was, to be sure, a topic to which Rashid Rida and his closest followers and successors constantly reverted. This ideal already existed in the 1920s, but took on a particular importance from the 1930s onward, as the wave of colonialism failed to recede and the Saudi state failed to live up to Rashid Rida’s expectations.

While religious journals and newspapers were major channels through which the message of religious standardization could reach different localities, missionary work and teaching also played an important role. Taqi al-Din al-Hilali epitomized this trend. In the course of his numerous travels, he aimed at spreading a unique Salafi Islam. As the cases of Upper Egypt, India, Afghanistan and Iraq suggest, al-Hilali quickly adopted a transnational approach to religious activism and strove to disregard the cultural and political boundaries that separated Muslims. The standardization of Islam along Salafi lines required him to raise the same religious ideas and address the same issues everywhere. It also reinforced his conviction that all Muslims needed to transcend their cultural origins and learn classical Arabic: only then could they gain direct access to the formative texts and thus rid themselves of innovations and differences in creed, law and rituals.

These efforts at religious standardization were an attempt to rationalize Islamic thought and practice for the good of the umma; in a way, they were not unlike the cultural standardization promoted by enlightened officials in the wake of the French revolution.
But a large part of this Salafi endeavor was more unyielding than before. The Salafiyya, as Rashid Rida and his collaborators now conceived of it, no longer allowed for ecumenism and indulgence. As a result, the call for religious conformism further facilitated the growth of Islamic purism within the Salafi movement, which continued to march away from its modernist heritage.

However, Salafi integration was not always a one-way process. It would be fair to say, for instance, that al-Hilali influenced Indian Muslims as much as they influenced him. On the one hand, he broadened the range of his students’ experiences and developed their awareness of Muslim interconnectedness across borders. On the other hand, his stay in India provided him with an impetus to learn English and increase his own global reach as a Salafi activist. Likewise, while al-Hilali improved his students’ proficiency in Arabic and brought them closer to the original scriptures, his presence in India allowed him to study under the scholars of the Ahl-i Hadith and quench his thirst for exoteric religious science. For the remainder of his life, al-Hilali would indeed approach Islam through the eyes of a hadith specialist (muḥaddith) armed with one of the most powerful and authoritative types of knowledge for determining what is Islamic and what is not. Unlike the most modernist Muslims of the era, he had no intention of reassessing the role of the Sunna as a source of religious knowledge.120

The ideas of religious purification and standardization were not new to the history of Islamic reformism. Without a doubt, they antedated the Salafi movement of the

twentieth century. What was novel was the way in which the Salafis engaged these themes and the fact that their efforts were based on a modern and unprecedented global consciousness. As historians Michael Geyer and Charles Bright put it: “Old ideas, expressed in the many ways of imagining the world, world space, and interregional relations across distance, gave way to new global imaginations.” The Salafis’ campaign to standardize Islam in the mid-twentieth century was tied to one such global imagination, which the challenges of widespread colonialism kept fueling. In actuality, the Salafis’ ambition and range of operation mirrored the extent of the Western colonial endeavor itself.

Chapter Five

The Struggle For Cohesion II:

Shakib Arslan and Islamic Nationalism

While in theory a call for religious standardization predicated on substantial modernist values and principles may have been possible, many Salafis were already too committed to purism to consider changing course. Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism, the dominant position within the prime Salafi networks of the Arab East was that religious purism—even if it needed to be reined in—was the most reliable means of ensuring the survival of Muslim identity in the face of agnosticism, atheism, secularism, Christian proselytism and colonialism at large. Puristic norms thus carried the day and often dictated how the qualified reconciliation of Islam with modernity could take place. Consequently, Middle Eastern thinkers and activists who either put modernism first or carried reformism too far were accused of hastening the erosion of the umma.¹

But in a period marked by the celebration of strong nationalist ideologies in Europe, the standardization of Islamic beliefs and practices along puristic lines offered additional advantages. In itself, the notion of standardization implied a unifying process that was not altogether unlike nation-building. Some Salafis took notice of this analogy

and developed it to the point of presenting the umma as a nation rather than an aggregate of various Muslim subgroups with their own cultures, histories and future aspirations. It seemed to them utterly modern to adopt the principle of nationality, even though Muslims did not constitute a nation in the way Westerners usually understood the concept. Nevertheless, the search for uniformity and cohesion that the Salafis were pursuing on the religious level coincided with the growth of a discourse that presented all Muslims as a single people. More than ever, anti-colonial actions that took place locally were projected onto a larger pan-Islamic scale, either in print or through a powerful new medium: transnational radio broadcast. The most instrumental figure in this process was undoubtedly Shakib Arslan (d. 1946), the preeminent modernist Salafi based in Switzerland. Using his geographical position, connections and leadership wisely, he spared no effort in internationalizing the struggle of all Muslims worldwide. He exercised such a wide influence throughout the Muslim world that he has been portrayed as the foremost articulator of “Islamic nationalism” in the mid-twentieth century.² Among the Salafis who shared his approach was one of his most devoted protégés, namely, Taqi al-Din al-Hilali.

For all the conceptual problems that it raises, the notion of Islamic nationalism perfectly reflects the dialectical tensions that were at play during the Salafis’ struggle against Western colonialism. Whether or not the discourse held by Arslan and other like-minded Salafis truly qualified as nationalist (or whether it was quasi nationalist or “supra-

nationalist”) is a question that may not be settled here. Of greater importance is the fact that their pan-Islamic discourse was increasingly modeled after nationalism. The powerful ideology that many Salafis had long seen as a threat to Muslim unity now appeared useful and worthwhile. The Salafis who subscribed to the notion of Islamic nationalism insisted that all Muslims should think of themselves, and start acting, as a modern nation like those of Europe.

In that sense, the puristic standardization of Islam yielded a strong sense of authenticity. Islamic nationalism required, of course, the forging of national sentiments rooted in an idealized and sometimes romantic remembrance of Islamic history. For the Islamic nation to regain its greatness and attain its true destiny, Muslims needed, among other things, to hark back to the pristine Islam of their pious ancestors. This Salafi Islam would not only bind all Muslims together into one unified community free of religious disagreements, it would keep this community strong in the face of Western colonialism. Looking at Islam through the lenses of nationalism was not an entirely puristic intellectual endeavor, but it was meant to make the case for Islamic unity in a compelling modern idiom. For purposes of nationalist galvanization, Muslims were encouraged to cultivate the memory of their illustrious communal past, irrespective of its degree of religious purity. Hence, Islam meant more than a mere set of correct beliefs and practices: it became a modern identity. It was linked to a historical civilization (madaniyya) and

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sustained a territorially loose nation or “self-defined human community” to which, ultimately, all Muslims owed their loyalty. Being loyal to the Salafi creed alone was not sufficient.

Shakib Arslan played a pivotal role in disseminating such ideas and shaping the symbolic repertoire of Islamic nationalism. His influence on the life and thought of Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, for instance, is unmistakable. But why should the type of discourse here termed “Islamic nationalism” be considered a stepping-stone in the evolution of the Salafiyyya in the mid-twentieth century? In what ways did it affect al-Hilali’s intellectual journey? Answers to these questions build on the conclusions reached in the previous chapter. As stated above, the Salafis’ call for the standardization of Islam stimulated the call for Islamic nationalism, and vice-versa. These trends were simultaneous and mutually reinforcing. Together, they furthered the globalization of Muslim identity in reaction to lasting colonialism. Therefore, Islamic nationalism served as a key agent in the development of a generic, transnational and somewhat de-territorialized Salafiyyya whose dominant features were increasingly puristic. In addition, it allowed al-Hilali and other Salafis to join the nationalist bandwagon of the interwar era and to develop nationalist sentiments without falling prey to particularistic forms of ethnic, territorial, or civic nationalism. As we shall see in the next chapter, this broader sense of “Islamic” national belonging will have a major influence on the evolution of the Salafiyyya later in the postcolonial era.

At the same time, it would be incorrect to assume, in light of both the call for Islamic nationalism and the call for a puristic standardization of Islam, that the struggle against colonialism simply gave way to anti-Western sentiments. Prima facie, one might be tempted to conclude that the Salafis rejected their modernist ethos because they lost respect for the imperialist scions of the Enlightenment. Based on this line of reasoning, it would seem safe to presume that the Salafis curtailed the potency of reason and refrained from pursuing the conciliation of Islam with Western philosophical modernity. This type of explanation is indeed commonplace in the literature on contemporary Islamic intellectual history. It appears all the more credible when scholars take for granted that Hasan al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood were Rashid Rida’s most direct and representative successors.\(^5\)

Although tempting, this hypothesis is not fully validated by empirical evidence and historical scrutiny. Islamic nationalism, for instance, was nothing but an effort on the part of the Salafis to make Muslim identity coincide with Western norms. A closer look at the life and thought of Taqi al-Din al-Hilali shows that he did not experience the kind of oppositional reaction that would have caused him to turn his back on the West. On the contrary, it was during the mid-twentieth century that Europe’s intellectual magnetism affected him the most. It suffices to say that al-Hilali, who is nowadays branded as the father of the Wahhabi-inspired Salafiyya in Morocco, graduated from the University of

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Berlin in 1940, one year prior to the late Harvard professor Annemarie Schimmel (d. 2003), with a Ph.D. in Arabic literature.\(^6\)

al-Hilali’s experience in Germany may have been *sui generis*, but details like these suggest that the intellectual relationship between puristic-minded Salafis and the West was far from broken. Even during the last phase of colonialism, the Salafis’ fascination for Europe had not completely disappeared. Though they became more cautious about cultural contamination, they often continued to look to the West as a model and a source of inspiration. In conjunction with the discussion on Islamic nationalism, this chapter will therefore make an additional contention: it will argue that the colonial experience had a more insidious and dialectical impact on the evolution of the Salafiyya than conventional wisdom would have it. The turn from modernism to religious purism in the mid-twentieth century was not simply a reaction against Europe, nor was it simply a rejection of philosophical modernity per se. Epistemologically speaking, there still was a certain measure of compatibility. In actuality, al-Hilali’s training as an Orientalist in Germany, his emphasis on philology and his positivist approach to history all bolstered his scripturalist and literalistic approach to Islam and made it more persuasive.

In Europe as Shakib Arslan’s Alter Ego

Since the time of his conversion to the Salafiyya in Morocco, al-Hilali had been dreaming of becoming a religious erudite and scholar. In Medina, he had a chance to teach at one of the two most prestigious and cosmopolitan mosques of the Muslim world. In India, he studied under renowned hadith specialists and taught in one of the most famous seminaries in the entire Indian subcontinent. Yet, these experiences neither fulfilled his ambitions nor endowed him with the level of credibility he was hoping for:

[…] Already at that time, I was of the opinion that a scholar without a diploma [from a European university] was like a traveler without a passport: there is no room for him in schools of higher standing. If he publishes a book or writes an article, the first question that people ask is: “Does he have an internationally-recognized diploma?” The answer is no. “Does he know a foreign language?” The answer is no. “Did he study in Europe?” The answer is no.7

To keep developing his global proselytism, al-Hilali believed that he needed to undertake graduate studies in a European country. Knowing religious science alone, he said, was not enough. Only with a scholarly passport from the West could he be able to command authority in the Islamic world.8 Therefore, in 1936, al-Hilali left Iraq once more and, without prior planning, traveled to Europe in hopes of finding an opportunity to study in one of its great universities. At the time, young Salafi activists who traveled to Europe were well aware that they could find a guide and a host in the person of the Amir

Shakib Arslan, the former Ottoman official and famous Salafi writer and polemicist who had gone into exile in Switzerland at the end of World War I. Arslan had met Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, studied under Muhammad ʿAbduh, was a very close friend of Rashid Rida and Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar, collaborated with Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib, and had contacts with Muslim activists from virtually every country in North Africa and the Arab East. Through him, many regional Salafi networks were connected to one another.

Hence, it should come to no surprise that al-Hilali decided to go to Geneva first, even though he did not yet know Arslan personally at the time. The two men had several friends in common, and Arslan was known for supporting the kind of educational endeavors that al-Hilali was about to embark upon. In the pages of al-Fath in 1930, Arslan had already encouraged young Muslims to learn European languages and to study in Europe, so long as they could preserve their religion. These declarations may well have influenced al-Hilali, whose interest in learning English dates from the same period. In any event, he found in Switzerland the help he needed. He stayed in Arslan’s house for one month in 1936 while figuring out where and how to undertake graduate studies.

From that moment onward, Arslan became one of al-Hilali’s most trusted friends and served, in some ways at least, as his new role model. Sources even suggest that their relationship was stronger and more significant than the one al-Hilali had previously

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9 Cleveland, 39.
11 Cleveland, 126.
12 Anonymous, 25.
maintained with Rashid Rida. But it was a different kind relationship: al-Hilali was forty-two when he first met Arslan, who was twenty-five years his senior. On the one hand, they bonded as two accomplished writers who espoused the same anti-colonial cause and shared the same awareness of Muslim interconnectedness across boundaries. On the other hand, they came from different generations and were not exactly of equal standing. In 1936, Arslan was already a monument within the circles of Islamic reformism and there is no doubt that he impressed al-Hilali. The latter even confessed that he named his first son Shakib as a token of his admiration for the Amir.\textsuperscript{13}

Arslan was indeed a unique character. Beyond his innumerable international contacts, he epitomized the de-territorialized Salafi. When he fled to Europe as a political refugee in 1918, he only expected to stay abroad temporarily. Yet the political landscape of the Middle East had changed drastically within a few years and, in the meantime, Arslan had failed to convert his former Ottoman citizenship into a Lebanese one. As a result, he remained stranded in neutral Switzerland, did not legally belong to any country and was unable to travel until Ibn Saʿud granted him an honorary Hijazi citizenship and delivered him a passport.\textsuperscript{14} Though he briefly visited many Arab countries thereafter, he never lived permanently in any of them. Colonial authorities even forbade him to return to his native Lebanon until 1946, that is, a few months prior to his death. Uprooted and living outside the symbolic boundaries of the Muslim world, Arslan belonged everywhere and nowhere at the same time. He wrote extensively, both in French and in Arabic, in

\textsuperscript{13} Muhammad al-Majdhub, ‘Ulama’ wa mufakkirun ‘arafuhum, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Nafa’is, 1977), 183.
\textsuperscript{14} Cleveland, 65.
support of the rejuvenation of Islam and the freedom of all Muslims. His devotion to anti-imperialism and Islamic causes knew no geographic, political or ethnic boundaries.

Needless to say, Arslan’s global outlook resonated with al-Hilali. In 1931, before his trip to Europe, al-Hilali had written a raving review of Arslan’s famous treatise *Li-madha taʾakhkhara al-muslimum wa li-madha taqaddama ghayruhum? (Why Are the Muslims Backward While Others Are Advanced?).* He had underlined the urgency of translating the book into foreign languages and rendering it available in a simplified and vowelized Arabic.\(^\text{15}\) It is significant, though not at all surprising, that al-Hilali so resoundingly acknowledged reading and appreciating this particular bestseller. Of all the books that Arslan wrote, *Why Are the Muslims Backward* was probably the most impregnated with the spirit of Islamic nationalism. First published in 1930, it was a testimony to the results of print culture, which now allowed many Muslims worldwide to “imagine” their global “communion” vis-à-vis the challenges posed by colonialism and modernity.\(^\text{16}\) Indeed, Arslan had originally composed his treatise in Switzerland at the behest of an Indonesian Muslim who, from Borneo, had become familiar with the Amir’s articles in Rashid Rida’s Egypt-based but widely distributed journal *al-Manar*.\(^\text{17}\)

In his attempt to shed light on the condition in which Muslims found themselves, Arslan’s response was as geographically and historically ambitious as would be expected

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\(^{17}\) Shakib Arslan, *Li-madha taʾakhkhara al-muslimin wa li-madha taqaddama ghayruhum* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Salafi li-l-Kitab, 1981), 3-4. The content of book was first published in *al-Manar*. 244
of him. His short treatise was not an in-depth study by any means. As an agent of mobilization and motivation, Arslan was more interested in framing a general call for action than observing the finest academic standards. Therefore, it was primarily through the breadth of his geographical coverage that he hoped to strike the imagination of his readers. By raising awareness to the plight of his coreligionists from Morocco to China and from India to the Caucasus, Arslan not only bridged the gap between them; he portrayed a unique Muslim community that shared more than just a common religion. *Why Are the Muslims Backward* submitted that this community was held together by a shared history and, above all, a shared socio-political future. All Muslims, regardless of where they lived, were dealing with the same challenges and were therefore in need of the same solutions. Only through their allegiance and devotion to the *umma*, which Arslan conceived on the model of a modern nation, would these various Muslims tap into their potential communal strength and break out of their backwardness.

Of course, many of the themes that Arslan discussed came from the reformist thought of al-Afghani, ‘Abduh and Rida. Should Muslims fight fatalism, accept modern science and support each other, the book argued, they would be able to progress while staying true to their religion. But Arslan expanded the scope of Islamic modernism by suggesting that progress demanded Muslims to model their esprit de corps after nationalism, which had become one of the most prominent features of European societies in the interwar era. For all its criticism of colonial policies, *Why Are the Muslims Backward* was based on the assumption that the Europeans’ dominance was inextricably
linked to the strength of their national sentiments. Each *umma*, Arslan claimed, is inclined to safeguard and hold on to its distinctive and constitutive characters, namely, its language, religion and customs. This, he wrote, was one of the “natural laws of existence” (*sunan al-kawn al-ṭabī‘iyā*).\(^\text{18}\)

For this reason, Arslan criticized Muslims who believed that the only way out of backwardness was to imitate Europeans and renounce the Islamic heritage. They were grossly mistaken, Arslan claimed, because a correct emulation of European societies would in fact require them to remain steadfastly attached to their own “national” identity. If these Muslims carefully examined the affairs of Europe, they would see that nationalist resolve translated into collective survival, dynamism and power. Muslims had to realize how strong and united Frenchmen, Germans and Italians stood as nations; how nationalism allowed Poland to resist Russia’s regional designs; how small entities such as the Baltic states, Croatia and Serbia resisted linguistic assimilation and retained their independence by means of their national determination.\(^\text{19}\)

Far from brushing aside the past in the name of progress, nationalism was nothing but the rousing celebration of each community’s historical heritage, which included religion. Christianity was over nineteen centuries old, Arslan noted, and yet it continued to bolster the national character of European societies that were, ironically, never branded as reactionary.\(^\text{20}\) His conclusion was that religion itself did not perpetuate backwardness: lack of national sentiments did. Muslims could progress, but only if they rallied and

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 53.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 53-57.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 62.
aspired to form a cohesive community on a par with Western nations or Japan (\textit{umma min al-umam al-ūrūbiyya aw al-amīrīkiyya aw Yābān}).\textsuperscript{21} Since nationalism was a fundamental aspect of modernity as Arslan conceived of it in 1930, he believed that Islamic modernists had the responsibility of engaging the concept.

But many reformist Salafis had until then avoided nationalism, for they had seen it as a divisive and secular force that could undermine the common bond of the \textit{umma}.

Arslan’s argument, however, was that Muslims could not afford to dismiss the potency of modern nationalism altogether. If they did, they would condemn themselves to an abject future at the mercy of Western colonialism. The key was therefore to borrow the most powerful and inspiring dimensions of nationalism, to tailor them to the needs of the \textit{umma} as a whole, and to ward off any undue allegiance to a subordinate form of identification (ethnic, civic or territorial). Arslan did not actually use the term “Islamic nationalism” in \textit{Why Are the Muslims Backward}, but he used a language that was ambiguous enough and drew enough parallels with nationalism to carry his point without entering into a tricky conceptual discussion.

For example, he often referred to the \textit{umma} in the traditional sense of the word to mean the entire community of the believers (\textit{al-umma al-islāmiyya}). Yet he also used it in the plural to designate various countries, nations and perhaps even nations-states, be they European (\textit{al-umam al-ūrūbiyya}) or Islamic (\textit{al-umam al-islāmiyya}).\textsuperscript{22} Arslan was conveniently unsystematic. Whether he meant ethnic and linguistic groups (such as the

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}, 7.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid.}, 13.
Turks and the Arabs) or particular historical and political entities (such as Morocco and Egypt) is unclear. But this lack of clarity was all for the better. He blurred the various definitions of the term umma in such a way as to capitalize on all possible nationalist connotations. For Arslan, any nation in the world was an umma, but no definition of the umma could supersede that of the community of all Muslims. To make sure that this semantic shift came across, or perhaps to forestall doubts about the compatibility between Islam and nationalism, Arslan also referred to Muslims as a qawm—a word often used in the modern era to refer to an ethnic understanding of the nation.23

The rhetoric of the book left little doubt as to Arslan’s intention of taming the spirit of nationalism and shaping it to the needs of pan-Islam in the mid-twentieth century. An Islamic nation did not need a single state in order to bloom; in fact Arslan did not even seek such a political or administrative union for Arab societies themselves.24 Modern national sentiments, so long as they were ultimately Islamic, were far more essential than governmental institutions and structures. Muslims first needed to acquire a real sense of cohesion based on religion; a sense of loyalty toward their coreligionists; a national-like pride (which Arslan strove to arouse); and a willingness to make efforts and sacrifices for the sake of the collectivity. Historian William L. Cleveland was thus on the mark when he asserted that Arslan was not, strictly speaking, an Arab nationalist.25 He rather believed that all Muslims owed their utmost allegiance to the Islamic umma qua nation, irrespective of their origin and background.

23 Ibid., 63.
24 Cleveland, 128.
25 Ibid., 127-131.
This call for Islamic nationalism, however ambiguous, made a deep impression on many exponents of the Salafiyya. By throwing his weight behind such a project, Arslan paved the way for other Salafis to express their Muslim-ness through the nationalist paradigm that so powerfully electrified Western societies. The ideas found in *Why Are the Muslims Backward* were also found in the pages of *al-Fath* and other reformist publications. They definitely influenced the writings of Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, whose close personal association with Arslan had intellectual repercussions that are attested by much textual evidence. On the whole, the two men adopted a similar approach. Like Arslan, al-Hilali framed his anti-colonial discourse in terms of Islamic nationalism. Though he never shied away from celebrating his native Morocco, he was fully convinced that all Muslims should conceive of their identity on the basis of their religion and that Islamic bonds should always prevail over any other sense of belonging.

But there was a difference between al-Hilali and Arslan with respect to their treatment of the Islamic dimension of Islamic nationalism. When Arslan portrayed the *umma* as a nation, he did so from the viewpoint of an anti-colonial political activist rather than a religious specialist. While he often hinted that non-Salafi Muslims were traitors to the Islamic nation, he never quite delved into the questions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. As Cleveland put it: “He did not provide a critical review of the classical jurists, he constructed no *tafsir*, he offered no reexamination of *hadith*. It is fair to Arslan

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27 See Arslan, 29-30, where the Amir simultaneously blames a Moroccan official for his betrayal of the common good of the *umma* and his Sufi practices.
to conclude that his technique was more akin to al-Afghani’s than to ṢAbduh’s. Arslan had no time for theological finesse, and his writings on Islam were never far removed from the political events he watched so closely.28

There lied a major difference. Whereas Arslan left doctrinal and legal considerations to others, al-Hilali was the one who emphasized them. In that sense, the two men complemented each other. It could be said that al-Hilali acted as Shakib Arslan’s religious alter ego. They were, it seems, fully aware of their respective strengths. With respect to political and historical subject matters, al-Hilali confessed that the Amir was far more knowledgeable than him. But when it came to religious issues, the roles were reversed. al-Hilali claims that Arslan was in the habit of consulting him and always showed admiration for his answers.29

**Graduate Studies and Radio Broadcasting in Germany**

It was Shakib Arslan who provided the forty-two years old Moroccan Salafi with his first opportunity to undertake graduate studies in Europe and to obtain his “scholarly passport.” There exists conflicting stories as to how it actually happened, but we know that Arslan established contact with a German professor at the University of Bonn, and then recommended al-Hilali for a position of lecturer in Arabic and Arabic literature. The salary allowed him to register as a student in Oriental Studies and to pay for the tuition. Although al-Hilali had originally wanted to study in Britain, he could not afford the costs.

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28 Cleveland, 115-116.
He therefore moved to Nazi Germany in the fall of 1936 and entered the University of Bonn, where he stayed for three years. He spent his first months studying German until he obtained a diploma attesting his proficiency in that language. He then began working on his dissertation while accepting scholarly contracts on the side. Among them was his collaboration with German Orientalist Paul Kahle (d. 1964) toward the painstaking translation of old Arabic texts. Kahle, who played an important role in al-Hilali’s academic journey, was director of the department of Oriental Studies at the University of Bonn. He occupied that position from 1923 until his suspension in November 1938 for lack of Nazi credentials, which led to his escape to Britain four months later.

al-Hilali had been working on his dissertation for over a year when Wilhelm Heffening (d. 1944), who had just replaced Kahle at the head of the department of Oriental Studies, chose to turn it down. Because a scholar from Cambridge had recently written on a similar topic, Heffening argued that he could not accept al-Hilali’s dissertation. Whether or not the true reason behind this refusal was the professor’s personal hostility toward his Moroccan student (as the latter claimed), al-Hilali felt ridiculed and reached a dead end. Without a dissertation to submit, he was unable to graduate and reap any benefit from all the time and money he had already invested. It was roughly at that moment, in early 1939, that he received an intriguing though unexpected invitation from Berlin. The Nazi Ministry of Propaganda was about to inaugurate a shortwave radio station in Arabic, and the authorities were looking for

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competent collaborators. Because al-Hilali no longer had any reason to stay in Bonn, he relocated in the capital and accepted to work for the Berlin Arab Radio as a proofreader (muṣḥḥiḥ) and linguistic authority (marjiʿ lughawī).\(^{32}\) In addition, he requested his transfer to the University of Berlin. When the government responded favorably to his demand, al-Hilali became once again a lecturer and student.\(^{33}\)

The doctoral thesis he submitted to the University of Berlin was a commented German translation of the introduction of *al-Jamahir fi maʾrifat al-jawahir*, a book on mineralogy written by the medieval scholar al-Biruni (d. 1048).\(^{34}\) It was the same dissertation that Heffening had previously refused at the University of Bonn. The topic was Paul Kahle’s idea: he had proposed it to al-Hilali early on in his graduate studies, and was also responsible for introducing the primary source to him.\(^{35}\) When al-Hilali settled in Germany, Kahle had already developed an interest in al-Biruni’s *al-Jamahir*, as one article he published in 1936 clearly attests.\(^{36}\) In Bonn, he invited the Moroccan student to assist him with his work on two different manuscripts of *al-Jamahir*, at which point al-Hilali accepted to devote his doctoral dissertation to the opening section of this text.\(^{37}\)

But even though al-Hilali did not originally come up with the idea of writing on al-Biruni, his willingness to concentrate on such an open-minded medieval figure is

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\(^{33}\) al-Majdhub, 190.


\(^{35}\) See al-Hilali, *al-Barahin al-injiliyya*, 37, where he confesses that the topic was Kahle’s idea.


worthy of note. al-Biruni was neither an exponent of Islamic purism nor a religious scholar. He was a multifaceted scientist with one of the most investigative minds of his time. Building on the Greek and Indian traditions, he wrote on astronomy, mathematics and medicine, among other fields. Besides natural sciences, he also delved into human sciences and had a marked interest for politics and history. A number of his investigations focused, for instance, on non-Muslim societies as well as Muslim groups which are traditionally considered heretical. In one of his most famous treatises, Kitab fi tahqiq ma li-l-Hind (often referred to as Kitab al-Hind), al-Biruni presented a remarkably dispassionate account of his observations and research in India. His sociological explanation of idol worship and pictorial representations of God, which he saw as outgrowths of the practice of any religion by uneducated masses, stood out as particularly sympathetic. It virtually equated true Hinduism with monotheism, on a par with Christianity and Judaism.

There is no doubt that some of al-Biruni’s opinions and intellectual habits ran against al-Hilali’s deepest convictions. In a fatwa issued in 1942, the latter strongly disapproved of all pictorial representations in matters of religion—even mental ones—and indirectly accused Hindus of having led Muslims astray with their paganism. It may therefore seem surprising that al-Hilali followed up on Paul Kahle’s suggestion and

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40 The fatwa is entitled “Mas’alat istihdar surat al-shaykh ‘inda al-dhikr wa-l-istimdad minhu” and was published piecemeal in a newspaper of Tetouan over three consecutive days. For the most relevant sections, see al-Hurriyya, November 4, 1942, 1; al-Hurriyya, November 5, 1942, 1.
selected *al-Jamahir* for his dissertation. Why did he accept to work on a medieval Muslim scholar whose religious views hardly met Salafi standards? Considering al-Hilali’s puristic inclinations and past experiences, the translation of a treatise by Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr or Ibn Taymiyya could have been equally fitting, if not more appropriate. Yet his final choice needs not appear dumbfounding. al-Biruni was in fact a suitable topic, because many of the ideas and ideals that animated al-Hilali from the 1930s to the 1950s were still quite modernist (although they were sometimes presented with a high degree of self-assertion). To be sure, writing a doctoral dissertation on *al-Jamahir* was entirely compatible with Shakib Arslan’s understanding of Islamic modernism in the mid-twentieth century. A partial translation of this book in German would not only provide a source of collective pride; it would present Islam in the most positive light possible while at the same time suggesting that Muslims, who were once dynamic trailblazers in the realm of natural sciences, could rival and even surpass Westerners in the modern era. In that sense, al-Biruni had a greater potential of rousing Islamic national sentiments than Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr or Ibn Taymiyya.

al-Hilali defended his dissertation with success in 1940. He earned his Ph.D. in Arabic literature, became the first Moroccan graduate of the University of Berlin, and proudly took on the title of Doctor (*al-duktūr*).\(^\text{41}\) In the same year, he confirmed his admission into Western academic circles by publishing a short article on the caste-like aspects of tribalism in the Arabian Peninsula, which appeared in the prestigious German

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\(^\text{41}\) Anonymous, 25.
journal *Die Welt des Islams*. Besides academia, al-Hilali’s work at the Berlin Arab Radio was equally successful and earned him a certain degree of international fame. Although he was at first offered the position of proofreader, he served as a speaker as soon as the station went on the air in April 1939.

The Berlin Arab Radio was the Nazi response to the establishment in 1938 of an Arabic division of the BBC. Transnational radio broadcasts were the European Powers’ new means of shaping the opinion of populations otherwise hardly accessible or out of reach. The Berlin Arab Radio, for example, was a powerful station emitting from the heart of Nazi Germany, but reaching listeners all over the Arab world. Within a month of its inauguration, it received letters from listeners in Morocco, the Sudan, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen. Through its programs, the station strove to criticize French and British colonial policies in the region in a way that was, obviously, favorable to Germany’s designs. The information was closely monitored: al-Hilali recounts how he had to type each statement he intended to air, translate it into German, and submit several copies in advance to the station’s director. Naturally, the Berlin Arab Radio raised concerns among Germany’s political rivals. In Morocco, the French authorities feared the

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42 In the context of Nazi Germany, the notion of caste was a telling topic. See Taqi ed-Din al-Hilali, “Die Kasten in Arabien,” *Die Welt des Islams*, 22 (1940): 102-110.
adverse consequences of this intangible propaganda, but did not fully succeed in jamming
the transmissions.\textsuperscript{46}

Although the number of radio receivers per inhabitant was much lower in the
Middle East and North Africa than in Europe, word to mouth in the public sphere allowed
news to spread at a surprising speed, even far from urban areas.\textsuperscript{47} The Berlin Arab Radio
and its transnational broadcasts thus offered an unprecedented opportunity to foster a
sense of communion among the Muslims of the Arab world. The station had
correspondents in different countries and its news bulletins emphasized colonial
exactions in each locale. While Moroccans auditors could hear about the latest events in
Palestine (by far the most recurrent topic), Lebanese and Iraqis could learn about French
injustice in the Protectorate of Tunisia.

With its wide scope, its anti-colonial message and its Islamic references, the
Berlin Arab Radio found an enthusiastic supporter in Shakib Arslan, who took the risk of
visiting the station during a secret trip from Geneva to Berlin in the fall of 1939.\textsuperscript{48} The
main speaker responsible for assuring the Islamic character of the programs was of
course al-Hilali. His regular interventions combined anti-colonial rhetoric with a
distinctly religious message. Nearly a month after he started working at the station, al-
Hilali went on the air to celebrate the anniversary of the 1930 Berber ʿẓahīr (decree)—a

\textsuperscript{48} al-Hilali, “Damʿa,” 10; Cleveland, 155-156. al-Hilali claims that Arslan wanted to keep his visit secret,
but an excited speaker announced it without permission. It should also be noted that the paramount
speaker at the Berlin Arab Radio, the Iraqi Yunus al-Bahri, already knew Shakib Arslan when he moved
Moroccan cause célèbre that Arslan had single-handedly internationalized—and to
denounce other French attempts at undermining the Islamic character of his native
country. In 1939 alone, al-Hilali devoted several of his radio interventions to the notion
of jihād and the religious obligation for true believers to combat colonialism. He also
delivered apolitical lectures on Ramadan and matters of ritual.

But for all its potential, shortwave radio broadcast had its limits. It is true that the
Berlin Arab Radio could reach a greater number of people, even illiterate ones, much
faster than print media. Yet its impact was rather evanescent, and the range of its signal
could not extend to far-flung regions. Unlike al-Manar, it failed to reach Muslims of
Southeast Asia. Hence, the station and its programs were specifically tailored for the
populations of the Middle East and North Africa rather than the entire umma. As a result,
it was only natural for al-Hilali to emphasize Arab affairs and culture. Some of his
interventions intended to raise his listeners’ spirits by lauding the Arab poet al-Mutanabbi
(d. 965) or by praising the Arabs’ virtuous character (futuwwa) that inspired European
knights to cultivate the ideal of chivalry in the Middle Ages. But the choice of these
themes does not imply that al-Hilali was an Arab nationalist per se. Like Shakib Arslan,
he saw Arabism as desirable so long as it fueled the revival of the Muslim community as
a whole. On the air, however, his ultimate frame of reference was religious. The

49 ABGR (APF/DAP), “Radio-Berlin,” May 16, 1939. For details on Arslan and the Berber ẓahīr, see
Cleveland, 96-98.
50 ABGR (APF/DAP), “Radio-Berlin,” April 29, 1939; July 21, 1939; July 28, 1939; August 18, 1939;
November 3, 1939; November 10, 1939.
52 Hourani, 299-300.
colonial powers were not merely the enemies of the Arabs: they were the enemies of Islam. Likewise, the promulgation of the Berber ẓāhir in 1930 was not merely a significant event in the history of Morocco: it was significant in the history of Islam.\(^{53}\)

At any rate, radio broadcasting allowed al-Hilali’s message to further transcend boundaries and to reach new areas and audiences. Though his work at the station brought him a few more enemies, he gained some notable admirers as well. A few years after his departure from Germany, during a short trip to Cairo in 1947, al-Hilali met with ʿAbd al-Karim al-Khattabi (d. 1963), the famous leader of the Rif War in northern Morocco who had surrendered to French forces in 1926. al-Hilali’s visit was timely. ʿAbd al-Karim had been sentenced to exile at Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean two decades earlier, but in 1947 he had just succeeded to escape and to reach the Egyptian capital.\(^{54}\) When one of the guests informed the veteran of the Rif War that a man named Taqi al-Din al-Hilali was there to see him, ʿAbd al-Karim requested that he be given precedence over all the journalists and political figures who were already in the room. ʿAbd al-Karim reportedly declared that nothing had cheered him more during his exile than al-Hilali’s eloquent sermons on the Berlin Arab Radio.\(^{55}\)

**A Formative Experience and Its Impact**

The six years that al-Hilali spent working and studying in Germany had a profound effect on him. During his stay, he encountered a new reality and witnessed the

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\(^{55}\) al-Hilali, *al-Daʿwa*, 44.
grandeur as well as the malaise of European society. At the ethical level, for instance, he later described how shocked he had been by the indecency of gender relations among young Germans who flirted and dated.\footnote{Ibid., 146-147.} According to him, Europeans had nothing but contempt for women. In the Berlin subway, he once noticed how no one was willing to give up his seat to an old lady, while dozens would suddenly volunteer when a young and attractive girl walked in the wagon.\footnote{Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and Sulayman ibn Muhammad al-Hamidi, \textit{al-Turuq al-shar'iyya li-hall al-mashakil al-zawjiyya} (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Salafiyya, 1983), 70, 77.} At the same time, he was troubled by the behavior of European women and their lack of obedience to their husbands.\footnote{Ibid., 114.} But all these recollections date from the 1970s, at a time when al-Hilali’s religious ethos had become even more puristic. While such statements might express how he felt toward German mores in the 1930s and 1940s, they are likely to reflect a later state of mind.

Regarding intellectual life, however, al-Hilali was much more outspoken and recorded his impressions in several contemporaneous accounts. For him, Europe was largely superior to the Muslim world in terms of both natural and human sciences. He was fascinated by the intellectual methodology, rigor and positivism of Western academia, though he resented the critical and condescending view of Islam that dominated Orientalist circles. Of course there were exceptions, especially in a country like Germany, which had no colonial stake in the Middle East and North Africa. For example, al-Hilali lauded his supervisor at the University of Berlin, Richard Hartmann (d. 1965), for his support to academic freedom, his lack of bias and his high intellectual
standards. But al-Hilali remarked that Hartmann was an exception, for most European Orientalists in France, Britain, and even in Scandinavian countries had deep-seated prejudices toward Muslims and Islam.\(^{59}\)

It was all the more fortunate that al-Hilali now possessed the necessary intellectual tools and credibility to defeat these Orientalists at their own game. On the day of his dissertation defense at the University of Berlin, he sat before a committee of ten highly qualified Western scholars including Karl Brockelmann (d. 1956), the famous German Orientalist and historian of Arabic literature. As it turned out, Brockelmann did not like al-Hilali’s dissertation at all. More specifically, he did not agree with the contention that al-Biruni was a truly devout Muslim rather than a freethinker. But this was precisely the Orientalist assumption that al-Hilali was trying to rebut. Brockelmann’s view, he explained, was as inaccurate as it was offensive, because it suggested that al-Biruni had too much interest in science and was too intelligent and too rational to believe in a religion like Islam. The other members of the dissertation committee agreed with him. They all refuted Brockelmann’s view and voted in favor of his revisionist argument. In the end, al-Hilali wrote, truth, reason and freedom of thought prevailed: the foreign Arab student triumphed over the greatest Orientalist of his time.\(^{60}\)

This personal achievement boosted al-Hilali’s confidence. After his graduation, he set out to defend Islam by means of the powerful intellectual habits he had learned in Germany. Clearly, his positivist approach to historical sources reinforced rather than

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\(^{59}\) *al-Hurríyya*, July 9, 1942, 1.

undermined his scripturalist and literalistic inclinations. From the 1940s onward, al-Hilali often wrote like the Orientalist he now was, making extensive use of footnotes, text-based demonstrations and philological arguments, and displaying an unwavering confidence in the concept of objectivity and the manifest character of truth.\(^{61}\) Using this methodological apparatus to his advantage, he reached essentialist conclusions about a single and unchanging Salafi Islam. The difference is that al-Hilali’s work, unlike that of most European Orientalists, idealized rather than depreciated this reified Islam.

In that sense, his training at a major German university did not transform his religious ethos per se. It rather improved his ability to argue and to conduct meticulous research to support his puristic understanding of Islam. It also exposed him to new topics that were ideal for bolstering the Muslims’ prestige vis-à-vis the West, such as al-Biruni and the concept of *futuwwa.*\(^{62}\) There was no obvious contradiction between al-Hilali’s religious convictions, his goals as an Islamic nationalist, and his scholarly training in Europe. Nor did his adherence to Western academia generate any second-guessing or noticeable discomfort. On the contrary, al-Hilali went back to the University of Bonn after the Second World War in 1953 as a visiting professor. He also remained in contact with Paul Kahle and even joined him in Oxford in August 1954 to translate yet another Arabic manuscript.\(^{63}\)

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\(^{62}\) Once again, it was Paul Kahle who first stimulated al-Hilali’s interest in *futuwwa*. See the latter’s introduction to al-Baghdadi, 103-106, 108, 111.

At the socio-political level, al-Hilali’s opinion of Europe combined fascination and repulsion. While he considered the anti-religious underpinnings of communism aberrant and dangerous, he nonetheless believed that Europe offered socio-political models from which Muslims should learn. After the Second World War, West Germany specifically appealed to him, not so much because of its capitalist or democratic character, but because it was a startling proof that religious beliefs could contribute to the success of a modern state. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (d. 1967) had a son who was a well-known monk, al-Hilali pointed out, and all universities in the country boasted a faculty of theology. What is more, students prayed and the population esteemed piety. al-Hilali marveled at the fact that the largest political party from the late 1940s onward was the Christian Democratic Union, which led West Germany’s successful reconstruction.

His experience in Europe also taught him that sectarianism had to be avoided. al-Hilali witnessed the power behind the various expressions of nationalism that were salient in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, and he envied the strong bonds that tied all the members of a community together. The idea that scattered individuals can put their differences aside for the higher interests of a nation captured his imagination. To a Moroccan audience, he wrote in 1942 that all Muslims should take inspiration from Europeans and work toward religious unity (tawḥīd al-ʿaqīda) as well as pan-Islamic unity based on nationalist-like sentiments (tawḥīd al-shuʿūr wa tawḥīd al-bilād). This all-embracing cohesion required a struggle against both the internal and external enemies of

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64 *al-Hurrīyya*, May 30, 1942, 2.
65 Anonymous, 26.
The Salafi creed is unique, al-Hilali claimed, and all Muslims should abide by it. Because religious innovations and Sufi practices constituted an obstacle to Islamic nationalism, their elimination became all the more justified. United under one true Islam, Muslims could thrive as much as European nations.

Such a discourse was of course highly reminiscent of Shakib Arslan’s. Like his friend and mentor, al-Hilali believed that the umma needed to develop a sense of communal Islamic belonging and pride equivalent in strength to the spirit that animated European nationalisms. He also shared with Arslan an equivocal definition of Islamic nation-ness, which he always assimilated to religious unity and fraternity, but sometimes linked to a historic homeland whose precise boundaries were left unspecified. al-Hilali mourned the passing of early Islamic society when, under the rightly-guided caliphs, a Moroccan could travel all the way to the province of Khurasan and yet remain within the bounds of a unique state and a unique law. This “great Islamic nation” (al-waṭan al-islāmī al-akbar) of the past was not built on Islamic diversity, al-Hilali wrote, but on the absence of religious divergence. It was thus unacceptable to pretend that disagreements (ikhtilāfūt) were a blessing for the umma, as one controversial hadith suggests. On the contrary, they were detrimental. Only by returning to pristine Islam, which knew no theological and legal schools, would Muslims regain their strength and be on a par with European nations.

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66 al-Hurriyya, August 17, 1942, 1.
67 al-Hurriyya, October 6, 1942, 1.
68 al-Hurriyya, August 8, 1942, 1. Contemporary Salafis usually adopt the same attitude toward this hadith. See the Moroccan weekly newspaper al-Sabil, July 15, 2005, 20.
Islamic Nationalism Versus Moroccan Nationalism, 1942-1947

al-Hilali was rather secretive concerning his departure from Germany. For reasons that are not entirely clear, life in Berlin became more difficult for him after the outbreak of the Second World War. In March 1942 he accepted to return to his native Morocco for the first time in twenty years. In truth, al-Hilali was on a mission. Hajj Amin al-Husayni (d. 1974), the famous mufti of Jerusalem who had escaped to Nazi Germany in 1941, asked al-Hilali to go to Tetouan to deliver an oral message to ʿAbd al-Khaliq al-Turris (d. 1970), the leader of the Hizb al-Islah al-Watani (Party of National Reform) in the Spanish Protectorate. al-Hilali never revealed what the message was; he only said that it was political in nature and pertained to the welfare and higher interests of Muslims.

According to French historian Charles-Robert Ageron, he had been charged with the task of going to northern Morocco to recommend the fusion of three local anti-colonial parties, namely, those of al-Turris, Muhammad al-Makki al-Nasiri, and Ibrahim al-Wazzani.

At any rate, al-Hilali’s trip to northern Morocco was supposed to be temporary. He intended to return to Berlin as soon as the mission was over. But because he had not been able to renew his Iraqi citizenship while in Germany, he did not possess any appropriate travel documents and was forced to rely on a forged passport—a detail that

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69 Anonymous, 26.
70 al-Hilali, al-Daʿwa, 30, 38; al-Hilali, “al-Sultan Mawlay ʿAbd al-ʿAziz,” 54. al-Hilali also confessed to a Moroccan scholar that he also acted as a translator during discussions that occurred in 1942 between al-Turris and Nazi agents who were ready to offer money and weapons to his party. See Abdelmajid Benjelloun, Approches du colonialisme espagnol et du mouvement nationaliste marocain dans l’ex-Maroc khélifien (Rabat: OKAD, 1988), 224.
71 Ageron, 198.
the Spanish authorities easily noticed. What he planned as a short trip to Morocco therefore ended up lasting for five years.

The details of al-Hilali’s departure from Germany reveal that he continued to develop ties with individuals linked to Salafi networks. Chief among them was, of course, the mufti of Jerusalem. Though he had a greater interest in political rather than religious affairs, Hajj Amin was a friend of Arslan and a former graduate of Rida’s short-lived Dar al-Da’wa wa-l-Irshad.72 Benefiting from a generous Nazi subsidy during his exile, he was no less generous toward al-Hilali. The latter claims that Hajj Amin offered him large sums of money in Berlin, paid for his trip to Morocco and continued to send him funds afterward. The mufti even provided him with a paid personal secretary (kātib), whose services al-Hilali must have appreciated, for he had already turned blind to the point of being unable to read.73 He had started to lose sight during his stay in Germany, at which point he considered learning Braille.74

As for ʿAbd al-Khaliq al-Turris (also known as Torrès), he too had met Shakib Arslan during the latter’s visit to Tetouan in 1930. Along with other Moroccan nationalists of Salafi background such as ʿAllal al-Fasi, Muhammad Dawud, and Muhammad al-Makki al-Nasiri (see chapter two), he remained in contact with Arslan and continued to gravitate toward his leadership throughout the 1940s.

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73 al-Hilali, al-Da’wa, 38, 106.
Although some of these activists attached more importance to the cause of Moroccan nationalism and less weight to Salafi reformism per se, they did not deem the two categories incompatible. al-Turris, for instance, had studied in a Free School founded in Tetouan in 1925 by two Salafis, ʿAbd al-Salam Bennouna and Muhammad Dawud, who were themselves students of Muhammad ibn al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi. al-Turris had also studied briefly at the Qarawiyyn in Fes and at al-Azhar in Cairo; but he was too enthralled with politics to find much interest in religious classes and issues.\(^7^5\) Nevertheless, al-Turris and the other Moroccan nationalists often collaborated with each other (or tolerated each other) for the greater cause of anti-colonialism, regardless of their degree of adherence to the Salafiyya. al-Hilali accepted this situation and agreed that circumstances required collaboration. Therefore he supported all anti-colonial efforts that were not overtly anti-Islamic.

However, after twenty years of absence, al-Hilali was a rather peculiar figure in the Moroccan religious landscape. With his strong convictions that bore influences from the Indian Ahl-i Hadith and Saudi Wahhabism, he was far from being the typical Moroccan Salafi. The contrast was even greater considering that the Salafiyya in his native country had remained highly modernist and progressive in nature. Islamic modernism à la Muhammad ʿAbduh had indeed become “[…] the wellspring of Moroccan nationalism.”\(^7^6\) As a result, local Salafis often articulated their religious ideals

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in a way that reflected Moroccan authenticity rather than Islamic universality. A modernist Salafi like ʿAllal al-Fasi, for instance, never severed his affiliation to the Maliki school of law because, for him, it was inextricably intertwined with Moroccan history and identity. As a nationalist who tried to bring the people of his country together, he conceded that Sufism could not be condemned altogether because it was part of Morocco’s national heritage. al-Fasi thus tried to balance Salafi reformism with the greater objectives of the Moroccan nationalist struggle. This seems to be the reason why he disputed a sweeping critique of Sufism that Rashid Rida had published in *al-Manar*. With a hint of nationalist pride, al-Fasi argued that Moroccan Sufis had not always been guilty of innovation, like Rida’s article suggested. Rather, they had been fully orthodox until the fifteenth century.

For al-Hilali, such an argument was simply irreconcilable with the Salafiyya. Sufism was wrong, regardless of historical nuances or time periods, and the notion of orthodox Sufism was an oxymoron. But in specific cases, he too was willing to tone down his rhetoric when it served the interest of anti-colonialism. A few years earlier, in 1934, while he was still in Iraq, he had published an article in which he praised Marabbi Rebbu, the Moroccan Sufi resistant and son of the famous Maʿ al-ʿAynayn (d. 1910). Evidently, al-Hilali considered that Rebbu’s fight against French colonialism in the Sus

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77 He actually endeavored to renew Maliki law on the basis of *istihsān* (preference) and *maslaha* (utility), two concepts that he deemed authentically Moroccan. See ʿAllal al-Fasi, *Difaʿ an al-shariʿa* (Rabat: Matabi al-Risala, 1966), 13, 32.
region warranted one’s tolerance of his Sufi convictions. This, however, was unusual. Overall, al-Hilali remained a staunch opponent of Sufism, and throughout his stay in Morocco he was particularly critical of the Tijaniyya. Though he was aware that the anti-colonial struggle required collaboration, his critique of Sufis was rarely soft. As an Islamic nationalist, he was reluctant to compromise on Salafi conformism.

al-Hilali was sometimes so reckless in his denunciation of Sufism and Sufi practices that he most likely undermined the work of ʿAbd al-Khaliq al-Turris and his collaborators, who were trying to gain certain tribes of northern Morocco to the nationalist cause. When al-Hilali criticized the cult of ʿAbd al-Salam ibn Mashish (d. circa 1227), one of the most influential Sufi masters in the history of Morocco, he angered the head of the local tribe of the Banu ʿArus. The chieftain as well as twenty-five of his men gathered the blood money (diyya) and stood ready to kill al-Hilali in retaliation for his insolence toward their patron saint. By contrast, other Moroccan Salafis and nationalists were never so doctrinaire with respect to Sufism. Between 1937 and 1948, al-Turris and his Party of National Reform almost always sent a delegation to the annual festivities revolving around the pilgrimage to Ibn Mashish’s tomb, which is located atop a mountain in the western part of the Rif near the city of Larache. There, they could avoid Spanish control and directly spread nationalist ideas to a population that

79 al-Fath, 393 (1934), 847.
80 In one rare case, al-Hilali almost apologizes and says he did not want to insult Sufis in his articles. But despite his softer tone, he persisted in saying that Sufis were wrong and should adopt the Salafiyya. See al-Hurriyya, October 9, 1942, 1.
was otherwise difficult to reach.\textsuperscript{82} al-Hilali met al-Turris to discuss his problems with the Banu ʿArus, but it is unclear if the latter criticized the former for his religious rigidity and lack of pragmatism. In the end, the emir of Larache interceded on behalf of al-Hilali and convinced the Banu ʿArus not to seek revenge.\textsuperscript{83}

**Priority to the Puristic Salafiyya**

The religious gap between Islamic nationalism and Moroccan nationalism was nonetheless growing obvious. To a far greater extent than most Moroccan Salafis, al-Hilali believed that the anti-colonial struggle should not, as far as possible, interfere with the integrity of Salafi Islam. National sentiments were beneficial, especially if they were Islamic in nature, but they should never become so important as to relegate religion to an inferior position. Clearly, al-Hilali feared such an eventuality. Through his collaboration with Moroccan activists, he realized the risks involved in promoting a synthesis between nationalism and Islam, even if this was useful to do so. He devoted two articles to this particular issue in *al-Hurriyya*, the newspaper of al-Turris’ party. Nationalism, he wrote, must not be confused with the Salafiyya. The former means respect for the rights of fellow citizens as well as one’s willingness to make sacrifices for them, to defend them and to allege their suffering. In short, to be a nationalist is to avoid being a traitor to one’s own people and state. This attitude is not specific to any religious tradition, al-Hilali wrote, for it is common to Muslims and heretics alike. The Chinese, Japanese, Indian,  

\textsuperscript{82} Abdelmajid Benjelloun, *Le patriotisme marocain face au Protectorat espagnol* (Rabat: Imprimerie Al Maârif Al Jadida, 1993), 158-159.  
\textsuperscript{83} al-Hilali, *al-Daʿwa*, 50-51.
and even pagan peoples are familiar with nationalism.\textsuperscript{84} So are insects: al-Hilali claimed that the lifestyles of ants and bees are among the best examples of sincere nationalism.\textsuperscript{85}

For al-Hilali, these basic aspects of nationalism were compatible with the true Islam of the pious ancestors and could be applied to the \textit{umma}. He therefore approved of “Islamic nationalism” (\textit{al-\-wa\-\-\-taniyya al-islamiyya}) and listed some of the modern ‘ulama’ who epitomized it, such as Hajj Amin al-Husayni, Mustafa al-Maraghi, Ibn Badis and the late Rashid Rida.\textsuperscript{86} Yet al-Hilali wanted his readers to know that, from a technical viewpoint, the Salafiyya was a totally different concept. In a few sentences, he explained that to be a Salafi means: “[…] to rely on hadiths so as to be in accordance with that to which the prophet, his companions and their followers conformed.”\textsuperscript{87} The Salafiyya is pure Islam unsullied by innovation, he wrote, and its followers are the only ones who shall be granted salvation in the hereafter.

This declaration is significant in at least two respects. On the one hand, it represents al-Hilali’s first written attempt to sever the concept and label “Salafiyya” from the broad socio-political project that had been associated with it since the early twentieth century. This was an interesting move considering that al-Hilali still made a connection between Islamic nationalism and the Salafiyya. His call for a unique and united Islamic nation was, indeed, a corollary of his call for a unique and transnational Salafi Islam. Yet he saw the need to draw a distinction that Shakib Arslan had not deemed necessary. On

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{al-Hurr\-\-ri\-\-yya}, October 6, 1942, 1.  
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{al-Hurr\-\-ri\-\-yya}, October 7, 1942, 1.  
\textsuperscript{86} \textit{al-Hurr\-\-ri\-\-yya}, October 6, 1942, 1.  
\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibid.}
the other hand, al-Hilali’s aforementioned definition of the Salafiyya was rather narrow and puristic in comparison to the discourse of other Moroccan Salafis at the time. In 1947, ʿAllal al-Fasi willingly acknowledged that the Salafiyya was intertwined with the independence movement. He treated the Salafiyya and the Moroccan people’s resistance to French colonialism as two sides of the same coin. Unlike al-Hilali, he continued to portray the Salafiyya as a progressive intellectual, social and political project, and not simply as a religious methodology and a set of proper beliefs and practices:

The future of Islam [lies in] in the success of true Salafiyya, that is, in the Muslims’ conviction that it is necessary to act in accordance with the Book of God and the Sunna of His prophet, to be in agreement with the requirements of evolving modes of thought, to care for the preponderant reason that has various far-reaching effects, and to reflect on the humanist principles [al-uṣūl al-insāniyya] that the Qurʾan made clear.89

On the whole, al-Hilali would not have denied the soundness of these recommendations. After all, as a graduate of the University of Berlin, he was himself a product of “evolving modes of thought.” He was also a partisan of reason (although he may have envisioned its role and application differently than al-Fasi) and he boasted the humanist aspect of Islamic nationalism in the face of colonialism. Yet, al-Hilali was increasingly eager to isolate the Salafiyya, as both a concept and a label, from these political, social and intellectual elements that could interfere or tamper with it. In that sense, he was definitely more anti-syncretistic than his colleagues. He did not decry

89 Ibid., 142.
modernist and progressive ideals, but he wanted to make sure that they were not
subsumed under the Salafiyya, which he conceived as a locked-in body of non-negotiable
religious rules and regulations whose number, incidentally, seemed to grow larger with
time. As a result, al-Hilali proved to be much more puristic than virtually all the
Moroccan nationalists and Salafis with whom he collaborated between 1942 and 1947.

True to his transnational outlook, he did not think that Morocco required a tailor-
made *daʿwa*. Indeed, his work as a Salafi proselyte in his native country was not very
different from the one he had previously undertaken in Upper Egypt, India, Iraq, Saudi
Arabia, and Afghanistan. He gave sermons on the Salafiyya in mosques, opposed the
people’s over-reliance on the Maliki school of law, combated Sufism and its numerous
manifestations, denounced the Ashʿari creed that prevailed in Morocco, tried to purify
religious life by teaching hadiths and by expounding proper worship with respect to
prayer, fasting, the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*), trust in God (*tawakkul*), seeking help
(*istighātha*) and so forth. He also promoted Arabic literacy. To spread his message, al-
Hilali traveled and preached in many towns and villages in northern Morocco, even
though colonial authorities kept an eye on him. Besides Tetouan, he went to nearby

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90 One scholar has rightly pointed out that Islamic purists tend to widen the scope of this non-negotiable
body of rules and regulations (*uṣūl*) and, by the same token, to restrict flexibility and diversity in
religious discourses. See Khaled Abou El Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldiers: The Authoritative and

91 al-Hilali, *al-Daʿwa*, 30-96. One book devoted to the Salafi way of praying dates from that period. It is
Mahdiyya, 1945).

Martil, Tangier, Chefchaouen (where he married again), Asila and Ksar al-Kabir.\textsuperscript{93} Like everywhere else, al-Hilali’s missionary work stirred a lot of opposition and often turned into an ordeal. An array of local ‘ulama’ insulted him and accused him of being a Wahhabi, of trying to destroy the Maliki school of law, and of causing dissension (\textit{fitna}).

al-Hilali was indeed relentless at times. In late 1946 in Chefchaouen, he warned a congregation that they could not read the Qur’an out loud in the mosque, because it was contrary to Salafi practice. He gave the men a number of proofs, including two hadiths, and left. When he returned a few days later, the worshippers were still reciting the Qur’an out loud despite the warnings and proofs he had given them. Worse, they were reciting as loud as they could so as to express their disdain. Displeased, al-Hilali raised his voice and repeated one hadith that proved the congregation wrong. The emir of Chefchaouen, who was present in the mosque and presumably annoyed, ordered him to keep quiet. al-Hilali replied likewise and added insults until police officers dragged him out of the venue, arrested him and threw him in jail for about a month.\textsuperscript{94} Though al-Hilali claims that this was an evil trap set up by heretics and colonial authorities, it seems fair to say that his peremptory statements and holier-than-thou attitude must have been irritating to some.

He also differed from most other Moroccan Salafis and nationalists in that he relied heavily on Hanbali literature. In Tetouan, al-Hilali’s teaching drew on standard Wahhabi works such as \textit{Fath al-majid}, a famous commentary on \textit{Kitab al-tawhid}. He also released \textit{Ziyarat al-qubur wa-l-istinjad bi-l-maqbur}, a book by Ibn Taymiyya on the

\textsuperscript{93} al-Hilali, \textit{al-Da‘wa}, 50, 74, 81, 103. In some instances, al-Hilali moved to the hinterland to find a dryer climate. He was suffering from heavy asthma crises and tried to avoid coastal towns.

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Ibid.}, 84-90.
visitation of shrines, and wrote a commentary on Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s treatise *Kashf al-shubhat*, which he used as a textbook for his lessons in mosques. When this last book went under print, al-Hilali claims that he managed to sell a thousand copies in northern Morocco alone. He explains that his objective was twofold: to provide the people with a much-needed source on *tawḥīd* and the Sunna of the prophet, and to rehabilitate Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab in Morocco.⁹⁵

But al-Hilali was well aware that many of his fellow Moroccans would not accept to read books by such controversial Hanbali scholars without some hesitation. The most distrustful ones would simply reject this literature out of hand. Therefore, he adjusted the names of the two authors in order to facilitate the dissemination of their ideas. A page of advertisement from the mid-1940s displays the marketing maneuver: Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab became Muhammad ibn Sulayman al-Dirʿi (from the oasis of Dirʿiyya, where he concluded an alliance with the Al Saʿud) while Ibn Taymiyya’s name was shortened to al-Hafiz al-Harrani (after Harran, his native town in today’s Turkey).

Arguably, such a deviation from conventional usage would not have made much sense unless al-Hilali’s intention was to mislead the public into believing that the authors were obscure scholars rather than notorious ones. This benevolent deception does not seem to have bothered Muhammad ibn Ibrahim (d. 1969), who had succeeded ʿAbdallah ibn Hasan as chief *qāḍī* of Saudi Arabia.⁹⁶ al-Hilali mailed him a copy of the two books, and

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the Saudi scholar was reportedly pleased to know that they were being distributed in Morocco.\textsuperscript{97}

A closer look at al-Hilali’s own literary output during his stay in the Spanish Protectorate reveals how puristic he had become in certain religious matters. In Chefchaouen, he wrote one of his first major books, which went through two re-editions over the years. At the request of his Salafi students who wanted to learn about true religion, al-Hilali dictated a compendium that was published under the title *Mukhtasar hady al-khalil fi-l-aqāʾid wa ʿibadat al-jalil*. The book is typically puristic insofar as it is, for the most part, a dry list of Salafi norms—a literary genre that Olivier Roy aptly labeled as religious “dos and don’ts.”\textsuperscript{98} In it, al-Hilali describes the proper Salafi code of conduct: how and when to use the *siwāk* (the small stick that the prophet used to clean his teeth), how and how not to place one’s hands during prayer, what phrase to say when entering a home, and so on. Scripturalism and literalism pervade the book to such an extent that some of its passages are rather puzzling. For instance, al-Hilali devoted a section to determining the amount of alms tax in gold dinars and silver dirhams that Muslims are expected to pay.\textsuperscript{99} While these medieval currencies are mentioned in classical texts, in the mid-twentieth century they belonged to museums. In a very literalistic fashion, al-Hilali also specified that veiling was not only mandatory for a man’s wives; it was also required for his female slaves (*mā malakat al-yāmīn min al-

\textsuperscript{97} al-Hilali, *al-Daʿwa*, 48.


This directive would have made more sense in pre-colonial Morocco, when official slavery had started to dwindle but was still extant. Other sources dating from that period confirm the puristic character of al-Hilali’s da’wa. He formulated an extremely demanding conception of tawhīd, strove to unveil heresies and innovations, promoted the implementation of canonical punishments for sinners who refused to repent, forbade people to read books of dialectical theology (kalām) and promoted a standardized Salafiyya in both creed and law. Many ṣalāḥiyya in northern Morocco were appalled by these views. al-Hilali mentions that he had several enemies who devoted countless Friday sermons to underlining the alleged errors in his books.

Nevertheless, most Moroccan nationalists appear to have tolerated his puristic and Wahhabi-inspired views even though they did not fully share them. Indeed, al-Hilali’s closest friends and collaborators between 1942 and 1947 were two Salafis and anti-colonial activists of relatively different backgrounds. The first one was Muhammad al-Tanji (d. 1991), a native of Tetouan born in 1902. He had attended the Qarawiyyin in Fes and had studied under one of al-Hilali’s favorite professors there: al-Fatimi al-Sharadi. He then moved to Cairo and graduated from the faculty of uṣūl al-dīn at al-Azhar.

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100 Ibid., 27.
103 al-Hilali, al-Da’wa, 48.
University in 1931. When al-Hilali met him in Tetouan, he was a religious teacher who closely collaborated with ʿAbd al-Khaliq al-Turris and the Party of National Reform.\(^\text{104}\)

The second was ʿAbdallah Gannun (d. 1989), one of the most luminous figures of twentieth-century Tangier. Largely autodidact, Gannun had not pursued higher religious studies at any university. He first learned from his father, who had been a teacher at the Qarawiyyin and thus owned a large library. In addition, he attended the lessons of scholars who happened to pass through Tangier, most notably Abu Shuʿayb al-Dukkali. Gannun introduced himself as a Salafi and was a typically modernist one. Younger, he read the European classics that had been translated in Lebanon and Egypt: Tolstoy, Hugo, Rousseau, Goethe, Montesquieu and Shakespeare were among his favorite.\(^\text{105}\) al-Hilali had heard about Gannun and his work while he was still in Berlin, but the two men met for the first time in 1942.\(^\text{106}\) Like Muhammad al-Tanji, Gannun was then involved in religious teaching and anti-colonial activities.

One may wonder why these two men and other Moroccan Salafis and nationalists of the Spanish Protectorate tolerated al-Hilali’s puristic views so easily. There are many possible answers. First of all, al-Hilali was a well-educated religious man whose personal journey commanded authority. He had roamed the Islamic world to become a respected


\(^{106}\) *al-Anwar*, 33 (1953), 1-2.
ālim and had studied or collaborated with major figures such as al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi, Rida, al-Mubarakpuri and Arslan. These were impressive references.

Secondly, al-Hilali and his fellow Moroccan Salafis were not diametrically opposed. On the contrary, they shared the same basic principles of Salafi epistemology and agreed on many religious issues, such as the need to return to the scriptures, to rid society of the excesses of Sufism, and to overcome taqlīd. Although many may have considered that al-Hilali was going too far, they could not deny the soundness of his Salafi premises. Moreover, he could still be viewed as the puristic anchor of an otherwise broader socio-political reform program. The existence of several common denominators made collaboration easier.

Thirdly, it is important to keep in mind that al-Hilali was a nationalist, albeit an Islamic one. He did not oppose Moroccan nationalism so long as it was neither particularistic nor oblivious to the rest of the umma. His fellow Moroccan Salafis, for their part, respected the fact that he abhorred European colonialism and tried in his own way to help Muslims overcome their weaknesses. In the context of the 1940s, al-Hilali’s puristic articulation of Islam was sometimes persuasive, often understandable, and almost always worth tolerating in the eyes of other Moroccan nationalists. Likewise, al-Hilali respected all anti-colonial activists who showed deference to Islam, even if their religious beliefs and practices did not squarely coincide with his own puristic convictions. Besides modernist Salafis, al-Hilali was ready to collaborate with Islamists as well. When Hasan al-Banna wrote him from Cairo and asked him to become the Moroccan correspondent
for *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, the eponym journal that the Muslim Brotherhood published between 1942 and 1946, al-Hilali accepted.\(^{107}\) He wrote a few articles under a pseudonym until the British and Spanish colonial authorities discovered the stratagem and brought the collaboration to an end. al-Hilali lauded and supported al-Banna’s efforts,\(^ {108}\) even though the latter was not a champion of the Salafiyya in its purest form. As noted in the previous chapter, the intensity of the struggle against a common external enemy—European imperialism—facilitated the cooperation between various categories of Sunni reformist activists who may otherwise have disagreed on a number of religious points.

Fourthly, al-Hilali may have been puristic in many regards, but he was neither ignorant of the West nor intellectually opposed to it. Put simply, he was no obscurantist. His direct experience and knowledge of Europe must have reassured his fellow Moroccan Salafis. Nevertheless, it is true that al-Hilali was difficult to label or categorize at the time, even for those who knew him well. He was often branded as a Wahhabi by his opponents, yet he held a Ph.D. from the University of Berlin, was a polyglot, corresponded with eminent European scholars, dressed in suits and ties and still refused to grow a beard.\(^ {109}\) This was confusing. When al-Hilali wrote an article on the need to stone adulterers, his puristic discourse and methodology shocked a rival scholar from Tangier who, ironically, criticized him for being “a Europeanized man” (*rajul*

\(^{108}\) al-Hilali, *al-Da’wa*, 82-83.  
al-Hilali not only came from Germany and dressed like a European; he could articulate and defend puristic religious opinions like a Western-educated man. In a different article, he justified cutting the hands of robbers on the basis of logic and social utilitarianism. The case of Saudi Arabia shows that the implementation of this canonical punishment is an effective deterrent, he claimed. It is more efficient and socially sound than the European systems. Plus, it relieves the state from the burden of maintaining extra prisons and keeping an oversized corps of law-enforcement officers.111

**Lisan al-Din**

The multifaceted and somewhat ambivalent persona of al-Hilali, torn between religious purism and modernism, is easily perceptible in the pages of *Lisan al-Din* (The Language of Religion), the Salafi journal that he founded in Tetouan in 1946. The title was a testimony to al-Hilali’s liminal state of mind, for it was also an allusion to *Lisan al-Din* ibn al-Khatib (d. 1375), the historian and *homme de lettres* of Granada who exemplified the literary and cultural refinement of al-Andalus.112 Like al-Biruni, Ibn al-Khatib was not a model of Salafi purism, but he was a useful object of collective pride.

This journal was al-Hilali’s contribution to the field of monthly Salafi magazines. It followed the pattern previously established by Rashid Rida’s *al-Manar*, Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi’s *al-Islah* and Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib’s *al-Fath*. al-Hilali’s two closest Moroccan associates, Muhammad al-Tanj and ʿAbdallah Gannun, collaborated to the

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111 *al-Hurriyya*, June 11, 1942, 2.
journal from its inception. Gannun’s involvement was particularly important, because he eventually took charge of the monthly Qur’anic exegesis and replaced al-Hilali as editor-in-chief in 1949.

From the beginning, *Lisan al-Din* exhibited al-Hilali’s combined call for Salafi conformism and Islamic nationalism. As Shakib Arslan’s alter ego, he focused primarily on religious rather than political issues. Most of the journal’s articles were written by al-Hilali himself and addressed technical topics of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Moreover, the journal never limited itself to Moroccan affairs. Rather, it adopted a global outlook, as *al-Manar* and *al-Fath* had already done, and informed readers about the situation of Muslims in Holland, Indonesia, Yemen and Pakistan. The identity of the journal’s collaborators reflected al-Hilali’s worldwide contacts. Mas‘ud al-Nadwi, his favorite student from Lucknow, wrote several exclusive articles on Islam in the Indian subcontinent. ʿAbd al-Zahir Abu al-Samh, who was still chief imam at the holy mosque of Mecca, also wrote for *Lisan al-Din*.

At the same time, al-Hilali used his journal to spread positive and encouraging Western views of Islam. In this, he clearly followed the example set by Shakib Arslan, who was known for unearthing the exploits of past Muslims in order to stir the pride of his readers and provide them with role models. Arslan had a penchant for historical topics that demonstrated Muslim superiority over the West; he also had an obvious liking for translated books in which Western scholars admitted to the achievements of Muslims. Hence, he wrote about early Muslim settlements in the Alps and the south of France,
about Salah al-Din who triumphed over the Crusaders in Jerusalem and, above all, about the grandeur of al-Andalus in the Middle Ages. He also translated Gustave Le Bon’s *La civilisation des Arabes* and wrote an extensive amount of notes and comments on the Arabic version of Lothrop Stoddard’s 1921 book *The New World of Islam*.

al-Hilali adopted a similar approach and some of the same topics as well. In *Lisan al-Din*, he published translated sections of European works from Louis Massignon’s *L’islam et l’occident* (which he found in another Arabic journal) to George McCabe’s *Splendor of Moorish Spain* (which he translated himself). As a token of his respect for Western academia, al-Hilali sent copies of the journal to various European Orientalists, including Paul Kahle in London and Hamilton Gibb in Oxford. The latter wrote back a kind note, which al-Hilali proudly published along with a short laudatory introduction of the man and his work.

But in 1947, just as the Moroccan anti-colonial struggle was entering its most critical phase, al-Hilali decided once again to leave the country for the Arab East, as he had done in 1922. The reasons that motivated his departure are not clear, but he later wrote that he wished to reunite with his first wife in Iraq. Nevertheless, he continued to read *Lisan al-Din* and to submit texts for publication until the periodical disappeared in

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the early 1950s. One of his last contributions to the journal was, in fact, a forceful statement of his puristic ethos. It was a reply to an article published in *Lisan al-Din* in 1952 about women’s rights. Its content had disturbed al-Hilali, because it argued that nothing in Islam prevents women from getting actively involved in society and politics as long as they are veiled. The text was not signed, but al-Hilali presumed that the author was his good friend ʿAbdallah Gannun.

In his reply, al-Hilali explained that Gannun—or whoever the author was—had reached his conclusion by means of an illegitimate analogy (*qiyās*) that was based on a jurisprudential opinion rather than on a primary source. al-Hilali was too scripturalist to accept such a methodology; one had to rely solely on the Qurʾan and the Sunna. These canonical texts, he argued, proved that women were created to manage their households and serve their husbands. Therefore, to prevent a woman from marrying so that she can run for public office would amount to disobeying God. Plus, al-Hilali buttressed his argument by stating the famous hadith according to which a people that puts a woman in charge of its affairs shall never prosper.118 He made no attempt to either reconsider its validity or reinterpret its meaning from a modernist perspective. Rather, he sealed the debate with an anti-syncretistic argument: the electoral principle to which Gannun had referred in his article was un-Islamic to begin with. It was therefore irrelevant to ask whether or not women should be allowed to run for office. Muslims, he wrote, must

118 For a modernist and non-literalistic reassessment of this hadith, see Fatima Mernissi, *Le harem politique: le Prophète et les femmes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1987), 7, 75.
clamor that Islam is not democratic, communist or socialist. It is an independent system.\footnote{Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, “Huquq al-mar’a al-siyasiyya,” \textit{Lisan al-Din}, 6, 10 (October 1952): 7-10.}

**Conclusion**

One of the principal impulses behind the modernist Salafiyya had always been to address the direct and indirect challenges posed by the West. When these challenges became more obvious and threatening in the mid-twentieth century, Islamic nationalism emerged as a compelling mobilizing discourse. In reality, Shakib Arslan’s message did not transform the political landscape. It did not, of course, rid the umma of its internal divisions, and it failed to convince many Muslim notables—including some of Arslan’s own admirers—that the Islamic nation was a workable concept. But this did not really matter to Arslan, because his primary goal was to arouse Muslims from torpor and to ensure that all nationalist struggles in the Muslim world would retain a strong religious dimension. He was never systematic in defining Islamic nationalism and he did not expect Muslim activists to be any more systematic in applying it.

A number of influential Salafi journals and individuals quickly assimilated Islamic nationalism and linked it to the standardization of Islam. Taqi al-Din al-Hilali is a case in point. Through his work at the Berlin Arab Radio and as a journalist and proselyte in Morocco, he acted as Shakib Arslan’s religious alter ego. Like the Amir, he was a de-territorialized Salafi activist, although he was a religious rather than a political firebrand. al-Hilali preferred to further the cause of Islamic nationalism by emphasizing
conformism to religious orthodoxy and orthopraxy. For him, the leveling of Muslim-ness according to Salafi norms would pave the way for a strong and united Islamic nation. al-Hilali did not hide his admiration for German nationalism: his stay in Europe convinced him of the urgency for Muslims to coalesce around a similar kind of empowering and organic sense of belonging to Islam.

Islamic nationalism did not entail an outright rejection of the West or of all things Western. It was not necessarily opposed to the modernist aspects of the Salafiyyya either, but it certainly provided a more fertile soil for the development of its puristic dimension. Ironically, the very conceptual ambiguity of Islamic nationalism prompted al-Hilali to drive a wedge between two of the Salafi movement’s poles. His desire to separate the socio-political objectives of the Salafiyyya from its purely religious core shows how strong his puristic penchant had become. al-Hilali insisted that the label “Salafiyyya” should only refer to a set of orthodox beliefs and legal prescriptions. Seeking to free one’s land from colonialism, cultivating the spirit of nationalism, assisting fellow citizens, adopting a progressive mindset, using free reasoning as a source of knowledge, and even looking for fresh reinterpretations of the scriptures all fell outside the purview of the Salafiyyya.

Must we conclude that al-Hilali was already a puristic Salafis by the mid-twentieth century? To a large extent, he was. But he was also too involved in progressive activities to be confined to any category. In truth, he often wavered from one ideal-type to another. Despite his anti-syncretistic rhetoric, al-Hilali continued to link his work as a Salafi missionary with the overarching goal of rousing the spirit of Islamic nationalism.
throughout the umma. There were times when he was at once scripturalist, literalistic and anti-syncretistic, but these were interlaced with displays of flexibility and Islamic modernism. Some examples include his ad-lib reinterpretation of the word *tawḥīd* for nationalist purposes, his sympathy for Moroccan Sufis who were patriotic, or his justification of canonical punishment (*ḥudūd*) on the basis of logical and sociological rather than purely scriptural evidence. Plus, his longing for European education, which led him to move to Nazi Germany between 1936 and 1942 and to obtain a doctoral degree in Arabic literature at the University of Berlin, proves that he still had a lot of respect for the West and its intellectual achievements. For him and others, the real break from the modernist aspects of the Salafiyya occurred later, in the post-colonial era.
Chapter Six

Searching for a Raison d’Être:

The Salafiyya in the Postcolonial Era

The end of colonialism in the Middle East, North Africa and elsewhere in the Muslim world not only redefined the social and political parameters of many states, it also affected Islamic thought in a profound way. With the popularity of the Nasser regime in Egypt, the victory of the FLN in Algeria, the triumph of Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia, military coups and the rise of the Ba’th Party in Syria, the first years of the post-colonial era saw the coming of mass secular nationalism and ambitious plans of modernization based on socialist and capitalist models. Clearly, the most appealing intellectual trends of that period were not of Islamic inspiration.¹ Even in Morocco, where many aspects of the modernist Salafiyya had been enshrined in the nationalist anti-colonial movement, the Salafis struggled—and sometimes failed—to secure the preponderance of their religious ideals after independence.

The exponents of the modernist Salafiyya who lived through these changes generally bowed to the new context, either because they were willing to work within the new postcolonial state system or because they lacked the institutional framework to oppose it. In several countries, they gradually gave up their broad program of reform and

withdrew behind the postcolonial state apparatus. Others chose to join the ranks of soon-to-be-struggling Islamist groups for which they could keep working as preachers or journalists. Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib, for example, had already made such a transition in the 1940s. Increasingly unable to sustain his independent reformist journals modeled after *al-Manar*, he chose to pursue his only métier on behalf of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. But when this last journalistic enterprise came to a halt due to political tensions, al-Khatib’s visibility faded out. His real tribunes had been *al-Fath* and *al-Zahra*; but the two journals that had made him famous throughout the Muslim world were now passé.²

This is not to say that Islamic modernism per se ceased to exist. The voices of modernist reformists continued to be heard. In Egypt alone, ʿAbd al-Wahhab Khalla (d. 1956), Mahmud Shaltut (d. 1963), Amin al-Khuli (d. 1966) and his student Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah (d. 1998), Mahmud Qasim (d. 1973) and Muhammad ʿImara (b. 1931) were among those who kept striving to reconcile Islam with philosophical modernity.³ Yet these voices were generally faint or marginal during the 1950s and 1960s. The more prominent Islamic activists, such as Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), often buried the legacy of Islamic modernism under a series of anti-Western and politically radical statements. To a certain extent, it could be said that the modernist side of the Salafiyya

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² Ābdallah al-ʿAqil, *Min aʿlam al-harakat al-islamiyya* (Cairo: Dar al-Tawzi’ wa-l-Nashr al-Islamiyya, 2000), 119-122. The author, who knew Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib personally, argues that the latter remained active, continued to publish (or republish) books and to run his bookstore. Yet there is no doubt, even from this account, that al-Khatib was past his prime.

regained vigor from the 1970s onward; yet it did so under a different guise. Intellectuals like Khurshid Ahmad, Hasan al-Turabi, Rashid Ghannushi and Hasan Hanafi either worked from an Islamist standpoint or gave new names to their reformist endeavors. Though Hasan Hanafi saw himself as heir to the school of al-Afghani, ʿAbduh and Rida, he summarized his own position as “the Islamic Left” and defined it as a different socio-political project.⁴

Indeed, after the passing of colonial rule, the Salafiyya’s center of gravity definitely moved to Saudi Arabia. Henceforth, it became extremely difficult for Muslims to define themselves as Salafis unless they conceived of Islam in puristic terms inspired by Wahhabism. By focusing on this final transition, the present chapter tries to explain why modernist Salafis gradually fell into oblivion, and why puristic ones fared better and continued to lay claim to the Salafiyya as a label and concept. Why was this final shift toward purism concomitant with the advent of the postcolonial era? Why is it that the Salafiyya did not simply split into two rival groups that could have coexisted?

These questions bring us back to the inherent tensions that always existed within the Salafiyya. In chapter two, we saw that the movement hinged on a delicate balance between a modernist and a puristic side. The dichotomy went deeper, for the Salafi movement also comprised individuals who emphasized concrete socio-political reforms, whereas others, like al-Hilali, were largely apolitical and focused more specifically on scholarly and religious issues. As long as there existed strong leaders like Rida and

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Arslan who managed to articulate common goals and to provide transnational guidance, the Salafiyya could hold together and a relative harmony between its various tendencies could be preserved. The disappearance of these leaders, in turn, accelerated the breakup of the movement, whose puristic and scholarly wing further drifted toward Saudi Arabia.

But besides the loss of great men, the end of the colonial era made the renewal of such unifying leadership rather obsolete. Throughout much of the twentieth century, the struggle against imperialism had been a major rallying cry and raison d’être of the Salafi movement. It had prompted modernist-leaning and puristic-leaning Salafis to keep overlooking their differences for the greater good of the umma. The end of the anti-colonial struggle simply removed that last common goal which, until then, had counteracted centrifugal forces. The departure of colonial troops and the transition to political sovereignty fully exposed the divide that already existed between the modernist and the puristic wings of the Salafi movement. Without the grand pan-Islamic ambitions of previous decades (Rida’s advocacy of an independent post-Ottoman beacon of progress and Arslan’s campaign for Islamic nationalism were no longer apropos), the Salafiyya broke under the weight of its own internal divisions. Unlike the puristic wing, however, the modernist wing lost momentum. On the one hand, some of its basic socio-political objectives regarding independence, education and religious reform had been fulfilled and no longer required advocates.5 On the other hand, the modernist wing of the Salafiyya suffered the consequences of its involvement in socio-political affairs. After

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independence, it usually lost its competitive edge to secularism and later Islamism. The postcolonial state generally domesticated or suffocated modernist Salafis. In Morocco, most of them became state employees and governmental officials, and the king co-opted key aspects of their discourse. Ultimately, the modernist wing failed to survive as a distinctive “Salafi” movement.

The story of Taqi al-Din al-Hilali between 1957 and 1968 exemplifies this final phase. Resolutely more puristic and quietist than modernist and politically active, al-Hilali felt ill at ease in independent Morocco. He did not relate to the politics of the Istiqlal party and its socialist offshoot, the Union Nationale des Forces Populaires (UNFP). Nor could he make sense of most state policies regarding religion. In particular, he was troubled by the formulation of an official Moroccan Islam, which he did not consider sufficiently orthodox. While the state was able to grant some of the modernist Salafis’ social and political wishes, it could not fulfill al-Hilali’s demands for a puristic interpretation of Salafi Islam. Increasingly frustrated, he accepted an invitation to return to Saudi Arabia: it was, after all, one of the environments that best corresponded to his religious orientation and where he could feel comfortable and useful. Several other puristic Salafis in other parts of the Muslim world experienced a similar transition and moved closer to Saudi Arabia during the 1950s and 1960s.

Ironically, the fact that al-Hilali belonged to the more puristic and apolitical wing of the Salafiyya is what allowed him to endure and to hold on to the Salafi label. While the modernist Salafiyya dwindled and gradually disappeared in Morocco and elsewhere,
the puristic understanding of the Salafiyya survived the end of colonial rule for two main reasons: because it enjoyed a safe haven in Saudi Arabia and because it had little political relevance and ambitions in the first place. In other words, the puristic Salafiyya crossed the second half of the twentieth century unhindered because its religious message was largely generic, transnational and safe from the competitiveness of the political arena. By not being involved in politics, al-Hilali and other puristic Salafis did not risk being outflanked by rivals with a better or more compelling platform.

Religion and Politics

In 1957, a year after Morocco acceded to independence, al-Hilali made a short trip to his native country. For the first time in 35 years, he was able to return to the formerly French zone. When a correspondent from the foremost state-sponsored religious magazine met him in Rabat for an interview, he described al-Hilali as a man who was neither severe nor arrogant:

I came to see Dr. Taqi al-Din al-Hilali in his room at the Royal Hotel. I found myself in front of an individual who is modest in his manners, speech and movements, and simple in his external appearance. He greets you and welcomes you warmly; he immediately makes you feel as though he knew you from before, and prompts you to drop your ceremonial manners, to talk without formality and to enjoy complete freedom. [You want] to fully open your heart to this man who speaks to you with his heart before speaking to you with his tongue. This is Dr. Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, the great scholar and globetrotter with a big heart.6

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As a religious activist who interacted with the masses as well as the elite, al-Hilali displayed great skills. He was evidently an affable man as long as he did not sense enmity, but he knew how to be harsh and destroy the reputation of his opponents when necessary. Similarly, he did not display his uncompromising attitude in every matter. Like most puristic Salafis, al-Hilali was adamant when it came to religion, but far more lenient with respect to politics. In the wake of numerous medieval ʿulamaʾ, he usually favored obedience and stability over a leader’s actual degree of religious virtue. While sound advice (naṣīḥa) to a ruler was acceptable, revolution was not.

But quietism alone fails to convey al-Hilali’s attitude toward politics. French scholar Olivier Roy put his finger on a key nuance when he remarked that puristic Salafis are notable not only for their lack of interest in politics, but for their lack of interest in political science as well. This observation fully applies to al-Hilali. Unlike Islamists and modernist-leaning Salafis, he did not delve into political thought and never attempted to reformulate the notions of state and government. He was very different from Rida in this regard, for the latter had strove to adapt the caliphate to modern needs. al-Hilali also differed from ʿAllal al-Fasi, who reexamined various notions of governance—

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7 In the 1940s, al-Hilali wrote three poems to disparage against a corrupted Sufi shaykh. He named them V1, V2 and V3 by analogy with the well-known missiles that Nazi Germany produced during the Second World War. The third poem was even deadlier than Hitler’s powerful weapon, al-Hilali wrote, because, unlike Britain, his Sufi opponent would not recover from the attack. See Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, al-Daʿwa ila Allah fi aqtar mukhtalifa (Medina: n.p., n.d.), 53, 55.

8 Ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyya are among the scholars who reported that sixty days under an unjust imam are better than a night without a sultan. See Henri Laoust, Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taki-d-Din Ahmad b. Taimiya (Cairo: Imprimerie de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1939), 591-592.


democracy, republicanism and constitutional monarchism—from an Islamic perspective.¹¹

No comparable investigation can be found in al-Hilali’s corpus. He wrote very little on political theory, even when he was younger. Though he condemned colonialism extensively over the years, he showed no particular desire to rethink the relationship between Islam and politics in the modern age. His puristic inclination may have prevented him from venturing into this delicate question. In his writings, he usually restricted his comments to praising or criticizing certain rulers based on the Islamic character of their politics. But the criteria he used were often idiosyncratic. Hence, he reportedly disliked Sharif Husayn because heresy (shirk) prevailed in Arabia under his rule, and because he opposed Salafis and Wahhabis. Yet, al-Hilali insisted that he had no aversion toward the Hashimites and that, when delivering Friday sermons in Iraq, he always expressed his allegiance to Sharif Husayn’s grandson, King Faysal II (d. 1958).¹² In Afghanistan in 1933, al-Hilali allegedly refused to visit king Nadhir Shah (despite the latter’s efforts at reversing the Westernizing policies of his predecessor, King Amanullah) because of bad stories that circulated about his government and its alleged cold reception of Arab visitors.¹³ Nevertheless, al-Hilali defended the spendthrift son of Ibn Saʿud, King

¹²al-Hilali, al-Daʿwa, 114, 123-124. He may have liked the fact that Faysal II was willing to normalize Iraq’s relationship with Saudi Arabia. See Madawi Al-Rasheed, A History of Saudi Arabia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 116.
Saʿud ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAziz (d. 1969), who was better known for his lavish lifestyle than his piety.\textsuperscript{14}

**The Iraqi Revolution of 1958**

Although his appreciation of rulers varied for personal reasons, it is fair to say that al-Hilali’s favorite regimes were conservative monarchies. When he returned to Baghdad after his short visit to independent Morocco in late 1957, he did not suspect that the days of the constitutional Hashimite monarchy of Iraq were counted. In July 1958, a group of Free Officers modeled after the Egyptian paradigm overthrew the regime. King Faysal II and part of his family were executed, while one of the revolutionary officers, ʿAbd al-Karim Qasim (d. 1963), maneuvered to establish a military dictatorship that professed Iraqi nationalism and treated religion and religious identities as residual issues. Rather, the new republic focused on agrarian reform and sought to reduce the country’s dependence on Western politics and economy.\textsuperscript{15}

For al-Hilali, this revolution was an illusory step backward because it ushered in political instability and compromised prosperity, which the Hashimite monarchy had been able to offer.\textsuperscript{16} Though it is true that the socio-political and economic legacies of the revolution were disappointing, one must note that al-Hilali did not merely criticize the way in which domestic reforms were carried out: he also opposed the entire rationale behind the revolution and denied its causal factors. For example, al-Hilali was oblivious

\textsuperscript{14} Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, *Diwan shiʿr al-Hilali* (unpublished typescript), 123.
to the fact that prosperity under the Hashimite monarchy was dramatically uneven, leaving over half of all the country’s privately owned land in the hands of nearly one percent of the population. al-Hilali was insensitive to the fact that the 1958 revolution was, in some respects, a rural one. The question of redistribution of land was irrelevant to him and certainly not worth a coup d’état, because it was not religiously justified. Along with the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, he considered all forms of socialism contrary to the will of God:

[Islam] did not hinder competent individuals, but rather left them free to use their talents and acquire material goods through legitimate means. There is no remedy to the ignorance of someone who wants to make [all] people equal. In the Sura The Bees, God said: “God privileged some of you over others in sustenance [rizq].” […] The difference in talent necessarily and absolutely entails disparity in possessions. The remedy [to that disparity] is [the Muslim’s] obligation [to provide] alms tax [zakār], interest-free loans and expiatory gifts [kaffārāt], as well as [Islam’s] incitation to charity [ṣadaqāt].

al-Hilali not only accused the 1958 revolution of being unwarranted from a religious viewpoint; he also accused it of being regressive insofar as it occurred at the expense of religion. He was particularly critical of the new regime’s decision to free communist activists who had been jailed under the monarchy. al-Hilali complained that these atheist individuals were despicable: as soon as Qasim gave them free rein, they violently opposed all practicing Muslims. al-Hilali was no less contemptuous toward

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the Iraqi Ba‘th Party and its Arab nationalist discourse. He implied that no serious Muslim could ever consider following a movement whose éminence grise was a Christian, namely, Michel ʿAflaq (d. 1989).\textsuperscript{20} But despite his repugnance for the revolution and its aftermath, al-Hilali chose not to protest openly. In his Friday sermons, he chose to ignore political issues altogether and refused to speak of Qasim’s government in either good or bad terms. When some of his students opted for a more confrontational approach and began criticizing the Free Officers in mosques, al-Hilali forbade them to do so for fear that repression would have disastrous consequences on religious life. He was far more comfortable raising money for the Algerian mujāhidīn who struggled against French colonialism.\textsuperscript{21}

In 1958, al-Hilali was still an Iraqi citizen and the thought of relocating to Morocco had not occurred to him until the revolution took place.\textsuperscript{22} Yet, the new political context worried him so much that he decided to save himself and leave the country.\textsuperscript{23} Using a medical pretext, he managed to flee to Bonn, now in West Germany, in 1959. From there, he decided to return to Morocco.\textsuperscript{24}

It is interesting to note that al-Hilali rejected the new Iraqi regime even though he had a privileged relationship with one of its top revolutionary officers. ʿAbd al-Salam ʿArif (d. 1966), who was assistant commander-in-chief and deputy prime minister under

\begin{footnotes}
\item[20] al-Hilali, \textit{al-Da‘wa}, 118.
\item[21] \textit{Ibid}.
\item[23] al-Hilali, \textit{Diwa‘ al-shakkin}, ii.
\end{footnotes}
Qasim (until the latter demoted him and imprisoned him), was a student of al-Hilali.\textsuperscript{25} What is more, \textsuperscript{ʿ}Arif later became the Iraqi head of state after the second coup d’
'état of 1963. al-Hilali said of him that he was “[…] among our most special Salafi brothers.\textsuperscript{26}” Indeed, \textsuperscript{ʿ}Arif was known for having little interest in the principles of the Baʿth Party besides Arab nationalism. He was averse to socialism because of his attachment to “traditional Islam.\textsuperscript{27}” At one point after 1959—probably after the second coup—\textsuperscript{ʿ}Arif wrote to al-Hilali in Morocco and asked him to come back to Baghdad. The revolutionary government of Iraq, \textsuperscript{ʿ}Arif claimed, was trying to follow the religious guidelines that al-Hilali had expounded in his lessons. Some Iraqi Salafis had evidently accepted to collaborate with the regime; one of them wrote to al-Hilali and advised him not to miss the opportunity of using his political connections to further the cause of Islam. Yet al-Hilali would not change his mind. He thanked \textsuperscript{ʿ}Arif for his offer, but refused to return to Baghdad because he did not think that the revolutionary regime would prove successful.\textsuperscript{28}

**Back in Morocco: An Apolitical and Marginal Salafi**

In 1957, al-Hilali had taken advantage of his trip to Rabat to write a couple of texts in the kingdom’s new official Islamic journal. In the first one, he offered a very religious reading of the independence movement. Ignoring international, political and social factors, al-Hilali suggested that Islam was the only driving force behind the

\textsuperscript{25} On \textsuperscript{ʿ}Abd al-Salam \textsuperscript{ʿ}Arif in Iraqi politics, see Luizard, 61, 74-76. See also Majid Khadduri, Republican \textsuperscript{ʿ}Iraq: A Study in \textsuperscript{ʿ}Iraqi Politics Since the Revolution of 1958 (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 60.

\textsuperscript{26} al-Hilali, al-\textit{Daʿwa}, 116.

\textsuperscript{27} Khadduri, 215.

\textsuperscript{28} al-Hilali, al-\textit{Daʿwa}, 117.
Moroccan triumph over colonialism. God granted victory to Muhammad V (d. 1961) and his mujāhidīn because they believed in Him, obeyed Him and were good Muslims. But complete devotion to Islam was no less essential now that colonial forces were defeated. No worldly success could be achieved, al-Hilali maintained, without adhering to a strict conception of God’s oneness. In a way that is typical of neo-Hanbali scholars, al-Hilali explained his conception of orthodoxy and orthopraxy by means of a twofold definition of tawḥīd. The acknowledgement of God’s oneness and omnipotence (tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya), he wrote, requires any Muslim to worship Him accordingly; therefore, a Muslim must also shrink from any thought or action that might be construed as calling God’s oneness and omnipotence in question (tawḥīd al-ʿulūhiyya, or tawḥīd al-ʿibāda). This demanding conception of monotheism, on which Ibn Taymiyya had insisted, significantly increased the number of potential cases of heresy (kufr). al-Hilali expected Moroccans to be true Muslims, and being a true Muslim entailed a constant struggle against actual and imagined errors.

The second text that al-Hilali published resulted from the twenty-minute audience that the king granted him at the royal palace in 1957. Their conversation was cordial and rather informal: it mostly revolved around al-Hilali’s travels outside of Morocco. Soon after this short meeting, al-Hilali wrote an ode to Muhammad V in which he praised the

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29 Laoust, 472.
30 Taqī al-Dīn al-Hilali, “Maʿna daʿwat al-haqq,” Daʿwat al-Haqq, 1, 4-5 (November 1957): 19-20. The puristic character of this article contrasts heavily with the other texts published in the same issue. ʿAbd al-Karim Ghallab, ʿAllal al-Fasi and Abu al-Aʿīla al-Mawdudi were among the other writers.
king for his religious qualities and anti-colonial achievements. Together, this poem and the aforementioned article encapsulate the main themes and attitudes that characterized al-Hilali’s activism in postcolonial Morocco. First, he eschewed politics, for he had never formulated any political objective besides the termination of the French and Spanish protectorates. Second, he continued to push for a religious purism that was somewhat unusual in the Moroccan context. In that sense, the advent of independence did not alter his primary goal.

But without a foreign colonial power to oppose, al-Hilali was no longer able to link his puristic convictions to a broader campaign for religious conformism or Islamic nationalism. His da‘wa not only became more difficult to justify in the postcolonial era; it was largely out of touch with the most pressing issues that now confronted independent Morocco. al-Hilali never directly engaged such questions as the building of the nation-state or the definition of its political nature. For the most part, he avoided thoughts on Moroccan politics. Instead, he used his pen to highlight his quietism. He praised both Muhammad V and Hasan II, and never admonished, criticized or opposed any of them in writing.

Upon his return to Morocco in 1959, al-Hilali wandered for some time and finally settled in Fes. There, he stayed in the house of his former professor, Muhammad ibn al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi. The man who had converted him to the Salafiyya in 1921 was now seventy-nine years old and, according to al-Hilali, was overwhelmed with hopelessness.

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When al-Hilali informed him of his desire to keep calling Moroccan to true Islam, the old professor recommended him to abandon proselytism. al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi reportedly confessed that such a project was doomed to failure, for he personally had not achieved significant results despite prolonged efforts. Posing as the champion of Salafi missionary work, al-Hilali replied that, for his part, he had called to God in various regions and everywhere he had succeeded beyond expectations. He was confident to succeed once again.\(^{32}\)

Though al-Hilali may well have rearticulated this dialogue to give it a self-congratulatory tone, it is true that Muhammad ibn al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi experienced disappointments in late 1959 and early 1960. The reasons why he was in such a state of mind, however, had probably more to do with politics than religious proselytism per se. Unlike his globetrotter pupil, al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi devoted most of his life to the Moroccan cause. For him, independence was the end result of a long and often personal struggle for the comprehensive renaissance of the Moroccan people. As one of the oldest and most respected proponents of the modernist Salafiyya in the country, he rejoiced at the return of Muhammad V from exile and, like other major nationalist ʿulamaʾ, he believed that modern Morocco would be built on the same progressive Islamic ethic that had animated the independence movement for decades. However, it did not take long before the ʿulamaʾ realized that neither they nor their convictions would play a major part

\(^{32}\) al-Hilali, \textit{al-Daʿwa}, 204.
in the construction of the new state. While the secular and westernized elite gained the upper hand, the monarchy succeeded in dominating the religious elite and reducing their influence. As Mohamed Tozy put it: “It took Morocco only four years (1956-1960) to find a stable balance between a Salafi interpretation of religion preached by all the nationalist factions and a makhzenian interpretation giving the king the role of guardian of all actors in the religious arena."

al-Hilali thus happened to visit his old professor right when the latter was growing disillusioned. A political militant, al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi had just suffered a number of setbacks and had few reasons to celebrate. Though he was ignored in the early months of independence and received no ministerial position in the first postcolonial government, he was later chosen to become one of the three elder members of the Crown Council (majlis al-tāj), a senate-like chamber created in 1956 to prepare the country for representative government. Concerned with social justice, al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi was apprehensive of the growth of the bourgeoisie and the monarchy’s alliance with rural landowners. He reacted by collaborating with the UNFP, the leftist offshoot of the Istiqlal Party that was created in early 1959. In December, however, the authorities discovered a plot against Crown Prince Hasan that motivated the Palace to use repression against militants of the UNFP—whose radical wing was suspected of wrongdoing—and against

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the politically inconvenient members of the former Army of National Liberation (ALM). These various moves, which aimed at consolidating the monarchy’s power, ran counter to the progressive ideals of al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi and the socio-political dimension of the modernist Salafiyya. In May 1960, when Muhammad V finally dismissed the government of ʿAbdallah Ibrahim (also a member of the UNFP) and appointed a new government under royal leadership, al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi lost confidence in the postcolonial governing process. As a token of his reprobation, he resigned from the Crown Council in 1960.

In terms of his relation to politics, al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi was thus diametrically opposed to al-Hilali. The old activist had remained, at heart, an advocate of the socio-political dimension of Muhammad ʿAbduh’s school of thought. Until his death in 1964, he continued to support the UNFP and its socialist policies. One photo dating from 1962 shows him at the party’s congress, sitting on a tribune next to ʿAbd al-Rahim Bouabid (d. 1992) who co-founded the UNFP with Mehdi Ben Barka. Wearing white traditional clothes, the old shaykh’s appearance stands in sharp contrast to the much younger activists in suits and ties who surround him. But despite the generational and sometimes religious gap, al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi’s commitment to progressive politics was undeniable.

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It was so strong that he dared joining the opposition campaign to the 1962 constitution. This crisis unfolded when Hasan II, who acceded to the throne in 1961, chose to bypass the consultative council that his father had set up and asked French constitutional jurists to draft the 1962 constitution. Not only was this legal document largely foreign in its origins; it worried those who either did not want Morocco to become a hereditary monarchy or objected to granting unprecedented powers to the king.\(^{40}\)

Inspired by the principles of the modernist Salafiyya, al-ʾArabi al-ʾAlawi refused to condone such provisions and, along with the leaders of the UNFP, chose to boycott the national the process of popular ratification by referendum.\(^{41}\) For al-Hilali, this kind of political opposition was unthinkable, because it encouraged instability against a ruler who, though he may not have been perfect, declared his attachment to Islam. He thus ignored the issue altogether. It is not clear what he thought of the constitution.

In actuality, not all modernist Salafis joined the opposition campaign. \(^{40}\)Allal al-Fasi, for one, approved of the 1962 constitution.\(^{42}\) But it is important to note that, unlike al-Hilali, many of the Moroccan modernist Salafis adopted a proactive attitude toward politics after independence. al-Fasi may not have agreed with al-ʾArabi al-ʾAlawi about the constitution, but he nonetheless favored progressive politics and embraced the political sphere wholeheartedly. For years under the Protectorate, he had played a central role in combining Moroccan nationalism with the modernist Salafiyya. Political issues


\(^{42}\)Ibid., 43-44.
were inherent to his discourse and actions, from his involvement in founding political parties to his redaction of political manifestos.43 When he returned from exile in August 1956, al-Fasi became president of the Istiqlal Party over which he had exercised much influenced from abroad. As a logical extension of his work against French colonialism, he seized all the opportunities that independent Morocco offered him: he presided over commissions, became minister and, eventually, opposition leader. His work in party politics forced him to address a wide array of socio-political issues. Besides his active support to the annexation of Western Sahara, al-Fasi dealt with questions of agricultural production, unemployment, industrialization, democracy and human rights. His ideas were often a reflection of his modernist Salafi convictions. For example, he contradicted al-Hilali on gender issues and believed that Islam gives women the right to vote and to run for office.44

But there was a price to pay for this level of political involvement. Like any other active politician, al-Fasi sometimes had to adopt a tactical behavior so that his party and ideas could stand a chance of prevailing, either entirely or partially. One example is the role played by al-Fasi in elaborating the Moroccan code of personal status, the Mudawwana. He was head of the ten-member commission (which included fellow modernist Salafis such as al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi and Mukhtar al-Susi) that hastily restructured and codified Maliki jurisprudence in 1957 and 1958. Political scientist Malika Zeghal underlined how al-Fasi departed from the modernist Salafiyya and

contradicted his own declarations when he failed to enshrine limitations on polygamy.\footnote{Zeghal, 62-63; Tozy, Monarchie, 136.}

In a context of growing competition between religious nationalists and the secular Westernized elite, even within the Istiqlal Party, al-Fasi and his colleagues appear to have favored rapidity of execution over progressive ideals. Indeed, al-Fasi was well aware that Westernized Moroccans were using their influential positions within the government to restrict the jurisdiction of sharīʿa courts. He was also aware that Islamic law needed adjustments to modern conditions in order to rival the appeal of foreign legal codes.\footnote{ʿAllal al-Fasi, Difaʿ ʿan al-shariʿa (Rabat: Matabiʿ al-Risala, 1966), 4-5.} But time was of the essence, and the modernist Salafis had to act without delay. Having only a few months, al-Fasi and his colleagues were too hurried to make all the modernist adjustments they wished for. Their priority was to ensure that Islamic law would at least prevail in matters of personal status.

This kind of political opportunism is precisely what puristic Salafis were trying to avoid. As Olivier Roy brilliantly remarked, modern politics calls for tactical positioning and compromises that inevitably put religious purity and integrity at risk—hence the growing tendency among today’s puristic Salafis to “[…] save Islam from politics.”\footnote{Olivier Roy, Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 91.}

Does it mean that al-Hilali, in opposition to al-Fasi, envisioned religion and politics as separate spheres? On the contrary, he affirmed that he could not differentiate between the two, because the Qurʾan and the Sunna are filled with politically relevant passages.\footnote{al-Hilali, al-Daʿwa, 31-32; Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, “Hukm al-murtadd fi-l-islam,” Daʿwat al-Haqq, 6, 5 (February 1963): 31.}
However, al-Hilali did not consider that the role of the ʿulamaʾ was to actively participate in the governing process. Judging from his own behavior over several decades, one must conclude that he saw the ʿulamaʾ as guardians of orthodoxy and orthopraxy whose task is merely to provide guidance on all aspects of life. Men of religion should thus advise the masses as well as rulers, but they should refrain from partaking in active politics because that could dilute the purity of Islam.

Indeed, al-Hilali must have found the Mudawwana aberrant, even though I found no written evidence that he disparaged against it. A staunch opponent of the principle of Islamic schools of law, al-Hilali was known for denying the authority of the Maliki madhhab even though it was part of the Morocco’s religious identity and heritage. Unlike his modernist colleagues, he did not seek the “Moroccanization” of the law; his sole concern was to make sure that the law was truly in accordance with God’s will and the Sunna of His prophet. Therefore, the “national” character of this new Maliki law code must have seemed irrelevant and inappropriate to him.

The fact that al-Hilali had previously advocated a puristic Salafiyya and a generic form of Islamic nationalism proved significant in the postcolonial era. His allegiance was more to puristic Islam than to the Moroccan nation as a sociological and historical entity. He did not think that independence could warrant any kind of Moroccan exception or distinction with respect to religion. For him, true Islam was unique and transnational. No reason could justify the elaboration of a specifically Moroccan set of rules, beliefs or practices.
Discomforts in Meknes and Rabat

While some of the modernist Salafis who had participated in the anti-colonial struggle did not partake in active politics, most of them integrated the new state structure in one capacity or another, as we shall see toward the end of this chapter. al-Hilali’s situation was slightly different, for he never occupied positions that were as prestigious or steady as those of his modernist colleagues who struggled for decades in colonial Morocco and earned solid reputations as nationalist combatants. But by means of his connections and qualifications, al-Hilali nonetheless managed to find work. Between 1959 and 1968, he served as a state-appointed preacher, a college professor, and a writer in Morocco’s official Islamic magazine, Daʿwat al-Haqq. However, this period in his life was marked by discomforts and frustrations due to his own religious grievances as well as the embarrassment he sometimes caused to the authorities. In many ways, al-Hilali was a misfit in postcolonial Morocco.

Controversies in the Mosques

In Fes, al-Hilali set out to do what he had always done, that is, to call the people to his understanding of the Salafiyya. Despite the disillusion of al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi, he started giving lessons in a local mosque and allegedly succeeded in attracting an impressive crowd in less than a week.⁴⁹ Among them was Makki Baddu, then Minister of

⁴⁹ al-Hilali, al-Daʿwa, 204.
Habous, or religious endowments (ḥubus, awqāf). After having attended one evening lesson, Baddu introduced himself to al-Hilali, praised him for his work and invited him to his office in Rabat. There, the minister offered al-Hilali a position as state-appointed preacher (wāʿīz) for 200 dirhams a month, which was about twice the normal salary. Even though this amount did not live up to his expectations and self-esteem, al-Hilali accepted the offer but chose to travel back and forth between Rabat and Fes for fear that the humid climate of the capital would dramatically worsen his asthma problems. A few months later, he decided to settle in the city of Meknes located some sixty kilometers west of Fes, and therefore closer to Rabat. Whenever possible, he also toured the country to preach in smaller cities and villages, especially in the Tafilalt.

The minister’s decision to hire al-Hilali was perfectly understandable and justified. At the time, Morocco could not count on many ʿulama’ with such qualifications and experience in preaching. There was an urgent need for individuals like al-Hilali. In 1956, ʿAllal al-Fasi had precisely complained about the poor quality of religious teaching in the country’s mosques and the inability of preachers to attract a substantial attendance to their lessons. However, Moroccan authorities may not have suspected that al-Hilali would stir controversy. With age, experience and confidence, he was far from growing

50 As soon as October 1956 and until 1961, this ministry, if it deserved such a title, no longer had ties to the government and was handled directly by the Palace. See Zeghal, 63. The official website of the Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs alleges that ʿAllal al-Fasi was its minister between 1956 and 1963, but this information is unsubstantiated and evidently inaccurate. Most sources indicate that al-Fasi rather became minister for the first time in 1961.
51 al-Hilali, al-Daʿwa, 204-205.
soft-spoken. Not long after he settled down in Meknes, he started angering many fellow citizens with his lessons, which emphasized a strict definition of *tawḥīd*, disputed the validity of the Maliki school of law and condemned Sufism and Sufi festivals (*mawāsim*). The governor of Meknes, who was a cousin of Muhammad V, along with other members of the local religious elite, allegedly convinced as many as 500 people to sign a petition against al-Hilali and to denounce his attacks on Moroccan religious traditions. They sent the petition to the Ministry of Habous and requested al-Hilali to be fired.\(^{54}\)

The controversy was serious enough that the Ministry set up a commission to assess the situation. Fortunately for al-Hilali, the commission was under the supervision of his good friend and former collaborator ʿAbdallah Gannun, who secured his exoneration. A few influential people also manifested their support to al-Hilali. Among them was his other friend from the 1940s, Muhammad al-Tanji, who now lived in Rabat and also worked for the Ministry of Habous as director of the office of preaching and religious guidance (*al-wāʿẓ wa-l-irshād*). Another supporter was Ahmad Bargash, who later became Minister of Habous and Islamic Affairs from 1963 to 1972. al-Hilali does not say under what circumstances he and Bargash met, but they seem to have been on good terms during al-Hilali’s entire stay in Meknes.\(^{55}\)

Nevertheless, several other controversies occurred in Meknes during the 1960s, and each time al-Hilali alleges that he was the victim of machinations. Because he claimed to be preaching the truth, he automatically held his opponents responsible for any

\(^{54}\) al-Hilali, *al-Daʿwa*, 205.
trouble that his sermons may have caused. Yet one can easily understand why al-Hilali stirred so much controversy and raised suspicions. On the one hand, he kept using *Fath al-majid*—a commentary on Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s *Kitab al-tawhid*—during his public lessons. ⁵⁶ On the other hand, al-Hilali strove to disseminate the book with the help of Saudi authorities. On one occasion, he used his connections with the Wahhabi establishment to ask King Faysal (d. 1975) to send him extra copies of the book. Saudi authorities acquiesced and al-Hilali soon received 343 free copies via airmail, which he sold in various Moroccan cities. ⁵⁷ He also admits to have received money from Ibn Baz (d. 1999), who later became Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, as well as an even greater number of free copies from another prominent Wahhabi whose name he did not disclose. ⁵⁸ It is not clear whether al-Hilali already benefited from the logistical and financial support of Saudi Arabia back in the 1940s, but he certainly did in the 1960s. This most likely gave him a greater sense of independence than other state-appointed Moroccan preachers, who may have refrained from causing religious controversies for fear of losing their only source of revenues.

The public could not fail to notice the correlation between al-Hilali’s sermons and Wahhabism. In one instance, while al-Hilali was in a mosque discussing *Fath al-majid* and branding as sinners all those who contradicted its teachings, one heckler abruptly interrupted him and asked him if he was implicitly charging the king of Morocco with sin. Indeed, the monarch happened to support some of the religious practices that al-

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⁵⁷ Ibid., 49.
⁵⁸ Ibid., 50.
Hilali was precisely decrying. For reasons that served the interests of the monarchy, Hasan II encouraged religious pluralism, honored local saints and dispatched delegations of ministers to the festivities—or moussems (*mawāsim*)—organized in their honor.\(^5^9\) These were practices that al-Hilali condemned out of hand even when they had taken on a national significance. He did not hesitate to criticize the annual and quasi-official moussem of Mulay Idris, near Meknes. The event annually attracts thousands of pilgrims who visit the tomb of Idris I (d. 791), the descendant of the prophet and founder of Morocco’s first dynastic state.\(^6^0\)

Thus, when the heckler called on al-Hilali, the latter must have felt torn between his puristic religious convictions and his reluctance to criticize the ruler. To dodge the question, he replied that the king was sinless and simply accused the heckler of being himself a sinner, an ignorant and liar. al-Hilali maintains that many people in the audience sided with him and started shouting back at the heckler. Soon enough, the situation degenerated; under threats of physical violence, the man had to take refuge in the minaret. As a result of the tumult, al-Hilali momentarily lost the right to teach until he explained himself with the authorities. Once again he was exonerated, but his opponents apparently kept filing complaints about him.\(^6^1\)

Over time, al-Hilali’s polemical and inflexible religious attitude irked the state authorities. At the behest of a Salafi friend, al-Hilali started giving lessons in a new mosque built outside the old city of Meknes and stirred another wave of controversy.

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\(^6^0\) al-Hilali, *al-Da‘wa*, 34. On the connection between the Palace and this moussem, see Zeghal, 86.
\(^6^1\) al-Hilali, *al-Da‘wa*, 210-211.
Though he was only acting as a substitute imam and teacher whenever his colleague was unavailable, he set out to rectify the time of the morning prayer, which he claims was slightly too early to be valid. A few people complained about this sudden change and tried to have the designated imam fired for letting al-Hilali substitute for him. The controversy quickly evolved into a larger conflict between supporters and opponents of al-Hilali. After undue provocations and condemnations on both parts, those who favored religious status quo went to the local governor (ʿāmil) and complained about “Wahhabi” agitators who reject other Sunni ways. In turn, the governor called the Minister of Habous and Islamic Affairs, Ahmad Bargash, who requested al-Hilali to come to Rabat. In the capital, the Ministry’s high official who was expecting him for a talk was a modernist Salafi named ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Dukkali (d. 1976). He was the son of Abu Shuʿayb al-Dukkali, otherwise known as the Muhammad ʿAbduh of Morocco. Here is how al-Hilali recalled his speech:

al-Dukkali began by telling me: “I traveled to India and in each university or scholarly assembly that I visited, I found people who fervently extolled you; many of them told me they were your students. So I rejoiced at that and, upon my return, I informed His Majesty Hasan II as well as the Minister; we were proud of you. Moreover, my father, the great Abu Shuʿayb al-Dukkali, was the first to proselytized the Salafiyya in Morocco, so I am among the supporters and admirers of your daʿwa. However, it is necessary to use moderation [ʾiʿtīdal] and to relinquish the relentlessness [tashaddud] that causes dissension.”

Of course, al-Hilali claimed his innocence and swore that he condemned relentlessness as much as al-Dukkali. But judging from this example and others, it seems

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62 Ibid., 207.
63 Ibid., 208.
clear that the Moroccan authorities were not fully at ease with his discourse and
demeanor. Whether he liked it or not, al-Hilali often triggered the kind of disorder that
government officials wished to avoid. Back in the 1940s, under colonial rule, he had a
much easier time justifying his religious zeal, even though it sometimes interfered with
the nationalist cause. The people whom al-Hilali then branded as sinners and heretics
often represented a threat to the Moroccan cause in the eyes of other nationalists as well.
While al-Hilali blamed Sufis for their misguided religious beliefs and actions, others
could blame them for their collaboration with the colonial authorities. Likewise, blind
imitators (muqallidūn) could be opposed from a purely religious angle, as did al-Hilali
when he portrayed them as misguided Muslims who refuse to abide by the Sunna of the
prophet. But these same blind imitators could be condemned for other reasons as well.
Moroccan nationalists, regardless of their religious convictions, could argue that the
muqallidūn prevented people from breaking the shackles of ignorance that made the
Moroccan nation such an easy target for colonization.

In the 1960s, however, the strictly religious objectives of al-Hilali no longer
overlapped with the socio-political objectives of the Moroccan elite. There no longer was
a common cause nor a common external enemy that justified religious intolerance toward
fellow Sunni Muslims. The people whom al-Hilali now called sinners and heretics were,
for the most part, loyal subjects of an independent kingdom. All political parties and
actors were trying to mobilize them and gain their support. In an era of postcolonial

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reconstruction, the *raison d’être* of al-Hilali’s controversial religious zeal was far from self-evident. Because the state never intended to implement a puristic understanding of Islam, Moroccan authorities had to intervene whenever al-Hilali’s preaching caused controversies that served no political purpose and were detrimental to public order.

**Disillusions on Campus**

As a professor, al-Hilali’s record was less controversial. He had been involved in a few heated debates with fellow faculty members in Lucknow and Baghdad, but the repercussions hardly extended beyond the halls of academe. Wherever he taught Arabic, be it in Oujda, Delhi, Lucknow, Bonn, Berlin or Baghdad, he never stirred controversies that took on political proportions. Grammar lessons kept him away from the most sensitive religious issues he so passionately debated in the mosques.

Thanks to the recommendation of ʿAbdallah Gannun, al-Hilali was hired at the newly created Muhammad V University in Rabat soon after his return to Morocco in 1959.65 He thus continued his career as professor of Arabic and Arabic literature. Once again, al-Hilali was an asset to the university insofar as he was one of the most qualified Moroccan candidates available at the time. But the atmosphere on campus seems to have disappointed him. In 1970, he confessed that he had been struck to find so much ignorance and heresy at the university.66 Among other things, the critical attitude toward

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religion that prevailed in scholarly circles prompted him to write several articles against agnosticism and atheism throughout the 1960s.

The structure and intellectual orientation of the new Muhammad V University must have disappointed al-Hilali who, ironically, had supported the establishment of a modern university in postcolonial Morocco. In 1957, he declared to a journalist that such a university could become an alternative to studies abroad, provided that foreign professors would come and join the faculty. While Europe had excellent universities that were strong in the fields of natural and empirical sciences, al-Hilali deemed it safer for Moroccan students to study under European professors in Morocco. Europe was a pathway to great technical knowledge, but studies abroad entailed a risk of cultural contamination that could prove detrimental to Islam.  

Alas, the ideal university that al-Hilali had imagined did not exactly correspond to the one that was officially inaugurated in December 1957. Muhammad V University originally comprised three faculties—law, natural sciences and human sciences—each headed by a French scholar. The first dean and father of the faculty of human sciences (literally, faculté des lettres) was no other than the famous historian of North Africa, Charles-André Julien. Despite his known anti-colonial sentiments, Julien’s plan was to establish a secular institution modeled after the Sorbonne in which the French language would prevail. But the government’s decision to add an Arabic section, whose creation and development Julien did not oversee, soon fostered tensions. Much to the dean’s

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displeasure, the Moroccan Ministry of Education unilaterally appointed many Arab professors of its choice, most of whom were Egyptians. It was actually through this channel that al-Hilali joined the faculty. Julien was not able to exercise any control over the selection process, nor could he set norms regarding the candidates’ required qualifications. His inability to guarantee similar academic standards and guidelines for both the French and the Arabic sections of the faculty of human sciences fueled a crisis that led to his resignation in late 1960.68

But the French influence did not vanish overnight. Most of the Moroccan professors who gradually replaced foreign professors were themselves graduates of French universities. They were bilingual, openly favorable to the political left and had little esteem for their Arabic-speaking colleagues.69 This was not the atmosphere that al-Hilali expected from a modern university in independent Morocco. It is no wonder, then, that he rejoiced at the news of the creation in 1964 of a new institute devoted to the study of hadith.

Dar al-Hadith al-Hasaniyya, as it came to be known, was part of the monarchy’s plan to develop and control religious education. By sponsoring the institute, Hasan II sought to display his commitment to Islam and to increase his own religious legitimacy. The project also happened to conveniently fragment the religious sphere so as to prevent the emergence of an autonomous and united corps of ʿulama’. Located in Rabat and

69 Abdallah Laroui, Le Maroc et Hassan II: un témoignage (Cap-Rouge, Québec: Presses Inter Universitaires, 2005), 78.
closely linked to the Palace, Dar al-Hadith further marginalized the Qarawiyyin in Fes. Abdallah Gannun and Allal al-Fasi reported, much to their regret, that the Qarawiyyin had virtually become an annex to the law faculty of Muhammad V University.\textsuperscript{70}

al-Hilali, for his part, seemed rather unconcerned with either the standing of the Qarawiyyin or the political rationale behind the establishment of Dar al-Hadith. The opening of an Islamic institute that emphasized the science of hadith—a discipline so dear to him—was everything al-Hilali wanted. He had high hopes for the new school and wasted no time in expressing them publicly. Dar al-Hadith symbolized the beginning of a new era, he wrote; it would revive Islamic science and cause the wave of heresy and sin to recede. In actuality, al-Hilali expected Dar al-Hadith to be the first step toward a comprehensive Islamization of the law whereby the Qur’an and the Sunna would become the sole sources of legislation in every region of Morocco. This, he hoped, would have repercussions well beyond the kingdom: “May [Dar al-Hadith] please the believers and anger the enemies of religion not only in Morocco, but in the whole world.\textsuperscript{71}”

Although al-Hilali clearly intended to flatter the king, the grand future he envisioned for Dar al-Hadith was a genuine expression of his transnational outlook and aspirations. As it turns out, it was strikingly similar to the grand future that Rashid Rida had envisioned for Dar al-Da‘wa wa-l-Irshad back in the early 1910s. al-Hilali wanted the new Moroccan institute to train multilingual missionaries who, in addition to being well versed in Arabic, would be required to learn a foreign language, preferably English

\textsuperscript{70} Zeghal, 64-67, 73-74, 81-83.
or French. Only then could they perform the religious obligation of bringing the message of Islam to all nations of the world.\textsuperscript{72} But whereas Rida wanted to use transnational proselytism to propagate a modernist and unifying Salafiyya vis-à-vis the challenges of modernity and imperialism, al-Hilali expected the graduates of Dar al-Hadith to spread a puristic Salafiyya worldwide for one reason alone: because true Islam is the only means to reach happiness in this world and the next.\textsuperscript{73} However, he did not explain what “happiness in this world” consisted in; he did not deem it necessary to add any social or political indication. The way of the pious ancestors simply had to prevail, because God rewards true and obedient Muslims.

Cursory references to salvation, the hereafter and this-worldly happiness were not likely to alarm the Palace. Nonetheless, the puristic standards which al-Hilali was calling for were a far cry from the religious status quo that the Moroccan monarchy was trying to maintain and take advantage of. The Dar al-Hadith that al-Hilali had imagined was by no means Machiavellian: it would never have put political considerations ahead of religious and moral obligations. But the real Dar al-Hadith turned out to be a reflection of how things were in independent Morocco, rather than how they ought to be according to puristic norms. The Palace may have realized from the onset that al-Hilali’s religious ethos was hardly suitable for the new institution, for despite his qualifications and enthusiastic public declarations he did not receive an invitation to join the faculty at Dar al-Hadith until two months after its inauguration.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 2-3.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 2.
The belated job offer appears to have hurt al-Hilali’s feelings, but he accepted it. The Minister of Habous, Ahmad Bargash, appointed him professor of Qur’anic exegesis and put him in charge of a course devoted to the *Muwatta* of imam Malik (a compilation of hadiths and sayings of the companions followed by Malik’s own commentaries). It did not take long before al-Hilali realized that his puristic Salafi ethos was not going to be enforced at Dar al-Hadith. He claims that four of his students, who were Tijani Sufis, hated his lectures and created unrest by constantly asking stubborn questions. This is hardly surprising. al-Hilali’s tendency to make ex cathedra Salafi affirmations probably insulted the Sufi students as much their rebuffs annoyed him. When he finally lost patience and decided to expel one of them from the classroom, he found no support from his superiors. Much to his annoyance, the dean of the faculty was himself a Sufi. Tired and disillusioned, al-Hilali resigned after only two and a half month. Although he listed several logistical and personal factors justifying his departure, he must also have come to the realization that Dar al-Hadith, despite its name, could not live up to his expectations.

**Apostates and Detractors of Religion**

In addition to being a preacher and a professor, al-Hilali continued to write articles about religion on a regular basis. The head of the management committee of *Da‘wat al-Haqq*, the Ministry of Habous’ official journal created soon after independence in 1957, was his friend Muhammad al-Tanji. al-Hilali could therefore count on the journal to publish his thoughts. Some of them, it is true, were no more

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74 al-Hilali, *al-Da‘wa*, 212.
puristic than the views of other Moroccan contributors and not much different from the opinions of conservatives within other religious traditions. For example, al-Hilali published a fatwa that condemned many of the rationales behind birth control.\(^{75}\) Interestingly, he admitted that it was no longer necessary to try and establish a ruling concerning sexual intercourse with slave girls “[…] because slavery does not exist in this day and age.”\(^{76}\) In the 1940s, his jurisprudential’s take on slavery had been more literalistic.

Yet most of the articles that al-Hilali wrote in Daʿwat al-Haqq in the 1960s conveyed a particularly strong sense of vexation. The elite, according to him, too often neglected Islamic identity and integrity. In that sense, the end of colonialism had led to a disappointing outcome, for even though Morocco and most Muslim countries were now free to return to their true religious self, Islamic norms were still improperly enforced and sometimes rejected out of hand. al-Hilali made it his duty to champion the Salafiyya in the face of those who slighted it or were too lenient to ensure its primacy. Thus, his writings were much more abrupt and puristic than those of his fellow Moroccan Salafi contributors.

One interesting example is the 1963 article in which al-Hilali took an uncompromising stance toward the Baha’i affair that had begun the year before. In the spring of 1962, the police department of the city of Nador in northern Morocco received

\(^{75}\) The fatwa was a response to a student from Mosul who had moved to al-Azhar in Egypt. al-Hilali’s articles often made reference to his transnational network of connections.

\(^{76}\) Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, “Raʿy fi tahdid al-nasl wa-l-ʿadwa,” Daʿwat al-Haqq, 6, 6 (March 1963): 4. The second and final part of the fatwa was published in the April issue under the same title.
complaints to the effect that some Baha’i activists were propagating their faith among Muslims. An investigation concluded that a few Iranian Baha’is and one from Syria had indeed been active in Nador, Tetouan, Fes and Meknes. It was also revealed that they had managed to convert local youths. As a result, fourteen people (thirteen Moroccan citizens and one Syrian) were arrested and faced criminal charges of rebellion, breach of public order, illegal constitution of an association, and violation of religious convictions. In a nutshell, the Baha’is were accused of choosing and propagating a heretical faith that contravened the state religion—Islam—whose status was enshrined in the Moroccan constitution. In December 1962, the tribunal of Nador condemned three of the Baha’i converts to death; five others defendants were condemned to life in prison, one received a fifteen-year sentence, and the remaining five were acquitted.  

These events created a national and international crisis. The Istiqlal Party and the Ministry of Habous, whose head was then ʿAllal al-Fasi, were in favor of the legal actions and condemnations. The UNFP, for its part, chose not to take position, while liberal commentators lashed out against the trial, its outcome and its axiological underpinnings. In France, the newspaper Le Monde spoke of an inquisition in Morocco. When the tribunal of Nador issued death sentences, the monarchy found itself under considerable international pressure to overturn the verdict. In April 1963, Hasan II pledged to a group of American dignitaries that he would pardon the Baha’is whose case

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78 One critic noted that al-Fasi had previously conceded the right of a Muslim to convert to Judaism. See ibid., 976. See also Mohamed Tozy, “Champ et contre-champ politico-religieux au Maroc” (Ph.D. diss., Université Aix-Marseille, 1984), 90.  
79 Le Monde, August 10, 1962, 3.
was then under appeal. But the king was spared the task of resorting to his discretionary powers when the Rabat Supreme Court exonerated the accused in December 1963.  

What incited al-Hilali to react publicly to this crisis was a letter he received from one of his former pupils, ʿIsam al-Alusi, who resided in Britain at the time. al-Alusi had read about the unfolding of the thorny Bahaʾi affair and complained that it generated arguments between Muslims and non-Muslims in his community. He decided to turn to al-Hilali to clarify the matter and explain “[…] Islam’s position with respect to such groups [as the Baha’is].” For the sake of Muslims in Britain, al-Alusi requested al-Hilali’s permission to translate the answer into English so that it could be distributed in a local Islamic center and published in the Pakistan-based journal *Muslim News International*.

The fact that al-Hilali engaged the Bahaʾi affair in *Daʿwat al-Haqq* at the behest of Muslims in Europe is indicative of his transnational standpoint. Unlike many other analysts in his native country, al-Hilali did not conceive of the affair as a Moroccan issue per se. For him, apostasy was a major sin whose legal consequences are attested by scriptural evidence valid for all places at any point in time; neither Moroccan politics nor contextual considerations warranted leniency in this case. al-Hilali thus based his answer on a series of sound and acceptable hadiths. The three most important ones state, in different terms, that it is forbidden to kill a fellow Muslim except in three distinct cases: when it is proven that he 1) committed adultery, 2) deliberately and illegally killed an

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individual or 3) abandoned Islam and divided the community (al-tārik li-dīnihi wa-l-
mufāriq li-l-jamāʿa, according to one version). After establishing the validity of these
prophetic hadiths, al-Hilali insisted on the religious duty of enforcing the rules they
contain. Whoever was having second thoughts about these rules and their binding nature
was “[…] more ignorant than a donkey.”

The thrust of al-Hilali’s argument was that Muslims cannot let pity, empathy or
self-consciousness get in the way of the implementation of God’s criminal justice as
carried through His prophet. He remembered a case where a man of Yemeni origins and
an Indian woman had both admitted to committing adultery before a judge in Mecca
during the ḥajj in 1957. The qāḍī condemned them both to death by stoning, but some
pilgrims reprobated the punishment. This was exactly the kind of attitude that
exasperated al-Hilali: according to him, these pilgrims knew nothing of Islam save its
name.

The question of apostasy left no more room for negotiation, even though the
Baha’i affair was giving Islam a bad name in the West. The relevant hadiths were too
explicit, and medieval puristic scholars of great repute—Ibn Qudama, Ibn Rajab, Ibn
Hazm—had clearly established the meaning of “abandoning” Islam. According to al-
Hilali’s epistemological parameters, there simply was no way of circumventing their
textual interpretation. Other authorities—the Maliki scholar Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (d. 1070),
whom al-Hilali deemed crypto-Zahiri, as well as the Hanbali scholar Ibn Rajab (d.

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82 Ibid., 30.
83 Ibid.
al-Hilali specified that such innovations could be theological in nature, such as one’s belief in the created-ness of the Qur’an or the denial that God “creates” the actions of human beings. While these thoughts do not make one an apostate, puristic medieval scholars nonetheless considered that whoever holds them is liable to execution. How then, al-Hilali asked, can one justify sparing the life of the Baha’is whose conduct and beliefs are even more heretical?⁸⁴

Conscious that scriptural arguments might not convince Western critics, al-Hilali also provided his readers with different kinds of intellectual ammunition. Because Islam does not distinguish between religion and state, Muslims are as entitled to execute apostates as Western nations are entitled to execute traitors. Was not Pierre Laval (d. 1945), the former vice-premier of Vichy France, executed for high treason at the end of the Second World War? By virtue of this *tu quoque* argument, al-Hilali claimed that it was illogical for Westerners to criticize the Baha’is’ condemnation for apostasy. In actuality, the epitome of illogic was to dissociate political creed (‘aqīda siyāsiyya) from religious creed, and to render unto Ceasar the things that are Ceasar’s: “For us [Muslims], everything belongs to God and nothing to Ceasar, for Ceasar himself is God.”⁸⁵ al-Hilali viewed man-made laws and regulations as fundamentally absurd, and in that sense his critique not only extended to the postcolonial Moroccan state itself, but to all the Moroccan personalities who demanded the execution of the Baha’is for civic reasons.

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According to him, no one should be invoking Moroccan nationalism. The crux of the problem was not public order or the cohesion of the Moroccan nation, as the spokespersons of the Ministry of Habous tried to frame the affair. Too many people were missing the point that apostasy is first and foremost a crime against God. The Baha’is should therefore be executed for infringing on the rights of God and the integrity of Islam per se. But alas, their case was brought before a Moroccan civil court that applied positive law and, as a result, the accused were not sentenced to death for the right reasons. Had Islamic courts retained their authority and prerogatives, such a long-standing crisis would never have occurred in the first place.86

The loss of Islamic references in postcolonial institutions and policies did indeed cause al-Hilali a great deal of dismay. Nowhere was this concern more obvious than in a series of sixteen related articles written in response to a 1964 paper written by the Lebanese Christian philosopher of Egyptian origins René Habachi (d. 2003). A friend and disciple of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Maurice Zundel, Habachi was neither an atheist nor a detractor of religion per se; yet al-Hilali construed his thoughts as hostile to faith in general and to Islam in particular. Published in Beirut, Habachi’s paper was a discussion on the psychological impediments to planning, progress and development of education in the Arab world. One such impediment was religious, though Habashi did not dismiss religion altogether. On the contrary, he made it clear that he did not want to abolish faith. What he condemned, rather, was certain type of faith—a caricatural faith

86 Ibid., 33.
(al-īmān al-kārīḵātūrī), as he put it—which is at once domineering and intimidating; close-minded and subjected to the individual’s natural impulses; obscurantist and thus determined to deny the advances of scientific discoveries; exclusivist and thus anti-humanist. This type of faith, Habachi argued, served as a holy pretext for educational inertia. But faith could evolve: humans were mistaken to try and deal with the problem by eliminating God altogether instead of reforming themselves.\(^{87}\)

Considering that some of Habachi’s thoughts were in fact congruent with the early twentieth-century Salafiyya, one wonders how al-Hilali would have reacted had he been exposed to similar arguments back in the early 1920s. But in the mid-1960s, he understood the philosopher’s remarks as sounding the death knell for religion. Targeting even one aspect of religion as a possible impediment to progress in the Arab world was sufficient to alarm al-Hilali. The sixteen articles he devoted to rectifying the alleged errors of Habachi became a remedial enterprise that grew well beyond a tit-for-tat response to the original offense. Until December 1966, al-Hilali channeled his own postcolonial grievances into this work.

He and Habachi agreed that the Arab world needed to progress and develop, but al-Hilali could not conceive of religion—especially his religion—as a possible culprit. Islam is what gave life to the Arabs, he argued, and all of their problems began when they departed from the religion of their ancestors. Logically, then, Islam was part of the solution rather than the problem. With respect to the law, for instance, al-Hilali once

again deplored the dwindling role of the *shari‘a* in Arab countries, where acts that should be illicit were made licit. But the relevance of Islam went far beyond the legal sphere. al-Hilali reaffirmed that Islam encompasses justice, freedom, science and reason. He gave no quarter on this issue and even criticized Habachi’s article for making conceptual distinctions that placed faith and reason in two different analytical categories, whereas in truth “[...] faith is the fruit of reason itself.”

To buttress his main point, al-Hilali insisted that Westerners, the most advanced of all people, were themselves eminently religious. Using his personal experience of Europe as a source of authority, he relied on this argument repeatedly and under different forms in the 1950s and 1960s. In Germany, Switzerland, Britain and other European countries, al-Hilali had witnessed an attachment to religion that contradicted Habachi’s contention that faith could be an impediment to progress. The number of Europeans who renounce their religion is very low, al-Hilali claimed. According to him, it did not exceed one or two percent of the total population. Most of these individuals, he added, were not even atheists. Rather, they often abandoned their religion out of obligation, either to marry someone from a different confession (al-Hilali gave the example of a Catholic women wanting to marry a Protestant man) or because they could not afford to pay Church taxes. Religion was so central to European life that even governments were involved in sustaining its primacy: state school systems were confessional and everywhere religion was part of the curriculum. As a result, departments of theology in

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every university produced a high number of doctoral students who never remained unemployed. 89 This depiction of Europe was an idealized mirror image of the postcolonial Arab states.

At a time when Islamic activists often decried the moral decay of the West, al-Hilali thus praised America and European democracies for granting their citizens full freedom of consciousness and the right to practice their religion freely. 90 But this was a double-edged argument whose sole purpose was to silence Habachi and annihilate the anti-religious trend he was supposed to represent. In truth, al-Hilali was not ready to accept the full implications of his own logic, and some of his other writings betrayed his distrust for the West. The earliest Muslim community was his only true model, not modern Europe. Freedom of consciousness was not his objective; he rather yearned for social and political conditions in which Islam could play the paramount role it deserved. Even though his line of argument hinged on the inherent religiosity of the West, al-Hilali could not keep from implying that the threat of secularism, agnosticism and atheism continued to emanate from Europe and to endanger Muslim societies. For instance, he accused Habachi of plagiarizing the work of Julian Huxley (probably his 1927 Religion Without Revelation), whose scientific humanism relegated the idea of God to a more primitive stage of spiritual development. 91 al-Hilali also warned his readers that spiritual colonialism (al-isti‘mār al-rūḥī) is a conspiracy whose evil is a thousand times greater

than that of material colonialism. It is a cancer (saraṭān), and it leads people like Habachi to publish articles that insult God.\footnote{al-Hilali, “Naqd maqal,” 38.} In other words, the alleged one or two percent of the Western population that was allegedly not religious, or less religious, still represented a major risk. Although they were a negligible minority unable to exert any influence in Europe, they had plenty of ignorant followers in the Arab world.\footnote{al-Hilali, \textit{Diwaʿ al-shakkin}, iii, 123.}

The sixteen articles were in fact nothing more than a rhetorical contest in which Habachi served as a straw man. Their intellectual value lies mainly in bringing al-Hilali’s own opinions, expectations and persona to light. It must indeed have been frustrating for him to fight for an idea as basic as the compatibility between civilizational greatness and religion when postcolonial states had, in theory, the power to try and re-Islamize society, but chose not to do so. Even worse was the fact that his tirade against Habachi elicited negative reactions from his co-religionists. What he saw as an urgent and noble endeavor in defense of Salafi Islam met with criticism and a hint of condescension. One fellow Moroccan intellectual, ʿAbd al-Hadi al-Sharaybi, declared that al-Hilali should be writing a book instead of publishing his lengthy series of articles in \textit{Daʿwat al-Haqq}. His work not only came in an odd format, al-Sharaybi noted; it interested only a few people. Of course al-Hilali counterattacked to the best of his abilities, but he was at a disadvantage. It is true that his writings were not attuned to the most fashionable intellectual trends of the time. He showed no interest for political theory or activism, had no penchant for socialism or existentialism, could not even present himself as a typical Moroccan or Arab
nationalist, and was not an Islamist à la Sayyid Qutb. Rather, he was an old-fashioned Salafí polemicist à la Shakib Arslan who used his pen to defend Islam by all means necessary. On the question of format, he replied to al-Sharaybi that the publication of lengthy series of articles was perfectly normal. As evidence, he reminded his critic that Rashid Rida had published his Qur’anic exegesis piecemeal in *al-Manar* for thirty-five years.⁹⁴ But this was precisely part of the problem: al-Hilali’s work was based on old models that many considered passé.

Other critiques came from students at Muhammad V University. One group blamed al-Hilali for his harsh language toward Habachi.⁹⁵ Evidently, his accusations of heresy and disbelief (*kufr*), his call for a mandatory jihad against the enemies of Islam who invite Muslims to renounce their religion, and his suggestion that Habachi deserved to be decapitated for his offense unless he recanted did not sit well with some of the educated youths in Rabat.⁹⁶ These students also targeted the scriptural basis of al-Hilali’s argumentation, which they saw as a rhetorical weakness. How could he quote the Qur’an and the hadiths to object Habachi when the latter did not even believe in them? Although al-Hilali first argued that no rational individual could examine the scriptures without being compelled to believe, he later exerted considerable efforts in finding new kinds of evidence. With this purpose in mind, he wrote to several Western embassies in Rabat to enquire about faith and religiosity in their respective countries.

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⁹⁶ There are many such references throughout the series of articles. See *ibid.*, 132-134.
The replies served as irrefutable proofs. al-Hilali triumphantly transcribed the letter he received from the American embassy, which contained figures from the 1960 census. Only two percent of the population of the United States declared that they had no religious affiliation. In West Germany, the results were even better. According to the 1964 census, atheists constituted a mere one percent of the population, and al-Hilali claimed that most of them were merely non-practicing believers. The figures provided by the embassies of Norway, Sweden and Switzerland reinforced al-Hilali’s conviction that advanced countries were religious and, therefore, that progress was not antithetical to religion. But what he understood by progress did not correspond to the understanding of progressive Moroccans, including most modernist Salafis. As he reviewed the figures from Switzerland, where women did not yet have the right to vote both at the federal level and in many cantons, al-Hilali remarked: “In this, there is a lesson for anyone […] who claims that advancement and progress cannot occur unless women partake in elections.”

Census figures were not, of course, a proof of religiosity, nor did one’s nominal affiliation to a religion reveal much about one’s faith. But al-Hilali either failed to realize the sociological naiveté of his conclusion or chose to disregard it for the sake of his argument. In any event, it is fair to say that his series of articles received mixed reviews. There was not much recognition to gain from this type of religious debate in postcolonial Morocco. al-Hilali insisted that he had lots of admirers, though many of them were his

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97 Ibid., 97-98.  
98 Ibid., 103.
own students and personal acquaintances scattered throughout Europe and various regions of the Muslim world. Overall, he had experienced his share of frustrations and disappointments in Meknes and Rabat. The *raison d’être* of his presence in Morocco was growing exceedingly unclear, and by the late 1960s he was ready for a change.

**Saudi Arabia Beckons: The Definitive Separation**

As mentioned in previous chapters, al-Hilali never lost contact with the highest authorities in the Saudi religious establishment. He moreover cultivated these connections during his frequent visits to the country for the purpose of performing the pilgrimage. On one such occasion in 1968, ʿAbd al-ʿAziz ibn Baz made al-Hilali a timely offer that the latter could not refuse. As vice-president of the Islamic University in Medina, Ibn Baz invited the Moroccan Salafi to join the faculty. When Ibn Baz told him that the Islamic University needed someone like him, al-Hilali replied that he too was in need of the Islamic University. A formal offer came through the Saudi embassy in Rabat, and the Moroccan Ministry of Education approved the transfer.

Considering al-Hilali’s disillusions about postcolonial Morocco, the perspective of moving back to Saudi Arabia was inviting. His departure from the Hijaz in 1930 had left him somewhat bitter, but the squabbles of the past no longer mattered. al-Hilali certainly held no grudge against the new religious and political elite. From a Saudi

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99 al-Hilali, “Taqwim al-lisanayn,” 122. In the original articles, he only mentions that he received letters of support from one admirer in Erfoud in Morocco and another in Baghdad. See al-Hilali, *Diwaʾ al-shakkin*, 132.

100 al-Hilali, *al-Daʾwa*, 214. We know that al-Hilali went on the pilgrimage in the spring of 1968 and remained in Saudi Arabia at the beginning of the new lunar year. But Ibn Baz may have offered him the job later that year, during the following pilgrimage that took place in early 1969.
perspective, the offer was no less opportune. The 1950s and 1960s were indeed a transitional period of crucial importance in the history of the young Gulf monarchy. Not only did these two decades represent a significant phase in the development of the Saudi oil economy; they also saw the unfolding of the Arab Cold War, that is, the period of intense rivalry that pitted Saudi Arabia and its politically conservative allies against the various socialist, revolutionary and Arab nationalist republics that viewed Egypt as a model and Nasser as their leading spokesperson.101

Under these circumstances, Saudi Arabia faced the urgency of providing an Islamic response to Nasserism and countering the leftist propaganda that emanated mainly from Egypt in print and through radio.102 The kingdom was in dire need of means to spread its Islamic message in order to preserve its legitimacy and ensure social peace. However, Wahhabi scholars were too few to carry out such large-scale tasks, and their traditional religious training had not prepared them well to grapple with secular leftist intellectuals. The establishment of the Islamic University in Medina in 1961 must be understood in this context. From the onset, the scope of the institution was transnational. One of its primary purposes was to promote Islam as a bulwark against the secular and socialist trends that dominated the politics of many third-world countries. On the one hand, university regulations stipulated that seventy-five percent of the students should be

recruited from abroad.\footnote{David Commins, The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 112.} On the other hand, foreigners played an equally important role at the professorial level. A number of Islamists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria taught in the new Saudi institutions of higher education after escaping repression in their respective countries. It was in the interest of the kingdom and its foreign policy to offer refuge to such religious activists, who were not only victims of the secular regimes, but could assist Saudi Arabia in the Arab Cold War as well. Incidentally, these Islamists staffed another Saudi-based transnational organization, the Muslim World League (\textit{rābiṭat al-‘ālam al-islāmī}), which was founded a year later in 1962.

But the foreign religious workforce was not limited to members of the Muslim Brotherhood. It also included non-Saudi Salafis of puristic inclination who may have had connections with Islamist circles, but were often freelancers or belonged to apolitical pietistic associations. al-Hilali was one of them. In Meknes and Rabat he faced neither state repression nor persecution, yet he chose to move to Medina because no country other than Saudi Arabia was capable of offering him the kind of intellectual environment where his puristic inclination would not only be tolerated, but encouraged and rewarded. In short, al-Hilali found in Saudi Arabia the level of acknowledgement and recognition he was denied in postcolonial Morocco. Instead of being considered an oddity or even a liability, he became an asset. In 1970, he noted with pride that his polemical articles of the mid-1960s, including his tirade against René Habachi, had fascinated Saudi diplomats and decision makers to such an extent that the Saudi Council of Ministers was ready to...
print and distribute the articles in book form.\textsuperscript{104} To be sure, Moroccan political authorities had never demonstrated as much interest in al-Hilali and his work. It is no wonder he praised Saudi Arabia as a “blessed country.”\textsuperscript{105}

**A Haven for Puristic Salafis**

This episode in al-Hilali’s life happens to be indicative of a larger trend. In the 1950s and 1960s, many other puristic Salafis from various origins, and with comparable intellectual journeys, either moved to Saudi Arabia or reinforced their ties with the kingdom in a significant way. The Lebanese scholar Sa’di Yasin (d. 1976) is a case in point. Born in Ottoman Damascus in 1887, he studied under Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar—Rashid Rida’s foremost Syrian disciple—and followed him to the Saudi-conquered Hijaz from 1927 to 1929. There, like al-Hilali and many other foreign Salafis, Yasin worked as a professor. He settled in Beirut afterwards and remained there until his death. Yet, he had the opportunity of renewing his relationship with Saudi Arabia in the meantime. From 1952 onward, he served as the official religious mentor for Saudi students registered at the American University in Beirut. He also served on the committee that established the Muslim World League in 1962, participated in the League’s outreach programs, and regularly contributed to its journal. His association with Saudi Arabia raised suspicions in Lebanon, especially within the postcolonial state apparatus, and it is

\textsuperscript{104} al-Hilali, *Diwa’ al-shakkin*, iii. The text suggests that al-Hilali was in fact trying to market himself from the very beginning. It was he who first approached the Saudi ambassador in Rabat and sent him a copy of the articles. In the end, however, the Saudis did not take charge of the publication because al-Hilali apparently chose to work with the head of a pietistic association in Casablanca.

\textsuperscript{105} al-Hilali, *al-Da’wa*, 214.
even said that Yasin received dead threats. But this did not deter him from carrying out his educational work. Over the years, many of his Lebanese pupils pursued their religious studies in Saudi Arabia.\footnote{Muhammad Hamad Khidr, \textit{al-Da‘iyya al-salafi al-shaykh Sa‘di Yasin, 1307-1396/1887-1976} (Beirut: Dar Maktabat al-Haya, 1980), 9, 12, 23, 26, 56-57, 75.}

Other foreign Salafis chose to leave their home countries and to relocate in Mecca, Medina or Riyadh. Among them were two scholars who became famous: Ṭāhir al-Razzaq Ṣafī (d. 1994) and Abu Bakr Jabir al-Jazā’irī (b. 1921). Born in Egypt in 1905, Ṣafī studied under Rashid Rida and became a younger member of his entourage. His other professors included Mahmud Shaltut, Mustafa al-Maraghi, as well as three of Rida’s religious disciples who were in the Hijaz with al-Hilali in the 1920s, namely, Muhammad Ḥamīd al-Fiqī, Ṭāhir al-Razzaq Hamza and Ṭāhir al-Zahir Abu al-Samh. But Ṣafī did not immediately follow them to Mecca and Medina. He graduated from al-Azhar in 1932, taught in Alexandria and joined Ansar al-Sunnah al-Muhammadyya, the pietistic Salafi association headed by Muhammad Ḥamīd al-Fiqī. It was not until 1948 that he first received an invitation to move to Saudi Arabia along with a sizeable delegation of graduates from al-Azhar. Once in the kingdom, Ṣafī’s career took a turn for the better. In the early 1960s, he participated to the elaboration of the curriculum of the Islamic University in Medina, and was later admitted to the highest and most select religious bodies of Saudi Arabia, including the Permanent Committee for Islamic
Research and Legal Advice (often referred to as dār al-iftāʾ) and the Board of Senior ʿUlamaʾ (hayʾat kibār al-ʿulamāʾ). He acquired Saudi citizenship and died in Riyadh.\(^{107}\)

As for Abu Bakr Jabir al-Jazāʾiri, whom we have already mentioned in chapter one, his story serves as a prime example of the tensions that existed within the Salafi movement in the twentieth century. Born in 1921 in a village near Biskra in Algeria, al-Jazāʾiri comes from a religious milieu in which Sufism and the Maliki school of law predominated. After his studies in Biskra, he moved to Algiers and worked as a teacher in a local madrasa. It was in the capital that he met and soon began studying with Tayyib al-ʿUqbi (d. 1960), a collaborator of the famed reformist leader Ibn Badis.\(^{108}\) To some extent, al-ʿUqbi represented the puristic wing of the Algerian Salafi movement. His most immediate concerns were not politics and anti-colonial activism, but the revival of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Though undoubtedly modernist in many regards, he had the reputation of being less moderate than Ibn Badis.\(^{109}\) One scholarly authority described him as an aggressive proselyte whose self-righteousness and intransigence, especially toward Sufis, earned the Algerian reformist movement more critics and enemies than sympathizers.\(^{110}\)


By the time al-Jaza’iri met him in Algiers in the mid-1930s, al-ʿUqbi was already becoming marginal vis-à-vis the mainstream Salafi organization, the Association of the Muslim Algerian ʿUlama (AUMA). But he made a strong impression on his young pupil who, in turn, clearly assimilated the master’s apolitical stance and focus on religious purism. Thus, on the eve of the Algerian war of independence, probably in 1952 or 1953, al-Jaza’iri decided to leave his home country to pursue higher religious studies in Saudi Arabia. He audited the lectures of several scholars in Medina and, in 1961, obtained a degree from the Faculty of Shari'a in Riyadh, which was then part of the local branch of the Saudi Scientific Institute (maḥad al-ʿilmī). That same year, he became a professor at the Islamic University in Medina.\footnote{al-Majdhub, 29-31.} He was a trusted collaborator of Ibn Baz, remained involved in Saudi-sponsored international proselytism and became a bestseller Salafi author. Considering these achievements, it is not difficult to understand why al-Jaza’iri never resettled in Algeria. The secular regimes that held power in his native country could not offer him an environment as hospitable as that of Saudi Arabia.

Not all foreign Salafis, however, spent such extended periods of time in Saudi Arabia. Some moved to the kingdom for a few years only, although they usually remained within the Wahhabis’ orbit afterwards. As we shall see in the next chapter, al-Hilali belonged to this category, and so did the famous hadith scholar Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999). Born in 1914 in the former Ottoman city of Shkodër, Albania, he was still a child when his family emigrated to Damascus. He learned Arabic,
undertook religious studies, and became an avid reader whose interests ranged from history books to translations of Western works of fiction, such as the stories of Arsène Lupin. But al-Albani’s life changed in the early 1930s when he stumbled on an issue of Rashid Rida’s *al-Manar* at a local store. The article that had the most profound effect on him was a critical review in which Rida assessed the merits and faults of *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*), the monumental masterpiece of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). It was an eye-opening piece, for al-Albani had never encountered such stimulating intellectual work in matters of religion.112 The contention that al-Ghazali used weak hadiths to support Sufi innovations proved so enlightening that al-Albani later credited Rashid Rida—whom he never met—with his passion for the science of hadith and his conversion to the Salafiyya.113

Like al-Hilali, al-Albani immediately chose to align himself with the puristic and scholarly wing of the Salafi movement. His primary goal was to champion the Sunna while opposing Sufism and traditional schools of law. He delved into hadith scholarship and, for the remainder of his life, sought above all to uncover and eliminate weak prophetic reports that insidiously weakened the Muslim community.114 Over time, he became acquainted with most of Rashid Rida’s closest religious disciples: Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar, Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi, ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza and, of course, al-

Hilali.\textsuperscript{115} As his reputation grew among his peers, al-Albani received an invitation to join the faculty at the Islamic University in Medina, where he taught the science of hadith for three academic years between 1961 and 1964.\textsuperscript{116} However, the short duration of his stay raises questions. If it is true that Saudi Arabia offered a haven for foreign puristic Salafis, why did al-Albani leave Medina in 1964? There is indeed something counterintuitive about his departure, for the ruling class in postcolonial Syria was immersed in secular Arab nationalism and harbored nothing but distrust for Saudi Arabia and its religious agents. In actuality, al-Albani returned to Damascus only to face enmity and spend one month in jail in 1967.\textsuperscript{117}

Although the circumstances leading to his departure from Medina are shrouded in uncertainties, it is possible that al-Albani’s iconoclastic approach to Salafi Islam and infectious causticity lead to his dismissal from the Islamic University and his repatriation to Syria.\textsuperscript{118} One the one hand, his rejection of the traditional schools of law was so adamant that it appears to have indisposed the Wahhabis, who still relied on the Hanbali \textit{madhhab}. On the other hand, due to his unique reassessment of hadith literature, al-Albani and his students held jurisprudential opinions that were sometimes irregular, even among fellow Salafis. As Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix explain: “[…] al-Albani presented several peculiar views on Islamic ritual, which raised controversy with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{115} al-Qaryuti, 192, 197, 218.
\item \textsuperscript{116} \textit{Ibid.}, 200-201. Though Western sources often state that al-Albani left Medina in 1963, Arabic sources specify that he stayed there until the end of the year 1383 A.H., which corresponds to the spring of 1964.
\item \textsuperscript{117} \textit{Ibid.}, 195.
\item \textsuperscript{118} I would like to thank Jonathan Brown of the University of Washington for kindly sharing his thoughts with me on this issue. In this context, I borrowed the notion of iconoclasm from his work. See Brown, 321, where he describes al-Albani as an “iconoclast extraordinaire.”
\end{itemize}
other scholars. Some say these controversies led to his expulsion from Medina.119

Sources convincingly suggest that al-Albani remained on good terms with the Saudi religious establishment, yet he never returned to the kingdom for more than briefs visits. In 1980, after having spent another six months in jail, al-Albani took refuge in Jordan rather than Saudi Arabia.

The Fate of Modernist Salafis in Morocco

In the 1950s and 1960s, the religious establishment of Saudi Arabia did not merely attract foreign scholars and activists from the Arab world. It also sought the collaboration, on various levels, of prominent Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent and South-East Asia. Two common denominators, which are not mutually exclusive, generally linked these various individuals together: they either longed for a religious patron—a powerful entity that could offer them support, recognition and, in many cases, protection—or subscribed to a puristic understanding of Islam. Muslims who did not meet any or these two requirements were less likely to curry favor with Saudi Arabia or to receive an invitation from Mecca, Medina or Riyadh. This explains in large measure why the modernist Salafis of Morocco, who constituted one of the largest extant groups of self-proclaimed Salafis who still identified with a progressive ethos, did not fall under Wahhabi influence.

Several reasons may account for the fact that these Salafis remained largely modernist despite the noticeable turn to purism that occurred in other Salafi circles over the years. Morocco, as a distinct geographical and historical entity, was overall less affected by the concerns and politics of the Arab East. Not only did the country’s earliest Salafi leaders have a modernist outlook; they kept it alive and were able to transmit it through an active network of Free Schools. In addition, these modernist Salafis were at the forefront of the struggle against the French and Spanish Protectorates and usually embraced Moroccan nationalism, which limited the appeal of generic and transnational articulations of Salafi Islam. In any event, Islamic modernism was better suited for the nationalist struggle than purism. A stringent religious idiom such as that of al-Hilali was more likely to alienate the French authorities (which had the power to grant independence), as well as large segments of the Moroccan population in general (whose support was necessary for victory).

These observations, however, do not explain the waning of the modernist Salafis in the last third of the twentieth century. To make sense of their gradual demise, one must turn to the political history of independent Morocco during its formative years. Although most modernist Salafis did not cope with the same frustrations that a maverick like al-Hilali experienced in Meknes and Rabat, they were denied the political influence they may have wished for. Throughout Morocco’s rapid and sometimes chaotic transition from a protectorate to an independent monarchy, the king emerged as the stronger player.
We have already seen how this process and the Salafis’ loss of political leverage disillusioned Muhammad ibn al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi.

Yet modernist Salafis were not without resources. Because many of them had played an important and constant role in the anti-colonial struggle, they had acquired nationalist credentials from which they could reap benefits. Moreover, they remained committed to the monarchy even when they disapproved of its growing power. The Palace made sure that their loyalty would not go unrewarded, and thus provided these supporters and former anti-colonial activists with ample professional opportunities after 1956. As a result, the majority of Salafis ended up accepting positions in civil service, broadly conceived. Muhammad al-Mukhtar al-Susi (d. 1963), for example, became the first Minister of Habous and was later appointed to the Crown Council, of which he remained a member until his untimely death.120 ʿAbdallah Gannun, for his part, became governor or Tangiers in 1956.121 Muhammad al-Makki al-Nasiri (d. 1994) served on various royal commissions and diplomatic missions, was appointed governor of Agadir from 1961 to 1963, taught in several institutions including Dar al-Hadith al-Hasaniyya, and became Minister of Habous and Islamic Affairs in the 1970s.122 Another leading Salafi of the former northern zone, Muhammad Dawud (d. 1984), served on the committee that drafted the Mudawwana in the late 1950s. He thereafter became head of

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the Royal Library in Rabat.ʿAbdallah al-Jirari (d. 1983), who had studied at the Qarawiyyin under the Moroccan pioneers of the modernist Salafiyya, was a chief inspector for the Ministry of Education. As for ʿAbdallah al-Sharaybi (d. 1987), he worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from the onset. He served in Tunisia, Egypt, Pakistan, and became Moroccan ambassador to Libya.

This list is by no means exhaustive. It also excludes some of the Salafis previously mentioned in this chapter, such as ʿAllal al-Fasi, Muhammad al-Tanji and ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Dukkali, who all worked for the state in some capacity. (Besides being a high official in the Ministry of Habous, al-Dukkali was also the chaplain of the Royal Armed Forces). But it soon became obvious, even to the Salafis themselves, that such professional rewards served a political purpose as well. The Palace was in fact pursuing a policy of domestication whereby the ʿulamaʾ could neither challenge the political and religious predominance of the king nor escape his control. In a letter addressed to a friend who had just been appointed qāḍī, Mukhtar al-Susi wrote:

I do not know if I should congratulate you on your promotion or offer you my condolences for losing the freedom you enjoyed thus far. [...] Today you bring your feet closer to golden and shiny shackles [...] to which you will quickly get used. You will adapt to the new conditions of obedience and servility toward your benefactors, so that you may continue to enjoy their favors.

123 al-Sulami, 149.
124 Ibid., 399.
125 Ibid., 442-443.
126 For more details, see Tozy, “Représentation/intercession,” 155-157.
Although religious scholars throughout Islamic history have been wary of the office of qāḍī for similar reasons, the words of Mukhtar al-Susi conveyed a real sense of despondency about the fate of modernist Salafis in postcolonial Morocco. For better or worse, the most rational choice available to them was to submit to the will of the monarchy, acknowledge the terms of the policy of domestication, and perhaps hope for future possibilities. In other countries, the modernist Salafis’ independence did not even last until the 1960s. In Algeria, for instance, they were incapable of responding to the revolutionary fervor and had little choice but to join the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in the mid-1950s. By then, the foremost Salafi organization, the Association of the Muslim Algerian ʿUlama (AUMA), was already required to support the FLN financially. For all practical purposes, it had lost its autonomy.\textsuperscript{128} The modernist Salafi movement of Algeria disappeared and failed to reemerge under the secular regimes of Ben Bellah and Boumédiène.

In Morocco, modernist Salafis did not vanish from the political scene until the 1970s. Some disagreed with the Palace and continued to partake in active politics for some years, either through the Istiqlal or the UNFP; but even though they were in the opposition and called for progressive political reforms inspired by Islam, they worked within the system and remained exposed to competing forces. In the 1950s and 1960s, they too suffered the consequences of the appeal of secular and leftist ideologies. Within the Istiqlal, the modernist Salafis lost the upper hand to the more liberal and secular

\textsuperscript{128} James McDougall, \textit{History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 97-143.
Eventually, they also lost the monopoly of the Islamic modernist idiom that characterized their discourse. The king, for one, appropriated many of its main themes and ideas, thus undermining the very raison d’être of the modernist Salafis. From the late 1960s onward, Islamism gradually outflanked the modernist Salafiyya as a more electrifying and compelling alternative for transforming politics and society on a religious basis. Unable to assert themselves in the political sphere, to retain their independence, to challenge the status quo and to preserve their corporate identity, the modernist Salafis of Morocco failed to ensure the survival of the Salafiyya as a distinct and relevant socio-political movement. The ideals and ideas of Islamic modernism survived, but the label henceforth escaped modernist Muslims.

By contrast, the political and religious needs of Saudi Arabia facilitated the survival and the strengthening of the label Salafiyya as a designation for puristic Islam. But the influence of Saudi Arabia alone did not cause the disappearance of the modernist acception. In truth, the inherent socio-political dimension of the modernist wing of the Salafi movement made it particularly vulnerable to competition in the postcolonial era. Reflecting on the appeal of secularism in the Arab world, ʿAllal al-Fasi noted with chagrin that the Salafiyya “[…] fails every time it leaves the theoretical level to the

130 This is particularly obvious in so-called religious testament of Hasan II, published a few years ago as a series of interviews with French journalist Éric Laurent. Discussing the virtues of Maliki law as well as the compatibility between Islam, democracy, and human rights, the late king’s discourse is strikingly similar to the ideas that ʿAllal al-Fasi promoted throughout his life. See Hassan II, Le génie de la modération (Paris: Plon, 2000). As for the Istiqlal, its current political platform hardly refers to Islam and the Salafiyya anymore, though ʿAllal al-Fasi remains the emblematic figure of the party. This can be seen from the illustrations on the party’s website. See www.istiqlal.ma (last accessed on 05/01/2008).
practical one. As mere religious specialists and directors of conscience, puristic Salafis did not run the risk of being defeated in the political arena. It is precisely because their message was generic and apolitical rather than national and “practical” that they managed to survive. They could easily be transplanted to another country without losing their relevance. By moving to Saudi Arabia, they regrouped, held on to their Salafi label, and benefited from Saudi resources to spread their puristic message around the globe with unprecedented success. Without such a haven, however, their fate could possibly have resembled that of the modernist Salafis.

**Conclusion**

Like many Islamic activists of all stripes, al-Hilali expected that the end of colonialism would usher in a period of significant re-Islamization. In the late 1950s and 1960s, however, his hopes were gradually shattered as he escaped the revolution of the Free Officers in Iraq, realized the appeal of secular and leftist ideologies among Arab elites, and witnessed the emergence of an official Moroccan Islam that tolerated many beliefs and practices he considered innovative. In Morocco, his disenchantment resulted from a number of frustrating experiences. Although he had a few allies within the Ministry of Habous, the state never gave him unconditional support as a preacher. Rather, al-Hilali faced at least one brief suspension, became the object of a ministerial investigation, and was forced to justify his conduct before the political authorities because of the unrest his sermons caused. Evidently, the advent of independence was not

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131 Quoted in El Mansour, 69.
making his puristic proselytism any easier. The few Moroccan institutions of higher education, which were also established and run by the state, afforded him no more opportunities to spread his puristic understanding of Islam. The dean’s office at Dar al-Hadith al-Hasaniyya, for instance, did nothing to back him up following his altercation with Sufi students. Worse, al-Hilali’s beliefs elicited their share of negative reactions from the religious elite. Instead of bringing him praise and recognition, his boldest and most unapologetically puristic articles were snubbed and at times discredited by students and fellow Muslims. While some found him old-fashioned, others found his views too stringent and foreign to Moroccan traditions.

al-Hilali tried hard to respond to his critics and not to let himself become an irrelevant figure in the postcolonial era. But the trials and tribulations of being a maverick puristic Salafi in independent Morocco took their toll on his sense of purpose. By and large, al-Hilali was a misfit and could hardly come to terms with the particular religious orientation of the nation-state. Not that he was alone. Modernist Salafis were also forced to reconsider their raison d’être, but their situation was different insofar as their objectives and expectations did not fully coincide with those of al-Hilali. Religious leaders such as Muhammad ibn al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi, ʿAllal al-Fasi and Mukhtar al-Susi had been counting on political structures to implement progressive policies that combined Islam and modern values. They too faced tremendous difficulties and competitors after independence, and their disillusionment was no less tangible.
Yet the rift between them and al-Hilali had become too great to be bridged. On the whole, it seems fair to say that the postcolonial era consummated the breakup of the old Salafi movement. While puristic and modernist Salafis had been able to collaborate or tolerate each other under colonialism when they struggled for a common cause, they now looked forward to different outcomes and no longer needed each other. Modernist Salafis were heir to the progressive and socio-political wing of the Salafiyya movement; in Morocco, they usually espoused Moroccan nationalism and strove to influence the nation’s concrete political and social conditions from an Islamic perspective. For the most part, their fate and *raison d’être* were tied to the nation-state: nowhere else could they truly pursue their goals. As they lost momentum and failed to rival the power of the monarchy, they integrated the postcolonial state system and gradually disappeared, thus bringing the existence of the Moroccan modernist Salafiyya to an end. The modernist Salafis’ inability to compete in the political arena accelerated their demise in others countries as well, such as Algeria and Egypt, though at different times. Everywhere, Islamism eventually replaced the modernist Salafiyya as the religious agent of socio-political change par excellence.

Puristic Salafis like al-Hilali, however, were too apolitical to harbor similar ambitions. That they generally stood aloof from active politics and remained quietist benefited them in the long run. Because their primary concern was to call the population to orthodoxy and orthopraxy, regardless of national considerations, their fate was not so closely tied to their home country. al-Hilali, for example, was not a typical Moroccan
nationalist; he was a transnationalist with a generic Islamic message deliberately untainted by religious localism. Emigration was thus conceivable, because al-Hilali, unlike his modernist colleagues, could leave Morocco without losing his relevance as a Salafi activist. His fundamental goals and the very essence of his discourse were applicable and transferable anywhere. During his stay in Morocco, he had never written for Moroccans alone; his audience was as much in Europe, India and the Middle East as in North Africa. So when an opportunity to relocate presented itself at the end of the 1960s, al-Hilali accepted a position at the Islamic University in Medina. In the context of the Arab Cold War, foreign puristic Salafis were in high demand in Saudi Arabia. There, they not only resumed their puristic teaching with the blessing of political authorities; they also found the level of consideration and recognition that otherwise eluded them. By all means, the collaboration between Saudis and foreign puristic Salafis was mutually beneficial.

With a haven in the Arabian Peninsula, the puristic wing of the old Salafi movement survived and continued to emphasize its Salafi identity. As a result, the remaining modernists formally lost the struggle over the labels “Salafi” and “Salafiyya” in the 1960s. While it may be too presumptive to say that Saudi Arabia became the lifeline of the puristic Salafiyya in the postcolonial era—puristic Salafis may well have been able to survive in various localities—the kingdom certainly boosted the proponents of Islamic purism and gave them cohesion and purpose. The Saudis sponsored and protected puristic Salafis, provided them with prime institutions, and integrated them in a
formidable network of transnational proselytism. The next chapter will examine the intellectual consequences of this watershed.
Chapter Seven

The Triumph of the Puristic Salafiyya

In the 1920s, the campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism had initiated a process whereby the center of gravity of the Salafiyya started to shift away from Egypt and closer to the Saudi state. A priori, this process entailed no teleological outcome; few could have predicted with any certainty that the Wahhabis would later succeed in laying the strongest claim to the Salafiyya as both a label and a construct. But by the late 1960s, in the wake of postcolonial struggles and the Arab Cold War, the process that began in the 1920s neared completion. With the weakening and receding visibility of its modernist wing, the Salafiyya became inextricably tied to Saudi Arabia for the remainder of the twentieth century until now. This is not to say that the Salafiyya ceased to be transnational, but rather that the Saudi kingdom served as its institutional, logistical and financial headquarters. Backed by a new and powerful sponsor, the puristic Salafiyya not only survived and triumphed; it intertwined with Wahhabism to such an extent that the two concepts are now often considered interchangeable.

The pervasive Wahhabi influence on non-Saudi Salafis was not new. It had already affected the disciples of Rashid Rida who had chosen to stay in the Hijaz after 1930, and it was now affecting Taqi al-Din al-Hilali as well. Following a stint as professor at the Islamic University in Medina, the aging Moroccan Salafi took on the ethos of a Wahhabi-inspired Salafi and displayed an exclusively puristic approach to
Islam and religious activism. From the 1970s until his death in 1987, his work showed a predilection for uncompromising casuistry and ignored many of the modernist ideals of previous decades. In actuality, al-Hilali’s tirade against René Habachi had been his last long-term project based, in part, on modernist premises. Thereafter, al-Hilali tended to limit his duties as an exponent of the Salafiyya and to restrict his task to the provision of proofs and counterproofs on what is Islamic and un-Islamic.

This chapter will examine the last period in al-Hilali’s life and assess the extent to which his religious discourse reflected the evolution of the Salafiyya in the 1970s and 1980s. Overall, it would be fair to say that al-Hilali had previously assimilated most of the puristic elements that came to characterize his thoughts during these last two decades. In that sense, one sees more continuity than change. Yet a most significant break with the past occurred. The difference lay, rather, in the almost complete disappearance of modernist concerns from al-Hilali’s writings. Until the 1970s, he had never fully abandoned his struggle to present Islam in a modern idiom and to make the case for its compatibility with the social and scientific standards of the modern era. In the wake of his final affiliation with the Saudi religious establishment, however, he no longer gave consideration to these objectives. Instead of pondering how Muslims might embrace the various aspects of modernity while remaining true to their religion, al-Hilali only concerned himself with religious truth. He conceived of religious renewal and reform as the reiteration of Salafi orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Thus, when he discarded the last
distinctive characteristics of Islamic modernism, purism filled the vacuum and permeated his religious discourse to an unprecedented extent.

**The Distinguished Professor From Medina**

From 1968 to 1974, al-Hilali officially served as professor of Islamic faith and teachings at the Islamic University in Medina. But more specifically, his peers continued to recognize his particular expertise in the field of linguistics. Throughout his life, al-Hilali had indeed devoted considerable time to the study and teaching of Arabic as well as foreign languages. These skills proved invaluable at a time when Saudi authorities endeavored to spread their religious views and reach Muslim communities abroad, whose members did not always have a strong command of the Arabic language. During his stay at the Islamic University in Medina, al-Hilali was thus entrusted with the task of translating the Qurʾan in English. His partner for this assignment, Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, was not a religious scholar by training. Rather, he was the Pakistani director of the University’s hospital.

Together, al-Hilali and Khan produced one of the most important tools for the dissemination of Saudi-sponsored religious ideas across both geopolitical and linguistic boundaries. *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qurʾan* has been so widely distributed over the years that al-Hilali became a household name in the West, especially

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1 In Arabic, he was known as a *mudarris fi kulliyat al-daʿwa wa usūl al-dīn*.
in America and Britain. Yet there is some irony in the fact that al-Hilali’s long-standing openness to European languages led him, in the end, to translate the word of God. In the 1930s, he was rather opposed to the idea. He thought that learning foreign languages (especially the languages of the European colonial powers) was a means to empower Muslims, but he insisted that sound knowledge of Arabic was necessary to guarantee Islamic unity and prevent the kind of misunderstandings that caused the emergence of heretical splinter groups. Let us recall that the reason al-Hilali wrote against the Ahmadiyya movement in 1932 is that they had issued a Qurʾan translated in English. He admired their ability to preach in foreign languages, but refused to condone their tampering with the word of God. At the time, Rashid Rida’s position was relatively similar. He agreed that Muslims had to devise ways of presenting the ideas of the Qurʾan in foreign languages, but wanted translations of the scriptures to remain minimal at best.

To be sure, historical conditions were different in the 1970s. Colonialism was over and Islamic unity no longer seemed as urgent, consequential or feasible as it had in the early 1930s. The Saudis’ religious ambitions and determination, then, seemingly overrode al-Hilali’s prior aversion toward the idea of translating the Qurʾan. On the one hand, they were alone in pursuing such a global and intense campaign of proselytism from a puristic standpoint. On the other hand, al-Hilali was grateful for being in Saudi Arabia, and was certainly inclined to comply with the will of his generous patrons. Translating the Qurʾan was, by all means, a religiously risky venture; but the Wahhabi

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seal of approval must have reassured al-Hilali and convinced him to go along with the project. In any case, he was well aware of its inherent limitations. In a Kuwaiti journal, he admitted that a translation could never generate as much emotion or elicit as many conversions as the original speech of God in Arabic.\(^5\)

Yet by translating the Qur’an at the behest of the Saudi religious authorities, al-Hilali could hardly avoid committing the very fault against which Rashid Rida issued a warning in 1906. The latter was afraid that a translator might “[…] lead the reader of his translation to hold beliefs that are not intended by the Qur’an.” As it turns out, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an* has been criticized for being a “Trojan-horse translation.” It does, in some instances, provide the readers with a particularly puristic rendition of the text without their knowing it. The most obvious example, which Khaled Abou El Fadl also noted, is the way in which al-Hilali and Khan assert the obligation for Muslim women to cover their entire face, save the eyes, on the basis of their translation of Qur’an 24:31 and 33:59. To do so, they interpolated details in each of these two verses in order to specify body parts that a literal reading of God’s

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5 In 1971, al-Hilali recounted a story that had happened to him in Berlin. He had met a native German who attended a mosque for an entire year and listened to the sermons delivered in German, without ever performing prayers. al-Hilali wondered why the man had not yet embraced Islam. He concluded that language and translations were to blame: had this man known Arabic and been able to read and listen to the original Qur’an, he could have converted to Islam as quickly as ’Umar ibn al-Khattab. See Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, “Ahl al-hadith,” *al-Wa’y al-Islami*, 7, 83 (December 1971): 57.


word would otherwise not reveal. Interestingly, al-Hilali’s personal opinion, which he expressed many times in his own writings until the early 1980s, was that a Muslim woman does not have the obligation to cover her face. One cannot but conclude that the chief Wahhabi scholars of Saudi Arabia demanded the translation to conform to their own views rather than al-Hilali’s.

Judging from a notice added by the publisher, the puristic overtones of *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an* were met with a mixed reception. Written in English and Arabic, the notice responds to critics by claiming that the book is by no means a Wahhabi translation of the Qur’an. As always, and not entirely without reason, puristic Salafis argue that their religious views do not derive solely from the teachings of Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab; they insist that other Islamic authorities have attested to the veracity and soundness of their beliefs, which represent nothing but true Sunni Islam. In this case, they argued that the work of al-Hilali and Khan is exempt from accusations of Wahhabism because it is based on the Qur’anic exegeses of al-Tabari (d. 923), al-Qurtubi (d. 1273) and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), as well as the authentic hadiths reported by al-Bukhari. But according to Abou El Fadl, the Qur’anic commentaries of

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10 Nevertheless, Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab and his epigones are among the contemporary Salafis’ primary sources of inspiration; their teachings often serve as a yardstick for interpreting other sources.
11 The notice is printed as an appendix at the very end of al-Hilali and Khan, 926-927. It should be noted that the three aforementioned exegetes constitute a rather eclectic group, although they each exhibited qualities that could satisfy the Saudi religious establishment. While al-Qurtubi was a Maliki whose *tafsir* made extensive use of hadith literature, Ibn Kathir was a Shafiʿi who had studied under Ibn Taymiyya.
al-Tabari, al-Qurtubi and Ibn Kathir give more leeway to Muslims—especially Muslim women—than the work of al-Hilali and Khan suggests. Abou El Fadl also points out that some of the hadiths taken from al-Bukhari were translated in such a way as to validate a conservative interpretation of the prophet’s sayings.  

During the same period, al-Hilali also helped Muhammad Muhsin Khan in the last stage of a parallel project aimed at the translation of al-Bukhari’s collection of hadiths. Prepared under the auspices of Saudi authorities, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari* conveys an equally puristic presentation of Islam that revolves around rigid prescriptions and proscriptions. The introduction, glossary, appendixes and comments inserted throughout the nine volumes warn English-speaking Muslims against the imminent danger of falling into disbelief (*kufr*) as well as the risks of polytheism (*shirk*) and hypocrisy (*nifāq*) that await anyone who does not abide by an exacting, Wahhabi-inspired conception of monotheism (*tawḥīd*). Therefore, the book does not merely aspire to provide an English translation of sound hadiths. Like *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an*, it also promotes a puristic reading grid and confronts readers with a simplified though unyielding exposé of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The text makes it clear that polytheists, wrongdoers and disbelievers, as defined by the translator and his patrons, are beyond the pale of Islam and cannot be tolerated.

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The selection al-Tabari may seem more surprising, for Hanbali scholars have never been particularly fond of his work. Yet Ibn Taymiyya liked his *tafsīr* and thus rehabilitated him to a certain extent. In the early twentieth century, it was not uncommon for Rashid Rida to use al-Tabari’s exegesis. See Henri Laoust, *Le califat dans la doctrine de Rashid Rida* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1986), 247.

Abou El Fadl, 194, 201.
There is no question that these two translations proceed from the same religious logic and were meant to complement each other in supporting a broader campaign of Saudi proselytism. In fact, both books include the same certificate of authentication signed by ʿAbd al-ʿAziz ibn Baz and confirming that Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan worked together on the two projects while they were employed at the Islamic University in Medina. The books also include a number of addenda for which no justification is provided, although the publisher’s decision to print them clearly indicates ulterior motives.

One of these addenda, which is found in both Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qurʾan and The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari, is the abridged and modified English version of a study that al-Hilali prepared in 1973 to arm one of his disciples in the United States with arguments against Christian critics of Islam. As we saw in chapter four, al-Hilali had started to study the Bible and to debate with Christians during his second stay in India in the early 1930s. He had reportedly become adept at inter-religious polemics and had written a first set of commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew which intrigued Shakib Arslan.

The 1973 study was originally entitled al-Barahin al-injiliyya ʿala anna ʿIsa ʿalayhi al-salam dakhil fi-l-ʿubudiyya wa la hazz lahu fi-l-uluhiyya (Evangelical Proofs

\[\text{al-Hilali and Khan, 3; Muhammad Muhsin Khan, The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari: Arabic-English, vol. 1 (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997), 3. We know that Khan was already translating al-Bukhari in the 1960s, for one edition (Beirut: Dar al-ʿArabiyya, 1997) contains a reference to the year 1969 at the end of volume nine. At the time, Khan had already been in Saudi Arabia for over fifteen years.} \]

\[\text{14 These commentaries are now lost. See Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, al-Barahin al-injiliyya ʿala anna ʿIsa ʿalayhi al-salam dakhil fi-l-ʿubudiyya wa la hazz lahu fi-l-uluhiyya (Mecca: Dar al-Thaqafa, 1973), 26.} \]
that Jesus is a Servant of God and Has Absolutely No Divine Status). In English, the abridged version bears a similar title. The primary purpose of this study, which al-Hilali openly disclosed in the original Arabic, was to serve as a repository of irrefutable arguments for debating Christians. It examines many passages from the Gospel—especially the Gospel of Matthew—and contends that the doctrine of the Incarnation is illogical and blasphemous. In both versions, the crux of the argument is that Christianity is an untenable religion.

There is of course nothing exceptional about the publication of al-Hilali’s refutation of Christianity, for inter-religious polemical literature has been commonplace within Salafi circles throughout the twentieth century. Between 1901 and 1903, following in the footsteps of Muhammad ʿAbduh, Rashid Rida too grappled with Christianity in a series of articles made available in book form in 1905 under the title Shubuhat al-nasara wa hujaj al-islam (The Criticisms of the Christians and the Proofs of Islam). But there is nonetheless a significant difference between al-Hilali and his former mentor in the way they approached the subject. As Simon Wood underlined, Rida’s critique of Christianity was, at heart, a modernist one. Though clearly polemical and superficial at times, his book did not merely attack Christianity for being theologically flawed; it also advanced

\[^{15}\text{al-Hilali and Khan, 869. The authorship of al-Hilali is acknowledged.}\]
\[^{16}\text{al-Hilali, al-Barahin, 4.}\]
\[^{17}\text{al-Hilali’s own logic, however, is not always easy to follow. While he wavers regarding the reliability of the Gospel as a revealed text, he never engages the Muslim notion of Biblical alteration (tahrif) in either the Arabic original or the English version. As the title of the study suggests, some of al-Hilali’s proofs stem directly from the Gospel; yet he also affirms that the Gospel comprises countless passages that contradict the Qur’an and defy reason. He made no specific comment to address this inconsistency.}\]
\[^{18}\text{This book has recently been translated and analyzed by Simon A. Wood, Christian Criticisms, Islamic Proofs: Rashid Rida’s Modernist Defense of Islam (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), x.}\]
arguments that questioned the “adequacy” of the Gospel in the early twentieth century.\footnote{I borrowed the notion of adequacy from William Montgomery Watt, \textit{Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions} (London: Routledge, 1991), 138.}

Whereas al-Hilali only emphasized the polytheistic and thus heretical aspect of the Trinity, Rida added that the blind acceptance of such an ungraspable doctrine would stifle the mind and fly in the face of rational inquiry.\footnote{Wood, 46.} Moreover, he suggested that Christianity was morally and socially counterproductive, thus contradicting the Islamic modernists’ efforts to overcome lethargy, nonage and colonialism:

He [Rida] regards gospel teachings as excessive, exaggerated, destructive of social and civil development and generally impracticable. This is seen in his comments on the injunction to “pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44) and “offer the left cheek” ([…]) he paraphrases Mt 5:39); to Rida, such teachings lower and debase human dignity, in contrast to the Qur’anic message of moderation and elevation. Rida is equally dismissive of excessive hatred, as seen in the requirement that one “hate his father and mother” (Lk 14:26). He finds the notion that one should not worry about livelihood, food or drink (Mt 6:25) […] simply incomprehensible.\footnote{Ibid., 44.}

One may well disagree with Rida’s reading of the Gospel, but there is no doubt that he engaged Christianity from a larger and more modernist perspective than al-Hilali. The latter only attempted to debunk the other religion by noting textual inconsistencies and making theological refutations informed by Islamic beliefs. His verdict was also based purely on creed: Christians are wrong and must be branded as disbelievers because they attribute a divine status to a prophet.\footnote{al-Hilali and Khan, 878; al-Hilali, \textit{al-Barahin}, 44.} In short, al-Hilali showed no interest for the social and progressive ideals that animated Rashid Rida. His 1973 study and its abridged
English version are merely concerned with matters of orthodoxy. al-Hilali made none of the overtures toward Muslim-Christian dialogue and mutual understanding that can be found in Rida’s work.\textsuperscript{23} Nor did he build on Rida’s efforts to present Islam as the religion that can best foster scientific and civilizational progress.\textsuperscript{24}

In truth, al-Hilali would not have disagreed with this last contention. Only a few years earlier, in the mid-1960s, he had written many articles in which he agreed that Islam encourages science and technology.\textsuperscript{25} Yet he would have refused the old modernist approach that elevated reason as a key criterion of truth through which the compatibility between religion and modernity could be enhanced. Rida, for his part, had been favorably disposed to such an approach in the very first years of the twentieth century. He had linked his claim regarding scientific and civilizational progress to a plea in favor of allegorical interpretation (\textit{ta’wil}) and the primacy of reason (\textit{‘aql}) vis-à-vis certain transmitted sources of knowledge (\textit{naql}).\textsuperscript{26} But one finds ample evidence that al-Hilali argued to the contrary throughout the 1970s. On the one hand, he strove to limit the epistemological function of reason in religious legislation, and opposed allegorical interpretation as a means of reconciling potential contradictions between reason and scriptures. On the other hand, he maintained that a unique report (\textit{khabar al-wāhīd}) yields

\textsuperscript{23} Wood, 37-38.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 98-99, 119-120, 155-56.
\textsuperscript{26} Wood, 171-189. It must be reminded, however, that Rashid Rida’s own views on these matters changed over time. His reliance on transmitted reports increased after the death of Muhammad ʿAbduh, and by the mid-1920s he contradicted his former views on allegorical interpretation. See Rashid Rida, \textit{al-Wahhabiyyun wa-l-Hijaz} (Cairo: Dar al-Nada, 2000), 4.
dependable knowledge—so dependable that it constitutes a binding legal proof upon which executions and canonical punishments can be carried out.\textsuperscript{27}

**Repatriation and Resilience**

Although al-Hilali lived and worked in one of the environments that were most favorable to the puristic Salafiyya, he left Saudi Arabia in 1974 and returned to Morocco where he spent the last thirteen years of his life. While this final return to his country of origin leaves a number of questions unanswered, it should not necessarily be construed as a sign of failure. Nor should the length of his stay be considered exceptionally brief. As we saw in the previous chapter, some of the foreign puristic Salafis who moved to Saudi Arabia during the 1950s and 1960s, such as Nasir al-Din al-Albani, remained in the kingdom for even shorter periods of time.

The standard explanation for al-Hilali’s departure from the Islamic University of Medina is that he lacked the necessary leisure to answer the call of his Moroccan disciples, who wanted him to return home and spread the Salafiyya.\textsuperscript{28} Although the details surrounding his repatriation are unclear, there is little indication that al-Hilali’s

\textsuperscript{27} Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, “Mabahith fi-l-kitab wa-l-sunna,” *Majallat Dar al-Hadith al-Hasaniyya*, 1 (1979): 87, 90-93. al-Hilali seems to have understood the term “unique” literally. A report that comes from only two different routes of transmission, he maintains, can be deemed *mutawātir* (of several transmissions). However, Muslims scholars usually have different criteria and require a higher number of transmissions. See Khaled Abou El Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldiers: The Authoritative and Authoritarian in Islamic Discourses* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001), 66. Likewise, many scholars in Islamic history have denied that single reports yield certain knowledge. For a review, see Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *al-Sunna: masdaran li-l-ma‘rifā wa-l-hadara*, 4th edition (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2005), 91-93.

\textsuperscript{28} al-Hilali did not only teach, but also served on the University’s administrative council (al-majlis al-idārī) for several years. See Muhammad al-Majdhub, *‘Ulama’ wa mufakkirun ‘araftuhum*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Nafā‘is, 1977), 207, 210. See also Anonymous, “al-‘Alim al-jalīl al-dukṭur al-Hilali fi dhimmat Allah,” *al-Furqan*, 4, 10 (1987): 7.
relation with the Saudi religious establishment suffered as a result of his resignation. On the contrary, he remained closely affiliated with the Wahhabi ʿulamaʿ in general, and to ʿAbd al-ʿAziz ibn Baz in particular. Nevertheless, we know that al-Hilali’s admiration toward his esteemed patron could be so intense as to elicit negative reactions. In 1977, al-Hilali’s good intentions backfired after he published a grandiloquent ode to Ibn Baz and his family in the pages of the journal of the Salafi University (al-*jāmiʿa al-salafiyya) in Benares, India. The poem disturbed and displeased Ibn Baz to such an extent that he thought it his duty to reply with an open letter in which he reprimanded al-Hilali for his flattery, and blamed the journal’s editors for publishing the ode in the first place.

According to Ibn Baz, al-Hilali had carried his praise too far: he exceeded the limits of Islamic virtue and needed to implore God’s forgiveness for his exaggeration. All the same, most sources (including testimonies from witnesses, as we shall see below) convincingly attest that al-Hilali stayed in the good graces of Ibn Baz as well as the Saudi authorities for the remainder of his life.

Upon his return to Morocco in 1974, al-Hilali settled once again in the city of Meknes. Politically, the situation was quite different. Significant events had shaken the regime during his absence. Chief among them were the two failed coups of 1971 and 1972 that ushered in a period of political stultification and repression. The religious

29 Linked to the Ahl-i Hadith movement, this university was founded in 1966 and has benefited from the financial, religious and political support of Saudi Arabia from its inception. See Muhammad Qasim Zaman, The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 175.

30 The poem and the open letter are reprinted in Muhammad ibn Musa al-Musa, Jawanib min sirat al-imam ʿAbd al-ʿAziz ibn Baz (Riyadh: Dar Ibn Khuzayma, 2002), 137-141.
landscape, however, remained as diversified as it was before. The Palace continued to support creeds and practices that contradicted the ideals of the puristic Salafiyya. That being said, al-Hilali’s apolitical stance and Saudi connections were particularly welcome insofar as they could help counteract the influence of leftist oppositional groups and, after 1979, the appeal of the Islamic revolution in Iran. King Hasan II, for instance, reportedly knew about al-Hilali’s return and approved of his giving Qur’anic lessons in mosques. Yet Morocco’s official Islam still drew heavily on the Maliki school of law, the Ashʿari creed and Sufism, all of which al-Hilali vehemently opposed. His struggle on behalf of the true Islam of the pious ancestors thus continued unabated.

In the early 1980s, al-Hilali resettled in Casablanca for reasons that are not at all clear. Muhammad ibn Saʿd al-Shuwayʿir, a Saudi religious scholar and author who knew both al-Hilali and Ibn Baz personally (and sometimes acted as an intermediary between the two), provided some clues in a recent article. According to him, Ibn Baz first suggested the move, and then pledged to help and support his Moroccan colleague in the process. But al-Shuwayʿir is vague concerning the reason behind this relocation: he simply mentions that “circumstances” befell al-Hilali. That the latter moved out of Meknes due to a serious religious controversy would come to no surprise given the intensity of his convictions. However, it is also possible that al-Hilali moved to

31 Muhammad ibn Saʿd al-Shuwayʿir, “al-Shaykh Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, 1311-1407” available online at: http://www.al-jazirah.com/119404/ar3d.htm (last accessed on 05/19/2008).
33 See al-Shuwayʿir. In Morocco, I have heard conflicting stories from people who were linked to al-Hilali.
Casablanca, in part, for medical reasons. He had, after all, been suffering from malaria, asthma and blindness for many years, and was now well into his eighties. In any event, he managed to resume his activities in Morocco’s largest city: he had a chauffeur; his house was always filled with visitors; he had devoted followers and students; dictated articles for various religious magazines, and gave sermons and lessons in the mosques of Casablanca’s popular neighborhoods, including ʿAyn Shuq.34

The rare photos of al-Hilali dating from this period are telling evidence that he openly acknowledged and displayed his affiliation to a puristic conception of the Salafiyya influenced by Saudi culture. We have already mentioned that al-Hilali had long refused to grow a beard and that, until at least the late 1950s, his official picture in Daʿwa al-Haqq showed him shaven and dressed in formal Western attire. At the time of his employment at the Islamic University in Medina, however, al-Hilali had changed his views and no longer minimized the Sunna of manners (ādāb) relating to facial hair and clothing. Although he did not think that one’s refusal to grow a beard constituted a major sin, he did not deem the matter optional anymore. He became convinced that taking the prophet as a model (uswa) was a religious obligation incumbent on all Muslims.35 Hence, the two pictures published in the obituary of the Moroccan journal al-Furqan reveal a man of over eighty-five years old who had dramatically changed in his appearance.

Taken in 1980 during a trip to India with the Saudi imam of the holy mosque in Mecca,

34 On the mosques in which he preached, see Muhammad Darif, al-Islam al-siyasi fi-l-Maghrib: mugariba wathaʾiqiyya (Casablanca: Manshurat al-Majalla al-Maghribiya li-ʾIlm al-Ijtimaʾ al-Siyasi), 137.
35 al-Hilali, al-Daʿwa, 38-39. al-Hilali says that he came to the realization that he should not try to interpret the hadiths relating to ādāb. Rather, he should abide by their rules and carry them out in practice so as to become a role model and appear consistent with his call to the Salafiyya.
the pictures show al-Hilali bearded, wearing a loose robe (jalābiyya) and a checkered scarf (shumāgh) on his head. In keeping with the practice of Wahhabi scholars and many puristic Salafis, al-Hilali did not wear a black cord (ʿiqāl) around his headdress to hold it in place.36 While Wahhabi scholars do not forbid the use of the ʿiqāl, it is customary among them and their religious students to refrain from wearing one.37

At home, this peculiar persona could not go unnoticed. Often branded as a Hanbali or a Wahhabi, al-Hilali evidently disturbed many fellow Moroccans who regarded his religious ethos and Saudi connections with suspicion. One example is the contention made a few years ago by ʿUmar Wajaj Ayt Musa, who is currently head of the refurbished Islamist movement al-Shabiba al-Islamiyya al-Maghribiyya (The Moroccan Islamic Youth).38 In a communiqué issued from Sweden in 2003, Ayt Musa claimed that al-Hilali recruited Muhammad Zuhal—a well-known Islamist and preacher born in 1943 and now based in Casablanca—on behalf of the Saudi intelligence service for 5000 dirhams a month. In addition, the communiqué affirms that Idris Basri, the infamous

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36 See the picture in Anonymous, 6.
38 The movement first originated in 1969-1970 under the guidance of ṣAbd al-Karim Muti, gained legal recognition in 1972, but disintegrated after December 1975 as a result of the Moroccan regime’s crackdown on Islamists. The refurbished version of the Shabiba denies this historical interruption and claims to represent the initial movement whose history, it is argued, now spans nearly forty years. The Shabiba’s current leadership is in Europe and remains affiliated to al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Maghribiyya (The Moroccan Islamic Movement), the umbrella movement whose guide is no other than Muti. For details, see www.elharakah.com and its sister site www.achabiah.com (last accessed on 05/22/2008).
former Moroccan Minister of the Interior, also recruited Zuhal afterwards. The latter would thus have served two masters and benefited from two considerable salaries.\footnote{Umar Wajaj Ayt Musa, “ʿAla hamish al-taʿdilat al-akhira fi-l-ajhiza al-amaniyya” available online at www.mafhoum.com/press5/156S61.htm (last accessed on 07/16/2005).}

In all likelihood, this unsubstantiated allegation is spurious. Zuhal happens to be a former member of the original Shabiba and, like many others, is now the object of a denigration campaign.\footnote{In recent years, the refurbished Shabiba has been particularly intent on settling scores by targeting Islamist figures that now belong to other parties and accusing them of espionage or treason to the cause. Thus, the communiqué targets several other Islamists and former members of al-Shabiba. For example, it accuses Saʿd al-Din al-ʿUthmani, the current leader of the Moroccan Party of Justice and Development (PJD), of being from a family that collaborated with the French authorities in Agadir under the Protectorate. More accusations of espionage can be found on the Shabiba’s website.} It is true that he knew al-Hilali and was in contact with him, but Ayt Musa provides no hard evidence that al-Hilali helped the Saudi intelligence service to recruit informers. Yet Ayt Musa’s communiqué is interesting, regardless of its actual veracity, because it reflects the way in which he and other Moroccans have perceived al-Hilali to this day. The old Salafi was indeed close enough to Saudi Arabia and had enough connections all over the world to project the image of a paid foreign agent.

Without a doubt, al-Hilali’s polemical and unapologetic attitude made waves that also contributed to his reputation as a suspicious outsider. In the 1970s and 1980s, his willingness to broach the subject of religiously-mandated combat (qītāl) without even referring to Afghanistan,\footnote{See al-Hilali, “Mabahith,” 100-104.} as well as some of his rigorist and nontraditional religious opinions\footnote{According to the no less controversial Moroccan ʿālim ʿAbd al-Bari al-Zamzami, al-Hilali and his disciples created unrest in Casablanca the late 1970s with respect to the beginning of the month of Ramadan. al-Hilali reportedly subscribed to the view held by Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qudama and many contemporary puristic Salafis, namely, that the sighting of the crescent moon in one country renders the fast binding on all Muslims worldwide, irrespective of distance (wahdat al-ṣiyām). The Moroccan} were reason enough to raise eyebrows and draw criticism from his Moroccan
detractors. Within certain religious circles, al-Hilali even earned the derogatory nickname *Shaqī* al-Dīn in lieu of Taqī al-Dīn (*shaqī* meaning “mischievous” in Arabic).  

**On Islamism and the Salafiyya**

For all the controversies he could raise, al-Hilali remained officially quietist throughout his last years in Morocco. Though he most likely received a pension from Saudi Arabia, he reaffirmed his loyalty to King Hasan II and repeatedly praised him for promoting hadith literature. But while al-Hilali did not criticize the Palace in writing, he hardly concerned himself with defending its legitimacy against the challenge of Islamism. In actuality, his stance toward Islamism was ambiguous. On the one hand, we have seen that he was in contact with Hasan al-Banna in the 1940s and that, in the context of colonialism, he had nothing but respect for the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood and the organization itself. In Iraq, he admitted to his links with this particular Islamist group, Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs, however, rejects this interpretation. Traditionally, the Ramadan only begins after an official representative sees the crescent moon somewhere in the kingdom. See “ʿAbd al-Bārī al-Zāmzāmī, “al-Waqī‘ la yartafī‘u,” *al-Tajdid*, November 27, 2002, available in the newspaper’s online archives at [www.attajdid.ma](http://www.attajdid.ma) (last accessed on 05/20/2007). I could not verify al-Zāmzāmī’s contention, but we know that al-Hilali issued a fatwa during the Ramadan of 1974 that invalidated the official time at which fasting became mandatory in the morning. He objected that the dawn prayer was called a few minutes too early to be valid, and thus could not warrant the beginning of the fast. See Taqī al-Dīn al-Hilali, *Kitāb bayan al-fajr al-sadiq* (Casablanca: n.p., n.d.), 6.

43 I have personally heard this nickname from different individuals in Rabat, Salé and Casablanca in 2005.

although I found no evidence that he formally belonged to it at any point in time.\textsuperscript{45} It must also be noted that al-Hilali’s former students included graduates of the Nadwat-ul-Ulama who, for some time, collaborated with Abu al-A‘la al-Mawdudi and worked for the Jama‘at-i Islami in India and Pakistan.\textsuperscript{46} al-Hilali does not seem to have criticized them for doing so.

On the other hand, al-Hilali’s interest for Islamism seems to have been selective. The Islamists’ effectiveness in the field of proselytism (\textit{da‘\textasciitilde}wa) is what he truly admired the most. He was too engrossed with issues of orthodoxy and orthopraxy to really engage their social, political and economic programs; such discussions are in fact absent from his writings. However, there is some indication that al-Hilali cared about the Islamists’ religious teachings, especially toward the end of his life. According to a puristic Salafi source, his creedal rectitude prompted him to condemn ʿAbd al-Salam Yasin—the leader of the Sufi-inspired Islamist group al-ʿAdl wa-l-Ihsan (Justice and Beneficence)—and to charge him with unbelief and religious innovation.\textsuperscript{47} In one of his books, Yasin did

\textsuperscript{45} Abdallah al-ʿAqil, \textit{Min aʿlam al-haraka al-islamiyya} (Cairo: Dar al-Tawzi‘ wa-l-Nashr al-Islamiyya, 2000), 223. I must thank Stéphane Lacroix from the Institut d’Études Politiques in Paris for bringing this particular source to my attention.


intimate that he was the object of such a charge (takfīr), either in the late 1970s or early
1980s, but he abstained from revealing the identity of his accuser. The puristic Salafi
source, which is equally critical of al-ʿAdl wa-l-Ihsan and its leader, affirms that this
unnamed accuser was no other than al-Hilali. If this is the case, then al-Hilali appears to
have judged Islamism primarily on the basis of its religious purity, as most contemporary
Salafis now do. The reason he denounced Yasin was not because of the way he
challenged Hasan II or the social and political status quo, but rather because he drew
inspiration from Sufism and therefore conveyed heretical ideas.

Another testimony points to the same conclusion. In an interview with the Arabic
magazine al-Bayan published in London, Muhammad Zuhal reported a conversation that
took place while he was visiting al-Hilali in Meknes, where the Islamist group al-Shabiba
al-Islamiyya was already well established. When al-Hilali asked him about the
organization’s stance with respect to creed (ʿaqīda), Zuhal named some of the books that
he and his fellow members of the Shabiba used as sources. He mentioned, among others
titles, Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s Kitab al-tawhid and Ibn Taymiyya’s al-ʿAqīda
al-wasitiyya. According to Zuhal, al-Hilali expressed his approval and commended the
Islamist group for its reliance on sound literature. When the interviewer from al-Bayan
asked about rumors to the effect that al-Hilali censured the Shabiba’s organizational
(tanẓīmī) structure, Zuhal denied that the old Moroccan Salafi considered this a blamable

which is a commented re-edition of one of al-Hilali’s books on prayer. In the wake of the terrorist attacks
of May 2003 in Casablanca, al-Hadduchi has been condemned to thirty years in prison for his role as a
propagandist of the jihadist strand of Salafiyya (al-salafiyya al-jihādiyya). Regarding the connection
between al-Hilali and Muhammad al-Zamzami in Tangier, see Zeghal, 287-289.


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innovation. Rather, Zuhal claimed that the majority of the members of the Shabiba visited al-Hilali and that the latter never criticized the group or its operational makeup. One wonders, however, if al-Hilali dared to support the Shabiba after Hasan II began to crack down on it in 1975 and 1976.

If accurate, Zuhal’s recollections corroborate the previous testimonies by presenting al-Hilali as a scholar who saw value in Islamism, but only as long as it called people to Salafi beliefs and practices. While it is hard to believe that he never warned the members of the Shabiba against partisanship (ḥizbiyya) or the evil of political instability, his apparent lack of interest for their ideology and socio-political ideas comes to no surprise. For al-Hilali, such inquiries were, to a certain extent, superfluous. Islam, he maintained, was a comprehensive system far superior to socialism, national-socialism, communism and capitalism; but he did not attempt to demonstrate this conviction by politicizing or conceptualizing religion. He considered the triumph of Salafi orthodoxy and orthopraxy a sufficient program, for true Salafis who serve and please God could only prosper and be happy. Hence, al-Hilali’s rare written critiques of Khomeini were strictly religious as well. Even when provided with a golden opportunity to comment on such issues as the political grounds for the Islamic revolution, the question of tyranny, or Khomeini’s claims to change the conditions in Iran for the better, al-Hilali chose not to discuss anything but religious errors. In the 1980s, he criticized Khomeini and the Shi’is

for contradicting the Sunna, for believing in a hidden imam who will come back at the end of times, for deeming the first three caliphs oppressive (which denies the Salafi creed), and for making all sorts of unsubstantiated religious allegations. His apolitical stance—or perhaps prudence—warranted no consideration of Khomeini’s socio-political program.

In that sense, al-Hilali’s strongest and most natural bond was not with the politicized Islamist youth, but rather with the fledging puristic Salafis who were just as devoted to the preservation of Islamic integrity as he was. Chief among the Moroccan figures he helped grooming is Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Maghrawi (b. 1948), the founder and head of the pietistic association Jamʿiyyat al-Daʿwa ila al-Qurʾan wa-l-Sunna. Born near al-Rashidiyya in the Tafilalt region, al-Maghrawi moved to Meknes to pursue Islamic studies in an institute affiliated to the Qarawiyyin. He then studied at the Bin Yusuf Institute in Marrakesh, where he also served as a primary and secondary school teacher. In parallel to his formal studies, he attended the lessons of al-Hilali and soon became one of his protégés. In due course, al-Hilali recommended him and wrote on his behalf to secure his admission to the Islamic University in Medina. In Saudi Arabia, al-Maghrawi studied under the most famous Salafi scholars of the late twentieth century, including Ibn Baz, Abu Bakr Jabir al-Jazaʿiri and the muḥaddith of Malian origins Hammad al-Ansari (who died in 1997 and, incidentally, was himself a former student of

51 See al-Hilali’s comments in Mahmud Saʿd Nasih, Mawqif al-Khumayni min al-shiʿa wa-l-tashayyuʿ (Kuwait City: Dar al-Nashr al-Salafiyya, n.d.), 3-5, 37-46. In the 1980s, al-Hilali made this annotated booklet available in Morocco at the suggestion of Kuwaiti Salafis who subsidized its distribution. It was written in the Arab East, but this particular edition was printed in Casablanca.
Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi and ʿAbd al-Razzaq Hamza). When al-Maghrawi returned to Morocco, he settled in Marrakesh and obtained Saudi support to found his pietistic association in 1976. He also established a network of Salafi learning centers called Houses of the Qurʾan (Dur al-Qurʾān), which now comprises over sixty branches all over Morocco.\(^\text{52}\)

al-Maghrawi’s conception of Islamic activism, as we shall see, also coincides with the one that al-Hilali adopted during the last period in his life. This is not to say that the latter only groomed puristic Salafis who gravitated in the orbit of Saudi scholars. Today, al-Hilali’s former disciples include journalists, politicians, Islamists and preachers who all feel that they have benefited from their shaykh, but do not always share the same religious views. For example, one of his occasional students from the late 1970s and 1980s—a Moroccan meteorologist educated in the United States—publicly took Ibn Baz and Ibn ʿUthaymin to task while the two were still alive, and censured their fatwas that denied heliocentrism.\(^\text{53}\) Though respectful, the religious dimension of this critique went much further than the old al-Hilali would have dared to go. It involved a more critical approach to hadith literature, openly questioned the soundness of some of Ibn Taymiyya’s assessments, and concluded that muftis, regardless of their prestige, should not issue legal opinions on scientific matters that fall outside their field of expertise.

\(^{52}\) See the biography and historical outline of the association on al-Maghrawi’s official website at: www.maghrawi.net (last accessed on 05/20/2008). The same information can be found on the website of Dur al-Qurʾān at: www.darcoran.net. Displayed on each of these two websites is a scanned copy of a 1997 letter of support issued by the office of the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia. In that letter, Ibn Baz vouches for al-Maghrawi and his association, and attests to the purity of his creed.

\(^{53}\) See Muhammad ʿAmrani Hanshi, Kayfa yaruddu al-khataʿ ala al-muftayn al-kibar al-shaykh Ibn Baz wa-l-shaykh al-ʿUthaymin namudhajan (Rabat: Muhammad ʿAmrani Hanshi, 1997). Among other books, the author has also published a critical response to al-Albani.
The intellectual link between the author of this critique and al-Hilali is nonetheless undeniable. Until the mid-1960s, al-Hilali too had gone to great length in the pages of *Daʿwat al-Haqq* to uphold the superiority and validity of religion in the scientific age. These were precisely the writings that had made an impression on the author of the aforementioned critique, well before he met al-Hilali in person and began attending some of his religious lessons.\(^5\) But in the wake of his employment at the Islamic University in Medina, al-Hilali gradually abandoned this type of intellectual exertions and narrowed the scope of his activism. By the 1970s, al-Hilali worked almost exclusively within the confines of Islamic theology and law. His role consisted in transmitting and spreading sound religious knowledge, issuing fatwas on very specific issues of creed and worship, and safeguarding Salafi Islam.

**What Became of Rashid Rida’s Legacy?**

Toward the end of the twentieth century, there is no doubt that the Salafi movement, as well as the Muslims who most emphatically and constantly introduced themselves as its torchbearers, had changed from the time of Rashid Rida. This transformation did not entail a categorical rupture: at the epistemological level, for instance, one would be mistaken to posit a complete incompatibility between the old and the contemporary versions of the Salafiyya (although we shall see that some of their apparent common denominators do not stand to close scrutiny). But in terms of its goals,

\(^5\) Read Hanshi’s recollections on his website: [www.alhiwar.org/en/content/view/20/2/](http://www.alhiwar.org/en/content/view/20/2/) (last accessed on 05/28/2008).
ambitions and ethical underpinnings, the Salafi movement of the late twentieth century was quite different from the moderate party (ḥizb muʿtadil) on which Rida relied to reconcile Islam and modernity while avoiding the traps of over-reformism and rigid conservatism.

For comparative purposes, let us return to al-Maghrawi’s pietistic association, al-Daʿwa ila al-Qurʾan wa-l-Sunna, whose statement of purpose is a paradigmatic summary of the goals that contemporary Salafis strive to achieve. The association defines its objectives as follows: to make the Qurʾan and the hadiths available and push for memorization; to teach the true meaning of the formative texts according to the standards of Salafi interpretation (bi-uṣūl al-tafsīr al-salafi); to familiarize the population with the pious ancestors as models of Islamic purity; to spread the true monotheistic creed and purge it from its impure accretions; to foster good morals; to promote the study of the Arabic language; and, interestingly, to reunite the umma on the basis of true Islam and warn against religious dividedness and dissension, which are innovative.55

Most early twentieth-century Salafis would not have disagreed with these objectives in principle—except, perhaps, with respect to the underlying definition of truth—but they most likely would have justified these clauses through intellectual, social and political rationales aimed at addressing the various challenges of modernity from an Islamic point of view. Even the mid-century calls for Islamic conformism and unity were never far removed from this-worldly concerns; they were conceived and presented as

means for the Muslim world to rise again and break out of colonialism. This observation goes for Islamists too. They have usually linked Islamic education to a comprehensive program for change that openly engages Western modernity. But al-Daʿwa ila al-Qurʾan wa-l-Sunna has no social pretension other than to ensure the triumph of puristic Salafi norms. What is more, the relevance of these norms is rarely a matter of discussion once it is established that they are based on textual evidence or that they solidify the practice of Salafi Islam in general.

To say that contemporary Salafis have a reduced agenda is quite different from saying that they cannot or do not constitute a social movement. The work of Quintan Wiktorowicz has shown how they use informal networks to seek reforms that would affect many aspects of Muslim societies. By no means do puristic Salafis favor stagnancy or close the door to any significant change. Yet their notion of reform points to an ideal that is certainly not Promethean, and barely intersects with the Enlightenment that intrigued the Salafis of the early twentieth century. It is no coincidence that Wiktorowicz emphasized the Salafis’ organizational structure and modes of activism rather than their socio-political discourse. He wrote of the objectives of the Qurʾan and Sunna Society in Jordan: “Members believe that the current deprived condition of Muslim societies is a result of deviations from the fundamentals of Islam, and that by teaching

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people about the Salafi understanding of Islam they are providing the foundations for a better society.57

This statement may seem circular and lacking in precision, but it does reflect how contemporary Salafis often envision and formulate their program. In large measure, their goals are predicated on self-sufficient puristic norms that entail no search for nonreligious rationales. Thus, contemporary Salafis are less prone than many Islamists and former modernist Salafis to reach what John Rawls has called an “overlapping consensus” with people who hold other views, be they secular or religious.58 al-Maghrawi, for example, completely eschews modernity as a philosophical issue. For better or for worse, he can therefore dispense with the kind of debating and critical thinking that would be required to come to grips with it. In that sense, his work is more akin to legal advising than it is to lobbying or socio-political advocacy. al-Maghrawi does not attempt to articulate his objectives by using modern categories in order to advance the cause of Islam, nor does he try to broaden his appeal by being trans-subjective and catering to the expectations of audiences that do not share his views or methodology. As a rule, contemporary Salafis are wary of actions and reflections that could compromise their rigorous standards of orthodoxy and orthopraxy.59 They may content themselves with stating their aversion toward the ethics of modern civilization (al-ḥadāra al-ḥadīth), but rarely feel the need

59 These particularities of the puristic Salafiyya have been duly noted by Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 243-249.
to sort out the problem of modernity or tackle the challenges it may pose. By all accounts, they prefer to focus their attention on misguided Muslims.

Narrowing Down the Salafiyya

The same puristic Salafi approach characterized the work of al-Hilali during the 1970s and 1980s. Given the fact that he was a former disciple of Rashid Rida, the contrast with Islamic modernism is at times striking. The Bucaille incident, as it may be called, is a telling example. In an article published in Saudi Arabia in 1984 but dictated in Morocco, al-Hilali recalled a visit to Paris in the late 1970s, soon after the publication of Dr. Maurice Bucaille’s original French version of the book *The Bible, The Qur’an, and Science.* Intrigued by the bestseller and its author, al-Hilali asked to meet Bucaille, who readily accepted the invitation and joined the shaykh and his disciples for a discussion.

Among those present was a Moroccan student who was working toward a degree in medicine. Curious, the young man submitted Qur’an 31:34 for examination, because it seemed to challenge Bucaille’s “concordist” thesis (that is to say, his attempt to show the concordance between Qur’anic statements and modern scientific knowledge as a way of proving the divine origins of the book). The verse reads: “Verily, Allah, with Him (Alone) is the knowledge of the Hour, He sends down the rain, and knows that which is

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61 Maurice Bucaille (b. 1920) is the famous French surgeon who converted to Islam after having served as family doctor to King Faysal of Saudi Arabia in the early 1970s. See his *La Bible, le Coran et la science: les Saintes Écritures examinées à la lumière des connaissances modernes* (Paris: Seghers, 1976).
in the wombs. The student asked Bucaille to comment. How can God alone know what is in the wombs when, in fact, modern scientists know as well? According to al-Hilali’s recollections, Bucaille—a medical doctor by profession—became furious. He claimed that this allegation was a lie, belittled the so-called student of medicine, and dared him to determine what is in a pregnant woman’s uterus with any scientific proof. He even told al-Hilali that he would have refused to come for a visit had he known he would hear such nonsense.

Both the substance of this anecdote and al-Hilali’s reasons for sharing it are rather puzzling. It is not clear why Bucaille resorted to an argument of authority instead of explaining his position. Did he flatly deny the possibility of knowing whether a fetus is male or female? What aspects of pregnancy did he think doctors could not know? Was he simply trying to make the point that obstetricians can only guess rather than know what is in the wombs? Whatever Bucaille had in mind, al-Hilali could not or would not tell. But the anecdote itself was sufficiently odd to warrant the addition of a footnote that mentions the existence of ultrasound imaging and suggests that Bucaille probably did not know about this technology in the late 1970s. Most online reproductions of the article now come with this particular footnote. Yet in truth, it was written and added by a webmaster—not by al-Hilali. The original version of the article contained no such remark, and this is precisely why the need for a footnote arose.

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62 The translation is from al-Hilali and Khan, 541.
64 See http://www.alukah.net/Articles/Article.aspx?CategoryId=51&ArticleId=838 (last accessed on 05/28/2008).
In this, there is an indication that al-Hilali distanced himself from past intellectual habits. Earlier in his life, he never lost an opportunity to assert the compatibility between science and the scriptures. But in this case, and despite his experience as an Islamic modernist, he addressed neither his student’s allegation nor Bucaille’s response, thus leaving readers in the dark about the soundness of each opinion. al-Hilali merely praised Bucaille and his work, and reiterated his old conviction that one cannot refuse to believe in Islam on the basis on modern science, for even Western scientists are believers. However, this conclusion was not only inexplicit; it fell short of the modernist standards set by Rashid Rida prior to the Second World War. In the Qur’anic exegesis of *al-Manar*, Rida took an unequivocal stance on the matter: he clearly acknowledged that it was possible, through modern science, to predict the sex of a fetus (*al-tanabbu’ bi-nawʾ al-ṭifl al-āti*).65

al-Hilali’s reluctance to elaborate on this issue or comment the statements that his former mentor had dared to make nearly half a century earlier is not without irony. Did he refrain from making any comment by respect for Bucaille? If so, one wonders why he raised the issue and made the anecdote public in the first place. While there can be no final answer regarding al-Hilali’s innermost feelings and motivations, it is clear from the sources that he had made a habit of discarding certain themes that were once dear to him. His stoic detachment vis-à-vis the Bucaille incident was not an exception. The rest of al-

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65 His comments were based on the early-twentieth century theories and clinical experiments of Rumley Dawson, whose writings were translated into Arabic. See Rashid Rida, *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-hakim al-shahir bi-Tafsir al-Manar*, vol. 7 (Beirut: Dar al-Maʿarifa, 1970), 464-467.
Hilali’s literary output during that period reveals a pattern of puristic inhibition that led to his adoption of a narrower approach to religious reform.

The contrast between the works of al-Hilali and Rashid Rida is probably nowhere sharper than in their respective Qurʾanic exegeses. The ten volumes of Tafsir al-Manar exemplified Rida’s lifelong effort to interpret Islam in the light of modernity. Based in part on lectures that Muhammad ʿAbduh had delivered at al-Azhar, it explained how the revelation had retained its full potential in the early twentieth century. Rida emphasized the social applicability of Qurʾanic verses. He praised the rational nature of the God’s word, emphasized the passages that disapproved of indolence and intellectual nonage, and qualified the passages that seemed to contravene modern values (he argued, for instance, that polygamy could have adverse effects on education and thus impede the progress of the umma).66 A seminal example of modernist exegesis, Tafsir al-Manar stood out for the progressive spirit of its ideas.67

At the very end of the 1970s, al-Hilali too published a Qurʾanic commentary that resulted from many years of painstaking work. It was, in many ways, the crowning achievement of his career as a religious scholar. Entitled Sabil al-rashad (The Path to Right-Mindedness), it was first published in Morocco in 1979-1980 and then reissued a few years later in a three-volume edition that was distributed free of charge at the Saudi Cultural Center in Rabat (al-Maktab al-Thaqāfī al-Saʿūdī bi-l-Maghrib). The

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66 On polygamy, see ibid., 178-182.
nontraditional aspect of this exegesis was not its content, but rather its selectivity. al-Hilali did not comment each sūra and each verse of the Qurʾan. Instead, he concentrated on the passages relating to tawḥīd, which he now divided into four types: of lordship (tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya), of worship (tawḥīd al-ʿibāda), of divine names and attributes (tawḥīd al-asmāʾ wa-l-ṣifāt), and of adherence (tawḥīd al-ittibāʿ, that is, following or adhering to both the Qurʾan and the Sunna).68 As guiding sources, al-Hilali relied on the six canonical collections of hadiths (excluding Ibn Maja, but including the Musnad of Ahmad ibn Hanbal) as well as the exegeses of al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir, whom he particularly trusted.

On the whole, the scope and goals of Sabīl al-rashad are much narrower than those of Tafsir al-Manar. Here again, al-Hilali’s intention was to impart knowledge about Salafi beliefs and practices while decrying whoever contradicts them. As a result of its uncompromising emphasis on the multiple facets of tawḥīd, Sabīl al-rashad issues many religious warnings and accusations. It goes to great length to identify and expose the many enemies of Islam, the unbelievers (kuffār), the depraved (mufsidīn), the sinners (murjīmīn) and the polytheists (mushrikīn). This last category includes the people of latter-day ignorance, who pretend to be Muslim because they fulfill the five pillars of Islam, but are nonetheless polytheists because of their non-compliance with the standards of Salafi Islam.69 Of course, all polytheists have a chance to escape their vile condition if they are told the truth. In a different book dating from the same period, al-Hilali

69 Ibid., 55.
acknowledges that he was himself a *mushrik* when he belonged to the Tijaniyya.\(^{70}\) Consequently, his Qurʾanic commentary enjoins misguided Muslims to recant and comply with true Islam (*al-islām al-ṣaḥīh*), or else they shall burn in the lowest part of Hell.\(^{71}\) al-Hilali did not say much about what might happen in this world to a person who disobeys God, is told the truth, is sane of mind, and yet refuses to comply. But he addressed this issue from time to time in his other writings.\(^{72}\)

There is virtually nothing in *Sabil al-rashad* that could be regarded as a truly modernist interpretation of the Qurʾan. Some passages, it is true, do suggest a type of reform that Rida would have applauded; but they are neither presented nor construed as a progressive step toward the renaissance of Islam in a specifically modern context.\(^{73}\) On the contrary, these passages are submerged by theological and legal discussions that define Islam as an ahistorical normative system. Even if we were to assume that al-Hilali still had modernist objectives in mind, we could wonder why he did not discuss them and why they had so little impact on his work. Evidently, the only purpose of his commentary was to make the case for *tawḥīd*, as defined by contemporary Salafis. In truth, al-Hilali


\(^{72}\) Through Ibn Hazm (d. 1064), al-Hilali suggested, for instance, that anyone who intentionally fails to pray at the appropriate time deserves to be struck and given a warning. But the wrongdoer who intentionally refuses to obey this rule, without a valid excuse and despite the warning, is an unbeliever, polytheist and apostate whose blood and wealth become lawful (*ḥalāl al-damm wa-l-māl*). Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, *Hukm tarik al-salā ʿumdan hatta yakhruj waqtuhā* (n.p., 1982), 36-37.

\(^{73}\) For example, al-Hilali exposes the charlatans who falsely claim to practice divination and take advantage of popular credulity. al-Hilali, *Sabil al-rashad*, vol. 1, 40.
hardly took the specificities of the modern era into account, because it was irrelevant to
his argument. To be sure, he still wanted the umma to regain the force and greatness of its
past and continued to believe with certitude that Islam was more conducive to civilization
(ḥadāra) and progress (taqaddum) than Christianity. But he did not elaborate on these
ideas and failed to explain the meaning of the two key concepts.74 In short, Sabil al-
rashad is a work of religious erudition and philology written from a puristic point of
view. It is not the work of an Islamic “intellectual” per se, at least not in the way that
Edward Said defined the term.75

Indeed, gone were the days when al-Hilali envisioned the future of the umma
from a synoptic perspective and made rationalist arguments to demonstrate the social
applicability of Islam and the temporal benefits that can be derived from it. Age was not a
factor, for there are many indications that al-Hilali was not lacking in energy.
Nevertheless, he no longer deemed it necessary or worthwhile to seek the elevation of
Muslim society or praise the merits of Islam in a modern idiom—not even for rhetorical
purposes.76 In 1981, he released a treatise on honor (ʿird) whose introduction affirms:

75 For Said, an intellectual has to be dedicated to certain values, but must also remain broad-minded,
multidisciplinary, in tune with the changing aspects of society and driven by “[…] an unquenchable
interest in the larger picture.” This definition suits the author of Tafsir al-Manar better than the author of
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76 There exists a lone exception that was published in 1977, but actually dates from 1968, that is, before al-
Hilali’s departure for the Islamic University of Medina. The article in question is the rendition of a
lecture on Islam that al-Hilali delivered before a German delegation to Morocco. Some of its passages are
so markedly different from the rest of al-Hilali’s discourse in the late 1970s that they warrant caution. It
is not clear why al-Hilali suddenly decided to publish this text, ten years later, in the official journal of
the Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs. See Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, “Kalima fi fada’il al-islam
“Whoever abides by the rules stated in the Qur’an the Sunna will be happy in this world and the next.” Yet the rest of the book fails to explain or justify the temporal aspect of this statement. Proceeding from a scriptural epistemology, al-Hilali contented himself with quoting memorized textual proofs. He insisted that there is no religion without honor, and that honor can only be preserved if Muslims follow the textual proofs. While he often assumed that these proofs spoke for themselves, he added the comments of past eminent scholars who have confirmed and explicated their correct meaning. Hence, honor will prevail if women cover their head and neck; if strict gender segregation is enforced in every situation; if women do not imitate men, and so forth.

There is nothing exceptional about these conservative views, but the logic of al-Hilali’s argument is quite narrow by comparison with the larger range of rationales that one could find in his previous writings. He provided no evidence that such norms could indeed bring happiness in this world except for the written testimony of a Muslim woman, whom God had punished with a terrible sickness because she flaunted her beauty (tabarruj). When she abandoned this behavior and began wearing the veil, God miraculously cured her. While no Muslim would deny the unlimited power of God, the paucity of al-Hilali’s social thought is nonetheless evident in this case. What is striking is not so much the unscientific nature of his point (miracles have survived modernity and modern science can neither prove them nor disprove them); it is the fact that al-Hilali no longer cared to articulate a religious discourse that appealed to temporal reasons. In the

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77 al-Hilali, Siyanat al-‘ird, 3.
78 Ibid., 16.
early twentieth century, and even much later in countries such as Morocco, it was common for modernist Salafis to invoke public interest, to think in utilitarian terms, and to discuss notions of progress, common good and justice in light of the needs and requirement of the modern era. In 1981, however, al-Hilali merely listed dozens of textual proofs and relied on supernatural hearsay evidence to confirm that Salafi Islam was well grounded. In that sense, he was more in tune with a Wahhabi type of reformism whose eighteenth-century founder, according to Ahmad Dallal, “[…] failed to link the creedal to the political or the social.

*Ijtihād and the Rejection of *Taqlīd*

The reduction of al-Hilali’s agenda, his narrower conception of religious activism, the paucity of his socio-political discourse, and the very substance of his writings in the 1970s and 1980s are various manifestations of the triumph of Islamic purism and its epistemological underpinnings among Salafis. These observations also reflect al-Hilali’s closeness to the religious inner circles of Saudi Arabia, where such an epistemology was highly regarded, encouraged and rewarded. But it has been recently suggested that the original reformist tradition upon which the Saudi state is predicated was neither rigid nor retrograde, because the promotion of independent of reasoning (*ijtihād*) and the rejection of blind imitation (*taqlīd*) were among the hallmarks of Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-

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Wahhab’s approach to Islam. This argument is based on the assumption that the call to *ijtihād* and the condemnation of *taqlīd* are two inherently positive markers of religious flexibility and adaptability. Thus, Natana Delong-Bas reached the conclusion that the importance given by Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab to these two concepts demonstrates that he was open to reinterpretations and as committed as other Muslim reformists to keeping the scriptures “[…] fresh and relevant for daily life in constantly changing contexts.” She used this interpretation to bolster the contention, among others, that Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab had more in common with the Islamic modernists than previously thought.

There are vulnerable points in this interpretation, and Delong-Bas herself appears to have noticed them. On the one hand, Muhammad ibn al-ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s call to *ijtihād* was qualified and largely theoretical. In her book, Delong-Bas struggles to provide more than a few concrete examples of independent reinterpretations where Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab actually differed from the Hanbali school. With respect to law, his legacy is meager: Arab critics and apologists alike have conceded this point, and so did Delong-Bas after all. On the other hand, Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s forceful rejection of *taqlīd* often yielded positions that were neither progressive nor motivated by the need to adapt to changing contexts. Delong-Bas acknowledges: “This is not to say that Ibn

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82 Ibid., 106.
83 Ibid., 110. For the view of an Arab critic, see Aziz al-Azmeh, *Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab* (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis li-l-Kutub wa-l-Nashr, 2000), 145. For the view of an Arab apologist, see Muhammad ibn ʿAbdallah al-Salman, *Rashid Rida wa daʿwat al-shaykh Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab* (Kuwait City: Maktabat al-Maʿalla, 1988), 98-99. This last author argues that Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab did not yield much *ijtihād* because he devoted his attention to creed (for which reform was urgently needed) and did not have enough time left for legal matters.
ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s *ijtihad* was necessarily designed to provide new answers to old questions. However, neither was it an attempt to simply recreate the past. The fundamental problem with which Delong-Bas is confronted here is the fact that Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab refused blind imitation, and yet often adhered to the rulings of the past. How is this possible?

The question is apropos because it pertains to contemporary Salafis as well. They too abhor *taqlid*, but nonetheless hold conservative views of Islam and are extremely wary of innovation. However, this is no contradiction as long as one does not misconstrue the concept at hand. From the perspective of a puristic epistemology, the notion of *taqlid* does not mean imitating, following or adhering to the teachings of the past, as Delong-Bas suggested on several occasions. Rather, it refers to an individual’s blind reliance on the so-called authority of another individual to interpret Islam, without going back to the canonical body of knowledge, and thus without examining the proofs originating directly from God and His prophet. Put simply, rejecting *taqlid* means that a learned Muslim should never rely on secondary sources alone to reach a verdict about religious truth. To her credit, Delong-Bas has duly noted this point; but for the sake of her argument she

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84 Delong-Bas, 107.
85 Ibid., 13, 40, 105, 120-121.
86 I use “secondary sources” by analogy with Western historical scholarship. The other category, the “primary sources,” includes the Qur’an and most of the Sunna. Inasmuch as this canonical body of knowledge is agreed upon, it is regarded as either minimally processed or fully unadulterated. But puristic Salafis, like other Muslims, rely on secondary sources as well (especially if they were written by puristic scholars and draw heavily on primary sources). For example, al-Hilali often put his trust in Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and Ibn Taymiyya for certain religious matters, including the assessment of obscure prophetic reports. He repeated the words of Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalani (d. 1448) to the effect that “[...] any hadith that Ibn Taymiyya does not know is not a hadith.” See Ibn al-Miʿmar al-Baghdadi, *Kitab al-futuwwa*, ed. Mustafa Jawad, Taqi al-Din al-Hilali et al. (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muthanna, 1958), 106.
ventured further and argued—not always convincingly—that Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s rejection of taqlīd is one of the features that warrant a favorable appreciation of both his methodology and opinions, which are too often considered literalist and opposed to modernity.87

The bottom line, which Delong-Bas downplayed but could not refute, is that rejection of taqlīd does not preclude literalism and never prevents a scholar from following the teachings of the past. When contemporary Salafis confront detractors who claim that Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab or one of his descendents blindly imitated Ibn Taymiyya or Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, they do not deny the intellectual connection. Rather, they retort that the fathers of Saudi reformism only followed scholars who themselves followed the proofs of the Qurʾan and the Sunna. In other words, puristic Salafis see nothing wrong with the fact that Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab reproduced many of the teachings of past Hanbali scholars; but they deny that he did so out of ignorance of the primary sources or in a spirit of taqlīd, that is, in a blind and uncritical fashion. The crux of their argument is that one cannot be blamed for discerning right from wrong, nor can one be criticized for agreeing with past scholars who spoke the truth and corroborated the truth (muwāfaqat al-ḥaqq li-l-ḥaqq).88

87 An in-depth analysis of her argument cannot be undertaken here, but the reader may examine Delong-Bas’ arguable definition of literalism and some of her attempts to show that the label did not befit Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab at all. See ibid., 25, 30, 73, 84, 115-118, 136, 283.
This is precisely how al-Hilali understood *taqlīd*. In the 1970s and 1980s, he continued to reject it with passion and even called it evil. Yet he did not adopt a progressive or modernist approach to the formative texts, and never refused to adhere to the teachings of medieval scholars when he deemed them right. As a result, some of his opinions shocked the liberal sensibility of other Moroccan Muslims. In Meknes, for example, a very young girl visited him and confessed that her sister was an unbeliever (*kāfira*) because she no longer prayed. Upon hearing this, al-Hilali told the young girl that Islam requires her not to love her sister and not to befriend her until she believes in God; she should only honor the tie of kinship (*ṣilat al-raḥim*) if her unbeliever sister needs assistance. This particular ruling, which al-Hilali boldly repeated in writing more than once, caused dismay within the community. He made no secret of the fact that he was accused of harshness (*tashaddud*) and exaggeration (*ghulw*). But he dismissed these criticisms, claiming that truth was on his side. He told his detractors to read what Ibn Kathir had written about this issue in the fourteenth century, and quoted reports from the prophet and the companions to confirm the validity of his view.\(^\text{89}\)

For al-Hilali, as for most contemporary Salafis, religious truth was unique and accessible within the limits set by God; in many cases it had already been spelled out. Hence, the reason he considered *taqlīd* a despicable habit of mind is that it opened the door to errors and disinformation, which then lead to innovation, wrongdoing, sin and, ultimately, disbelief. He did not reject *taqlīd* because it was somehow retrograde, stood in

the way of change, or prevented fresh reinterpretations of Islam in new contexts. This was beside the point. Like other puristic Salafis, his priority was rather to identify, transmit and preserve an allegedly unadulterated truth based on certified and reliable textual primary sources. Clinging to this irrefutable truth, then, was laudable. In actuality, al-Hilali maintained that taqlīd was permitted for the masses, provided that they get their knowledge from a reliable scholar (ideally a Salafī). He did not want unqualified individuals to randomly examine the formative texts, try to interpret the proofs without proper training, and then come to their own whimsical conclusions about Islam. In order to prevent deviations from the truth, it was preferable to let anyone who ignores religious science have the right to blind imitation.90

Likewise, the concept of ijtiḥād should not, a priori, be construed as an expression of religious flexibility conducive to “fresh reinterpretations.” The term is often translated as “informed reasoning,” but the nature and the outcome of this reasoning—or self-exertion—hinges on the epistemological assumptions of each Muslim scholar. Rashid Rida, it is true, saw ijtiḥād as the key legal device for ensuring the revival (nahda) of the Muslim world in modern times.91 Yet the fact that puristic Salafis now emphasize the same concept does not prevent them from disagreeing with Rida. It does not prevent them from issuing very conservative judgments and reiterating the views of past scholars.

al-Hilali is a case in point. First, it is interesting to note that he did not usually contrast taqlīd with ijtiḥād, but rather with ittibāʿ (adherence, or following the proofs).

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Time and again, he denied the authority of the traditional schools of law and urged the seekers of knowledge to adhere to the unmediated rules and regulations stipulated in the Qur’an and the Sunna, as if their interpretation was devoid of any subjectivity. But the call to *ittibāʿ* is notably different and much more peremptory than a call for fresh reinterpretations in changing contexts. It is worth recalling that in the pages of *Sabīl al-rashad*, al-Hilali presented *ittibāʿ* as a branch of *tawḥīd*, thus putting it on an equal footing with the belief in God’s oneness. This left little room for disagreements.

Second, al-Hilali referred to *ijtihād* occasionally, but the meaning of the concept had somewhat shifted. What he understood by “self-exertion” was the intellectual effort required to identify the truth and bring it to light. He conceived of this *ijtihād* as a form of independent reasoning, because it entailed a thorough examination of the primary sources as well as the relevant secondary sources. In that sense, it was the intellectual stepping stone toward *ittibāʿ*, although al-Hilali did not always make that subtle distinction. In at least one instance, he clearly equated the two concepts and wrote that *ittibāʿ* is the term used by Salafis to refer to *ijtihād*. In any case, this type of self-exertion further restricted the hermeneutical role of reason and did not allow for the kind of religious flexibility, tolerance and diversity that the modernist Salafis of the early twentieth century had in mind. For example, al-Hilali declared that Malik ibn Anas (d. 796) was

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guilty of contradicting the Sunna through his *ijtihād*. But he exonerated the pious ancestor on the assumption that certain hadiths must not have reached him at the time. Therefore, Malik could not be held responsible for his error. Because it was not his fault, he deserved a reward for his effort. However, al-Hilali warned that such leniency does not apply to those who now have access to the primary sources that were unavailable to Imam Malik. If any scholar knows the existence of a reliable hadith and yet chooses to disregard it in favor of some arbitrary opinion (which would include the misinformed opinion of Imam Malik), then he is an innovator and a sinner (*āthim*) who does not deserve any credit.95

For the sake of accuracy, it must be acknowledged that al-Hilali made these statements in the context of discussing a matter of worship. More specifically, he was arguing for the religious obligation incumbent on all Muslims to say “amen” after reciting the *fātiha* during prayer. His remarks did not pertain to mundane matters of interactions among individuals (muʿāmalat), which is the area where modernist Salafis were pushing for *ijtihād*.'96 Nevertheless, a lot of Muslims agree to disagree on minor details of ritual. At the very beginning of the twentieth century, Rashid Rida was willing to tolerate these differences of opinion, because indulgence was better than division and far more representative of the values of the pious ancestors. His decisions, opinions and principles often reflected his attachment to a greater social and political cause. But al-Hilali espoused no such cause in the 1970s and 1980s. He had become a specialist of

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95 al-Hilali, *al-Husam*, 81-82, 123.
textual religious proofs and was intent on defending a unique truth, even in the minutiae of worship. He was not inclined to reckon with the type of *ijtihād* that Rida promoted.

The different set of epistemological assumptions and preferences from which al-Hilali proceeded left an unmistakable imprint on his literary output. Most of the writings he published during that period pertain to specific details of orthopraxy and orthodoxy. They are presented as factual and objective renditions of the truth that often consist in lengthy and multiples quotations followed by relatively brief personal commentaries. In many instances, al-Hilali simply provides a numbered list of proofs (Qur’anic passages followed by the commentary of a reliable exegete, hadiths, or reliable secondary sources). In other cases, he reproduces entire sections of books written by other puristic scholars, be they medieval or contemporary. On the whole, his rejection of *taqlīd* and his definition of *ijtihād* were not fully congruent with the highest ideals of the early twentieth-century modernist Salafis.

**Conclusion**

al-Hilali had taken on many roles prior in his life, but the part he most often played during the 1970s and 1980s was that of a religious expert who inculcated the puristic Salafiyya and sought to uncover all possible religious deviations, even minor

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ones. As a faculty member at the Islamic University in Medina between 1968 and 1974, al-Hilali worked in an environment that valued Islamic purism and afforded professional opportunities to those who embraced it. While he was already inclined toward purism before moving to Medina, his professional association with the Saudi religious establishment encouraged him to further emphasize this side of his heritage rather than the modernist one. In the process of translating the Qurʾan in English, for instance, he even contradicted his personal views and accepted the more stringent Wahhabi opinion that obliges women to cover their face and hands.

Six years in Saudi Arabia did not leave al-Hilali unaffected. At the time of his return to Morocco in 1974, the changes in his religious ethos and persona were manifest. Until he passed away in 1987, he remained very close to his Saudi colleagues and benefactors, was often perceived as an outsider in his native country, and issued legal opinions whose substance seemed quite foreign and conservative to other Moroccans. Moreover, al-Hilali gradually disregarded social thought; he no longer discussed or debated issues that were not strictly theological or legal per se. His assessment of Islamism, for instance, suggests that he was more concerned with creedal purity than he was with socio-political ideas, tactics, and goals. As a Salafi specialist of textual proofs, his agenda was rather tangential to the specificities of the modern era; he did not conceive of religious reformism as a response to contextual or temporal incentives. Therefore, his definition of *ijtihād* and *taqlīd* revealed a puristic epistemology that restricted the role of reason and promoted a rigid and conservative understanding of
Islam. Toward the end of his life, then, al-Hilali seemed far removed from the ideals of Rashid Rida and the modernist Salafis of the early twentieth century.
Conclusion

Circumscribing the Salafiyya as a historical object of study is not an easy task. Its nature and ethos are not only difficult to grasp; they are marked by a confusing mixture of continuity and change that continues to fuel many misunderstandings. Put simply, the history of the Salafiyya is at least twofold: it is the history of a label as well as the history of a religious orientation. These two subhistories, however, have not always overlapped. Some of the religious ideals and attitudes that are today considered typical of the Salafiyya can indeed be traced back to much earlier centuries, but they were not necessarily known under the label “Salafiyya” at the time. Likewise, there is evidence that Salafi labels existed as far back as the twelfth century, but they were much more marginal and restricted in meaning than they are today. In actuality, modern and medieval sources suggest that the Salafiyya is a recent construct. Prior to the twentieth century, there is no indication that any movement of Islamic reform ever made such an extensive use of Salafi labels and slogans to establish its corporate identity. In that sense, the current Salafi movement has no precedent in history. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ʿAbduh cannot even be credited for its emergence.

Yet the history of the Salafiyya in the twentieth century is no less puzzling, for the label which was at first tied to a movement of Islamic modernism later came to designate a puristic movement associated with Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia. One of the contentions of the present dissertation is that these two types of Salafiyya are not historically disjointed. The modernist strand, for instance, did not abruptly come to an
end with the death of Rashid Rida in 1935, nor did Hasan al-Banna and the Muslim
Brothers become its custodians afterward. This is not to deny the connection between the
modernist Salafiyya and al-Banna (in truth, many aspects of al-Banna’s Islamist project
were the logical extension of Rashid Rida’s social and political thought). However, there
continued to exist a number of scholars and activists, in Morocco, Algeria, and even in
the Middle East, who displayed a much greater attachment to the Salafiyya as a
distinctive religious orientation. The Salafis affiliated with Middle Eastern circles never
approached al-Banna’s level of fame, but they had a much closer relationship with Rashid
Rida and proved to be his most direct religious heirs. Taqi al-Din al-Hilali was part of
that group, along with some of the individuals whose names have been mentioned several
times throughout this dissertation: Muhammad Bahjat al-Bitar, Abd al-Razzaq Hamza,
Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi, Abd al-Zahir Abu al-Samh and Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib, to
name a few. These individuals kept Salafi networks alive and, perhaps more importantly,
witnessed and partook in the transformation of the Salafi ethos over the course of the
twentieth century.

In seeking to understand why the Salafiyya evolved the way it did, it is necessary
to bear in mind the context in which changes took place. The challenges of that era are
well known: the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the abolition of the caliphate, the spread of
European colonialism, as well as the political division and weakness that ensued all
combined to alarm Salafi reformists. But one should not assume that the Salafiyya
evolved into a religious purism simply because its exponents became disillusioned with
the West in the wake of the First World War. This type of explanation is attractive and conveys a sentiment that did exist, but it also glosses over the actual process of change and downplays the fact that several Salafis still held the West in high esteem. A closer examination rather shows that the Salafiyya evolved incrementally as its exponents attempted to respond—sometimes in an ad hoc manner—to the aforementioned contextual challenges. There was nonetheless a common denominator linking each of the transition points discussed throughout this dissertation. In some way, they all resulted from the unprecedented ability of key Salafi leaders and activists not only to conceive of the umma as a single global community, but also to believe that they could act in its behalf and actually shape its destiny.

In the early twentieth century, the Muslim global imaginary of Rashid Rida, for instance, differed markedly from the more local focus of other Salafi leaders such as Ibn Badis in Algeria or ʿAllal al-Fasi in Morocco. Rida was not committed to the revival of Muslims in a specific country, nor was he dedicated solely to the revival of the Arab world, even though this was the region to which he devoted most of his attention. The numerous volumes of al-Manar are rather a testimony to Rida’s global sensibility and his continuous concern, over several decades, for the revival of all Muslims everywhere. This global approach to Islamic reformism played a major part in his decision to campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism in the 1920s. Above all, Rida strove to enhance the reputation of the Wahhabis in the eyes of other Muslims so that the Saudi state could stand a chance of becoming the new rallying point for all Muslims in the post-
Ottoman era. He was not a utopian to the point of seeking to eliminate the political fragmentation that existed since the Middle Ages, but he did not want the *umma* to lack and independent flagship state. In the end, Rida’s leadership brought the Salafi movement closer to Islamic purism and contributed to moving its center of gravity toward Saudi Arabia. There is no question that he believed he was acting in the best interests of the worldwide Muslim community by putting his trust in Ibn Saʿud and vouching for the Wahhabis.

Efforts to standardize Islam across cultural, political and geographical borders proceeded from the same global consciousness. Among other consequences, the spread of colonialism to most parts of the Muslim world had heightened the awareness of transnational issues and challenges. Although the Salafis who belonged to Rashid Rida’s entourage still lacked a reliable political arm (the Saudi rulers did not always consider the unity and progress of the *umma* a priority), they hoped to strengthen the worldwide Muslim community in the face of colonialism by pushing for religious conformism in creed and law. Admittedly, the travels of Taqi al-Din al-Hilali were more extensive and diverse than normal, but the extent of his missionary ambition was in keeping with the global ambitions of his mentor, Rashid Rida. Except for his insistence on religious conformism rather than ecumenism, al-Hilali corresponded to the archetypal modern missionary previously envisioned by Rida in the 1910s. He learned English to better defend and spread Salafi Islam, promoted religious unity, opposed traditional schools of law, taught classical Arabic, was open to modern and profane sciences, and never let
anything supersede his loyalty to the Islam of the pious ancestors. al-Hilali was still a modernist Salafi in some respects, but his religious ethos reflected a growing trend toward inflexibility and peremptoriness. As a matter of fact, Rida too distanced himself from his formerly moderate and conciliatory approach to Muslim unity. Regardless of its degree of success or failure, the transnational quest for cohesion through religious conformism favored the puristic side of the Salafiyya and further undermined the modernist inclinations of some of its exponents.

A second facet of this quest for religious cohesion consisted in likening Muslim-ness to a modern national identity, which Shakib Arslan and other Salafis saw as the most organic and powerful sense of belonging in the twentieth century. Should Muslims think of themselves as a cohesive nation, they argued, the umma could gain the strength and resolve that allowed so many collectivities in Europe to resist various onslaughts and to come of age. Although this discourse was an attempt at presenting Islam in a modern idiom, it left little room for religious diversity insofar as it intersected with the Salafis’ transnational efforts to standardize Islam. (Moreover, the modern idiom they chose was not necessarily a liberal one. al-Hilali, for example, was particularly impressed by the German nationalism of the Nazi years). In reality, some degree of religious tolerance continued to exist as long as the struggle against colonialism lasted, but the generic Muslim identity delineated by Arslan and his emulators lent itself better to the combination of scripturalism, literalism and anti-syncretism that became characteristic of the late twentieth-century Salafiyya.
To be sure, not all Salafis followed or internalized the new values promoted by Rida, Arslan and others from the 1920s onward. But the ethical changes that had taken place within the Salafi movement were undeniable; they came to full view when its transnational leadership waned and the wave of colonialism started to recede. In the postcolonial era, those who had supported the campaign for the rehabilitation of Wahhabism as well as the quest for religious cohesion through religious conformism and Islamic nationalism were far less disposed than other Salafis to strike a balance between the need to construct modern nation-states and the necessity to uphold Islam. This was all the more so for Salafis of puristic inclination who emphasized orthodoxy and orthopraxy rather than social or political activism per se. They not only struggled to find new justifications for their religious stringency; they proved unable to coordinate their action with the remaining modernist Salafis. Whereas anti-colonialism had allowed apolitical and puristic Salafis to collaborate with politically-active and modernist ones, decolonization removed the main common cause that had hitherto united the different wings of the Salafi movement. In Morocco, for instance, al-Hilali strove to find a *raison d’être*, to influence public opinion and to make his views prevail. He had become a marginal Salafi whose religious ethos was rather ill suited to the postcolonial reconstruction of the 1950s and 1960s.

In actuality, modernist Salafis struggled as well. Leftist and secular ideologies had such a tremendous appeal among the ruling elites of the Muslim world that, in due course, the last networks of modernist Salafis failed to stay at the forefront of the
intellectual and socio-political scene. In many countries, Islamists eventually supplanted them as advocates of an Islamic modernity. The Salafis of puristic inclination, for their part, were able to outlive their modernist colleagues and survive the postcolonial transition due in large measure to their global outlook and generic understanding of Islam. al-Hilali, for instance, did not need to be in Morocco to pursue his call for orthodoxy and orthopraxy. His religious discourse and reformist goals remained the same wherever he went, and he entertained no political ambition. Hence, emigration neither posed a problem nor weakened the potency of his message. Like many other foreign Salafis, he moved to Saudi Arabia during the Arab Cold War and reinforced his personal and professional relationship with the Wahhabi establishment. The puristic wing of the Salafiyya thus continued to thrive with its center of gravity in the Arabian Peninsula.

Under Saudi auspices, the late twentieth-century Salafiyya lost most of its prior modernist features, but this should not be understood to mean that contemporary Salafis try to ward off all things modern. In the context of this dissertation, modernism means something more specific, namely, the frank attempt at reconciling a religious tradition with the intellectual project spawned by the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Contemporary Salafis have come to value Islamic purism to the point of avoiding or at least disapproving of such reconciliation. Saudi Salafis, for example, do not forbid Muslims to acquire modern science and new skills in order to strengthen their country or the umma; but they warn the youth against the dangers of critical intellectual habits that might elevate reason as an autonomous arbiter of truth or comprehension. They also
make little attempt to present Islamic creed, laws and ethic as congruent or consistent with values regarded as typically modern. Unlike the Salafis of the early twentieth century, contemporary Salafis do not champion the kind of moderation that was supposed to overcome any apparent contradiction between Islam and modernity. Their priority is rather to defend the purity of Islam and to preserve it from all potential corruptive force, including the influence of the West and its notion of modernity. Epistemologically, they are thus much more rigid and cautious than their modernist predecessors.

On the basis of these remarks, two questions are in order. First, is it misleading to identify Islamic purism as the defining characteristic of contemporary Salafis given the fact that Salafis of puristic inclination already existed in previous decades? It is true, for instance, that the Salafi ethos of Muhammad al-Maghrawi’s pietistic association al-Daʿwa ila al-Qurʾan wa-l-Sunna (chapter seven) is not, prima facie, very different from that of Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya, which Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi founded in 1926 (chapter three). Yet the latter association was born in a Salafi environment that was much more diversified and in which a partnership between activists of modernist and puristic outlooks truly existed. In Rashid Rida’s *al-Manar*, Islamic modernism often rationalized Islamic purism, while purism prevented modernism from going astray. Since the late twentieth century, however, this kind of partnership has waned to the point of being either ad hoc or nonexistent. It is telling that Islamic modernists are no longer considered part of the Salafi movement.
Similarly, al-Hilali’s religious ethos was more multifaceted in the 1940s than in the 1980s, even though he already held puristic views regarding *ittibāʿ*, *tawḥīd* and innovation, among other matters. The difference is that in the aftermath of the Second World War, his religious discourse still comprised modernist and progressive elements (although, as stated above, he often took inspiration from illiberal definitions of modernity and progress). At the time, he still strove to explain that his rigorist views were in fact compatible with modern values, alluded to the similarity between his scripturalist-cum-literalistic epistemology and the positivist method of Western Orientalists, and justified his religious stringency on the ground that it served the struggle against colonialism. By the mid-1970s, however, al-Hilali no longer cared to articulate a parallel modernist discourse.

This raises the second question: is it fair to posit that the Salafis abandoned modernism? Could it be, perhaps, that modernism declined because it exhausted its potential? Strictly speaking, it is true that the type of Islamic modernism advocated by early twentieth-century Salafis was not fully in tune with the 1970s. By then, the struggle against colonialism had been largely successful; the *umma* was stronger and more confident than it was in the 1920s; the need to stress the compatibility between Islam and modern sciences appeared less pressing; and reforms in education had led to the creation of modern Islamic universities with Ph.D. programs in religious disciplines. Had Rida lived to see these changes, he may have considered that parts of his agenda had been fulfilled.
Nevertheless, it would be presumptuous to conclude that the modernist ethos ipso facto lost relevance, or that it could no longer find expression in the 1970s. In the end, the Salafis of the late twentieth-century must bear responsibility for the religious attitude and epistemological assumptions they chose to adopt. The changing context of Islamic reformism in the twentieth century provided them with ample opportunities to favor religious purism over modernism, but it did not force them to do so. al-Hilali, for one, had no obligation to reduce his role (for the most part) to that of a provider of exoteric religious science and watchdog of Salafi orthodoxy and orthopraxy. However, his overwhelming emphasis on religious purism from the 1970s onward did not predispose him to engage modern social, political or intellectual problems like Rida and other early twentieth-century Salafis had done. It rather predisposed him to focus on ahistorical religious norms and deviances.

I am aware that the scope of this dissertation is in many ways too broad to convey the looseness, diversity and elusive character of the Salafiyya. In trying to discuss and understand its evolution over several decades, I most likely made it appear more structured, cohesive and united than sources warrant. To be sure, there was more to the modernist Salafiyya than the thoughts of Muhammad al-ʿArabi al-ʿAlawi, ʿAllal al-Fasi or Rashid Rida and his closest collaborators. Likewise, al-Hilali’s journey is enlightening insofar as it highlights important steps in the evolution of the Salafiyya, but individual Salafis often followed different routes. As for the contemporary Salafiyya, it can be no
less elusive than the modernist one, even though puristic Muslims have largely succeeded in monopolizing the label to refer to their method of thinking.

Needless to say, one shall always be able to find quotations, texts or random opinions that dispute each and every postulate upon which this dissertation is based. To deflect criticism, some Salafi websites like to reproduce a statement attributed to Ibn al-ʿUthaymin to the effect that the Salafiyya is not a party whose members consider anyone who differs with them as astray. However, the label “Salafiyya” has become so powerful and value-laden that it is sometimes used in ways that Ibn al-ʿUthaymin would have found dubious, improper or downright repugnant. Many Islamists, for example, see themselves as Salafis even though they fail to meet all the standards of religious purity set by puristic Muslims. Some Sufis claim that they are in fact the true Salafis, because they hold on to the ascetic and spiritual legacy of the pious ancestors. I even remember reading one blogger who claimed, with unaffected and wishful simplicity, that the label is too divisive and that all good Muslims should be considered Salafis.
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