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**Prophetic rituals in modern Syria: Defending the “old orthodoxy” with the ‘ulamā’ in it**  
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**Thomas Pierret**

In modern Syria, prophetic devotion has retained considerable appeal among the ‘ulamā’ and ordinary believers alike. Not only has the age-old celebration of Muhammad’s Birthday (*Mawlid*) continued to attract massive crowds to the mosques of the country,<sup>1</sup> but it was supplemented with the revival of two Prophet-centered rituals, namely, the assembly of prayer for the Prophet (*majlis as-ṣalāt ‘alā al-nabī*) (ici il faudra renvoyer à l’article de Nelly Amri dans ce volume), and the public hearing (*samā’*) of canonical ḥadīth collections. While the former ritual was widely embraced by leading ‘ulamā’ and consequently became an integral part of Damascus’ religious landscape from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onward, the latter aroused remarkable popular enthusiasm in the years that preceded the 2011 uprising.

Besides the devotional aspects of Prophet-related rituals,<sup>2</sup> the literature has highlighted their relation to the two issues of political power and orthodoxy. Studies on the *Mawlid* have illustrated how its celebration has been used to uphold the religious legitimacy of political authorities or, more recently, to assert Muslim communal identity in a hostile context.<sup>3</sup> In early modern Sufism, increasingly common reference to the “Muhammadan path” served claims to immediate contact with the Prophet, ergo doctrinal purity, ritual correctness, and superiority over existing Islamic mystical traditions.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, I shed light on another aspect of Prophet-related rituals that has received less attention, namely, their role in buttressing the dominant ‘ulamā’’s claim to authority over the religious field and society at large. I argue that each of the three Prophet-related rituals considered in this chapter addresses the aforementioned challenges in its own way. Under a Ba‘thist regime that has drastically curtailed the ‘ulamā’s political influence, the *Mawlid* functions as a symbolic reassertion of their leadership over the Muslim community. As for the prayer for the Prophet and public hearing of ḥadīth, which are respectively discussed in the third and fourth sections of the chapter, they constitute responses to modern challenges to the dominant ‘ulamā’s doctrines and relevance within the religious field. (votre introduction devrait s’arrêter là)

Prophetic devotion is thus not only the object of the three rituals under scrutiny. It is also a pretext for something else: celebrating those who commonly describe themselves as the “heirs of the Prophets” (*warathat al-anbiyā’*), that is the ‘ulamā’.<sup>5</sup> My ethnographic observations even suggest that those rituals are organised in ways that limit the emotional dimension of the attendants’ devotional experience: I am referring here to the unmitigated formalism and ceremoniousness of the *mawlid*, the extreme sobriety of the silent assembly

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<sup>1</sup> For a general account on the *Mawlid*, see Katz, *The Birth*.

<sup>2</sup> Addas, *La Maison muhammadienne*.

<sup>3</sup> See Woodward, “The ‘Garebeg Malud’ in Yogyakarta”; Kaptein, *Muhammad’s Birthday Festival*; and its review by Touati; Fareen Parvez, “Celebrating the Prophet”.

<sup>4</sup> For the latest episodes in the related “neo-Sufism debate”, see Voll, “Neo-Sufism: Reconsidered Again”; Chih, “Discussing the Sufism of the Early Modern Period”.

<sup>5</sup> Pierret, *Religion and State*, 10-11.

of prayer for the Prophet's, and the erudite orientation of the public hearing of ḥadīth collections.

I am not arguing here that the dominant Syrian 'ulamā' oppose more affective forms of Prophetic devotion in general. In fact, they even supervise, and encourage, less restrained, more direct expressions of love for Muḥammad, but they do so in *other* settings. The latter include, to speak only of those I could personally observe, the *ḥadrāt* (lit. "presence", i.e. gatherings) of Sufi brotherhoods, and the "kissing of the relics" (*taqbīl al-āthār*), i.e. ceremonies where participants stand in a queue to kiss a relic of the Prophet contained in a small cushion. Those rituals allow for ecstatic behaviour and emotional displays (in particular tears) that have no place in a mawlid or assembly of prayer for the Prophet. I assume, therefore, that the three rituals I analyse in this chapter fulfill the goals outlined above (i.e. bolstering the 'ulamā's standing) by taking advantage of an affective relationship to the Prophet that is primarily nurtured *in other circumstances*.

This chapter relies on the author's observation of several dozen religious ceremonies that were held in mosques across Damascus between 2006 and 2008. Observations were made either in person, or on the basis of extended video recordings that were purchased in mosques and Islamic bookshops. I follow an ethnographic method, by which I mean the description and analysis of practices and discourses from the perspective of the social context in which they were produced.<sup>6</sup>

### Heirs of the Prophet

The 'ulamā' are defined here as a group of religious experts whose formation, vocation, and orientation are characterized primarily by a "sense of continuity with the Islamic tradition".<sup>7</sup> They differ in this from "modern" intellectuals, who might draw argument from the Islamic tradition, but are chiefly concerned with the formulation of a forward-looking discourse on society and state.

In modern Syria, 'ulamā' continue to emerge through a bottom-up, informal process of recognition by elder religious scholars and peers. Although the state might advance, or hinder, the career of a given scholar depending on his loyalty, it does not decide who ought to be regarded or not as an 'ālim. As a result, the term "'ulamā'" is commonly used in Syria to refer to a broad and heterogeneous category that includes academics and mosque-based scholars, experts in exoteric religious sciences and Sufi masters, graduates from religious schools and alumni of secular faculties, authors of erudite treatises and administrators of Islamic charities, as well as self-sustained merchant-scholars, teachers in private Islamic schools, and (a minority of) holders of high-ranking official religious positions.<sup>8</sup>

By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, dominance within Syria's Sunni religious field was correlated with a given doctrinal orientation, namely, embrace of the "old orthodoxy" that had prevailed among the country's religious elites since the Mamluk era:<sup>9</sup> Ash'arī doctrine (*'aqīda*) in theology, imitation (*taqlīd*) of the four Sunni *madhāhib* in matters of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and Sufi mysticism (*taṣawwuf*). Most 'ulamā' in pre-2011 Syria did, indeed, subscribe to some form of Sufism: they had either taken an oath of allegiance to a Sufi master as part of their religious training, or further specialized in that domain to become the "educator"

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<sup>6</sup> Dupret, *Ethnographies of Islam*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Zaman, *The Ulama*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Pierret, *Religion and State*, 9-14.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffroy, *Le soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie*.

(*murabbī*) of their own disciples. Whether a Sufi master was socially regarded as an *‘ālim* depended on his level of exoteric knowledge and, more importantly, on the quality of his relations with scholarly religious elites.<sup>10</sup>

Ash‘arism, madhhabism and Sufism thus constitute what, in the modern Syrian context, corresponds to “traditional” Sunni doctrines, hence the epithet “traditionalist” I apply to those *‘ulamā’* who embrace and defend these doctrines against their present-day challengers. Traditionalist dominance in Syria only partly resulted from political factors. For sure, the Ba‘th party that seized power in 1963 rid traditionalist *‘ulamā’* of influential rivals by suppressing, first, the modernist wing of the Muslim Brotherhood that controlled the Faculty of Sharia at the University of Damascus,<sup>11</sup> and second, Salafi scholars whose teachings started to gain traction at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Yet, traditionalist *‘ulamā’* also owed their influence to the fact that from the Mandate era onwards, they pioneered grassroots initiatives of religious revival (schools, charities, and informal networks) that gave them a sizeable social base. As a result, they, too, were perceived as a threat by the secularist, Alawite-dominated Ba‘thist regime. While some of them were coopted, like Grand Mufti Ahmad Kaftaru (in office from 1964 to 2004), prominent traditionalist figures opposed the regime in the 1960s and 1970s, then during the insurgencies that rocked the country in 1979-1982 and after 2011.<sup>13</sup>

The hegemony of traditionalist *‘ulamā’* within the religious field remained fragile, however. First, the social and political influence of Muslim religious elites at large was profoundly and durably undermined by the advent of the Ba‘thist regime. Second, in Syria like elsewhere, growing doubts emerged about the *‘ulamā’*’s relevance in an age of mass religious literacy, as the progress of schooling and the mass media made robust levels of religious knowledge increasingly common among considerably larger populations than the tiny scholarly circles of old. As a result, new religious leaders emerged that contended with the *‘ulamā’* to speak in the name of Islam, some of them even calling into question the need for a class of religious specialists.<sup>14</sup> Third, from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, attacks on traditional Sunni doctrines emanating from Salafi scholars based in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt found their way to Syria through print material, cassettes, and eventually, satellite TV channels and the internet.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Celebration of the Prophet’s Birthday**

Every year in the cities of Syria, the twelfth day of the lunar month of Rabī‘ al-Awwal marks the beginning of the “celebration of the noble prophetic birthday” (*al-iḥtifāl bi-l-mawlid al-*

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<sup>10</sup> Pierret, *Religion and State*, 117-129.

<sup>11</sup> The northern chapters of the Muslim Brotherhood, which were equally suppressed by the Ba‘thist regime, embraced traditional Sunni doctrines in matters of creed, jurisprudence, and Sufism.

<sup>12</sup> Pierret, *Religion and State*, 9-14.

<sup>13</sup> Boettcher, *Syria’s Sunni Islam*; Pierret, *Religion and State*.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance Robinson, “Technology and Religious Change”, 249; Eickelman and Anderson, *New Media*.

<sup>15</sup> With regard to Syria, see Pierret, *Religion and State*, 100-143.

*nabawī al-sharīf*).<sup>16</sup> *Mawālīd* are organised every evening in different mosques, the largest of which welcome up to more than 5,000 people on that occasion.<sup>17</sup>

Addresses given by the ‘ulamā’ during the celebration of the Mawlid revolve around the ideas of morality and unity: on the one hand, speakers call their audience to imitate the exemplary behaviour of Muhammad and stress the need to abide by his Sunna; on the other hand, they present the birthday of the Messenger of God as the best occasion to reunite his followers against their enemies, domestic and foreign, thereby endowing the celebration with political overtones. In the 1960s and 1970s, *mawālīd* were sometimes used as a platform to voice opposition to the secularist and authoritarian policies of the Ba‘thist regime.<sup>18</sup>

In the years that followed the ruthless suppression of the 1979-1982 Islamic insurgency, many mosques were prohibited from holding *mawālīd*, while those that remained allowed to do so adopted a distinctively low-key approach. Conversely, the celebration of the Mawlid underwent a marked revival at the beginning of this century as a result of rapprochement between Bashshār al-Asad (in power since 2000) and Sunni religious elites, whose support the new president sought in a context of severe tensions with Western countries.<sup>19</sup> The number of celebrations (which henceforth took place in mosques but also, on some occasions, in outdoor public spaces), the size of their audience, and their degree of pomp increased throughout the decade, as did the political content and boldness of the accompanying exhortations.

In 2006, *mawālīd* provided an opportunity to voice anger at the West following the Danish cartoon affair and rejection by the United States and European Union of Hamas’ victory in the general elections held by the Palestinian National Authority.<sup>20</sup> The following year, as the Mawlid was celebrated a few weeks before a no-contest presidential election following which Syrians would be ordered to renew their oath of allegiance (*bay‘a*) to Bashshār al-Asad, some speakers knowingly reminded their audience that it was to Prophet Muḥammad that the “greatest allegiance” (*al-bay‘a al-kubrā*) was due.<sup>21</sup> Addressing thousand, widely revered Sheikh Usāma al-Rifā‘ī went as far as to warn “the leaders in our country” that if they failed to “raise the banner of Islam”, God would “replace them with better people”.<sup>22</sup>

Observing the formal aspects of the Mawlid in Syria reveals another important dimension of its celebration, namely, the strong sense of social hierarchy it conveys. It is arguably a celebration of the Sunni ‘ulamā’ and urban elites at large, more than of the Muslim community as a whole. Each *mawlid* lasts for three or four hours starting from one of the two evening prayers. After the latter, the crowd progressively fills the mosque and sits on the carpets facing the *qibla*. In one corner of the mosque sits a group of *munshidūn*

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<sup>16</sup> Depending on the context, the Arabic term *mawlid* (plur. *mawālīd*) designates the Prophet’s birthday itself, its celebration, or a celebration that follows the same pattern but is organised at another moment in the year, for instance on the occasion of a marriage or in honour of guests. I use the written form “Mawlid” in the case of the former and “mawlid” in the case of the latter two.

<sup>17</sup> An extended version of this section on the Mawlid was published in Pierret, “Staging the authority of the Ulama”.

<sup>18</sup> Buti, *Hādihā wālīdī*, 130-1; Ḥawwā, *Hādhihi tajribatī*, 130.

<sup>19</sup> Pierret, *Religion and State*, 190-207.

<sup>20</sup> Observations by the author.

<sup>21</sup> Observations by the author.

<sup>22</sup> Pierret, *Religion and State*, 3.

(religious singers), whose chants in honour of the Prophet are heard throughout the evening.

Against the *qibla*'s wall, facing the public, a "choir" is formed by notables (*wujahā'*) sitting on two or three rows of plastic chairs, benches, and, for the most distinguished of them, leather armchairs. The centre of the front row is reserved for the *shuyūkh* ("shaykhs"), a term which, in this context, refers to the 'ulamā'. They are recognisable by their serious and hieratic attitude, their white turban or scarf as well as by their distinctive dress, which for this special occasion is often a gilt-edged robe (*jubba*). By their sides sit junior men of religion as well as lay notables, most of whom are merchants. The latter, who are commonly called *hajj* (a honorific title conferred upon someone who performed the pilgrimage to Mecca), often display outward signs of religiosity such as a short beard, sober robe, and white prayer cap (*taqiya*). In some cases, more prominent businessmen with a moustache and elegant suit are also present.

For members of the private sector, enjoying a place of prestige in a Mawlid is often a symbolic reward for donations to the mosque and its charitable activities. Consequently, the greater the generosity of a merchant, the warmer he is greeted on his arrival, and the closer to the 'ulamā' he is invited to sit. In some cases, auction-like fundraising sessions organised during the mawlid itself allow wealthy people to publicly display their readiness to spend money "in the path of God".<sup>23</sup> This way of enhancing one's reputation is particularly convenient for those businessmen who aim at being elected to the Parliament as "independent" deputies. For instance, during the 2007 campaign for parliamentary elections, which coincided with the Mawlid season, some candidates toured the mosques of the capital in order to reap the symbolic benefits of their previous donations to religious institutions. *Mawālīd* are also a means for the 'ulamā' to manage relations with their colleagues: clerics who are on good terms systematically invite one another, while publicly welcoming a rival is a common way to initiate a *détente*.

In general, guests do not attend the entire celebration, which results in ceaseless comings and goings between the entrance of the mosque and the "choir". In order to reach the latter, distinguished visitors have to walk across the crowd, sometimes through a passage delimited by cordons. On their way, they are greeted by a disciple (*tilmīdh*) of the host shaykh. Once they reach the "choir", the 'ulamā' and notables who are already present stand up from their chairs to embrace or exchange handshakes with the newcomers. By greeting each other in this way, hosts and visitors display a sense of social equality, and therefore of superiority over the audience of common people.

Particularly old and respected shaykhs are subject to special treatment. When they are among the hosts, they do not stand up when guests arrive, but rather wait for them to come and kiss their hand or forehead. Likewise, if they are among the visitors, they are immediately surrounded by respectful hosts when they reach the rows of chairs, which they sometimes do on an improvised litter, that is, an armchair borne by three or four young men. Some guests might also choose to sit among the audience out of modesty. In this case, the host sheikh sends one of his disciples in order to request them to come and sit with the "VIPs".

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<sup>23</sup> Pierret and Selvik, "Limits of 'authoritarian upgrading'", 596-596.

Half a dozen times during the evening, religious hymns stop to make place for the ‘ulamā’s exhortations. The first of them is given by the master of ceremonies, usually a close disciple of the shaykh of the mosque, i.e. the latter’s most senior scholar. His address, which occurs later in the evening, is generally the most important moment of the ceremony. As a gesture of respect, major guest ‘ulamā can also be asked to speak. The celebration closes with an invocation (*du‘a*) led by a scholar chosen for his ripe old age—which is synonymous with divine blessing (*baraka*)—and/or for his scholarly reputation.

Throughout the evening, the crowd watches the “show” and generally remains quiet and still. It does not sing along with the *munshidūn* and is not invited to do so. Except for the concluding prayer and invocation, the only participation that is requested from the audience—above all to ensure its attention throughout lengthy sententious speeches—is to pronounce the ritual formula of divine blessings upon the Prophet (*tasliya*) “May Allah honour Him and grant Him peace” (*ṣallā Allāh ‘alayhi wa-sallam*) each time the Prophet’s name is mentioned by a speaker.

There is evidence that the public is not entirely happy with the sober, ‘ulamā’-centered character of the Mawlid. Many people seem chiefly interested in the musical aspects of the celebration, as illustrated by the fact that video CDs of the *mawālīd* that are sold on pavements and Islamic bookshops are sometimes edited in order to cut out the ‘ulamā’s exhortations, thus leaving only religious hymns.

The attendants’ quest for “entertainment” is also obvious in the rare outdoor *mawālīd* that were allowed by the authorities as part of a progressive relaxation of restrictions on Sunni religious activities in the first decade of this century. Held in pedestrian areas or public gardens, those celebrations sometimes include more festive features such as whirling dervishes (in fact, professional dancers). Outside the sacred space of the mosque, spectators behave more freely: while remaining seated, they frequently sing along the *anashīd* while “dancing” by raising and moving their arms in the air. Whereas organisers disapprovingly wave at the few spectators who stand up out of enthusiasm, they usually tolerate “seated dancers”.

Even in mosques, participants are sometimes tempted to turn the “spectacle” into a “carnival”, that is, as per Mikhaïl Bakhtin’s conceptualization, to shift from a celebration in which performers are clearly distinct from a passive audience, to one in which such separation dissipates as the audience itself celebrates in a spontaneous and disorderly way.<sup>24</sup> During one of the celebrations I attended, attempts at controlling the crowd fell apart as over-excited youngsters rushed towards the centre of the prayer hall and started running in circles around the chair of a respected shaykh. Unable to restore calm, organisers eventually evacuated the mosque, throwing handfuls of candies into the courtyard in order to hasten the exit of the unruly teenagers.

The ‘ulamā’s insistence on preserving a ceremonious approach to the celebration of the Mawlid against the public’s attempt at “carnivalizing” it is not only a matter of religious orthopraxy. Although the rise of Salafism over the last decades has certainly made traditionalist ‘ulamā’ warier not to lend themselves to the accusation of tolerating “sinful innovations”,<sup>25</sup> there is nothing particularly new to the broad pattern of celebration

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<sup>24</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*. The idea of applying Bakhtin’s conceptual framework to the celebration of the Mawlid is borrowed from Schielke, “On Snacks and Saints”, 120.

<sup>25</sup> On modern controversies regarding the Mawlid, see Katz, *The Birth*, 169-207

described above. The latter description suggests that what is most fundamentally at stake here is the ‘ulamā’'s own prestige and authority. Indeed, as it is performed in Syria, the mawlid is a theatrical device that extols an ideal (and largely imaginary) social order dominated by religious scholars and their merchant allies.

As per Bakhtin, carnival is synonymous with a temporary suspension of the usual social order, hence with a potential challenge to the latter. By contrast, the Mawlid as performed in urban Syria is a highly ritualised spectacle that constitutes an ideal type of “anti-carnival”. The clerics’ authority is not only displayed through their monopoly on speech, but more importantly, through the “formulaic spatiality” of the celebration.<sup>26</sup> The latter contrasts with the egalitarian pattern of the Muslim collective prayer, in which the faithful pray in the same direction and, as much as possible, side by side. By conspicuously embracing incoming guests, clerics display the number and quality of their friends among the notables, that is, their social capital. They decide who has the right to sit in pride of place, which is made clear when visitors who choose to sit in the audience are publicly designated by the host as worthy of being seated with the other notables.

The fact that this approach to the performance of the mawlid aims to celebrate the ‘ulamā’, rather than the community as a whole, is acknowledged in the hagiography of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Rifā‘ī, a prominent Damascene scholar who died in 1973. Explaining al-Rifā‘ī’s keenness to celebrate the Prophet’s Birthday, the author asserts:

Those who enter the mosque on this occasion feel like they are in one of the gardens of Paradise because the ‘ulamā’, these heirs of the beloved Prophet, are at the centre of the assembly. Through this crowd of Muslims, Damascus displays its joy in belonging to this religion as well as its loyalty to its ‘ulamā’.<sup>27</sup>

Such an acknowledgement is unusual, but it is far from insignificant. By the time this text was published in 2008, al-Rifā‘ī’s disciples had taken advantage of the greater leeway conceded to them by the regime to become the largest Islamic network in Damascus, and the one whose *mawālīd* attracted the largest numbers of attendants. This network, known as *Jamā‘a Zayd* (“Zayd’s group”), split after 2011 as the major part of it defected to the opposition. While al-Rifā‘ī’s son Usāma, the group’s most senior figure, became the chairman of the Syrian Islamic Council established in Istanbul in 2014, some of his followers established *Ajnād al-Shām* (“The Soldiers of Sham”), one of the three major rebel factions of Damascus’ suburbs.<sup>28</sup>

The success of efforts to perpetuate the mawlid in the form described above should be seen as the result of previous endeavours to bolster the ‘ulamā’'s claim to religious authority. Indeed, it would not have been possible to drag thousands of attendants to a ritual designed to uphold the ‘ulamā’'s pretensions to head the social order (be it at a purely symbolic level), if religious scholars had not been able to first assert their primacy over their primary domain of activity, that is, the religious field. Both the assembly of prayer for the Prophet, and the public hearing of ḥadīth, have been part of that quest for relevance and legitimacy.

### ***The assembly of prayer for the Prophet***

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<sup>26</sup> Parkin, “Ritual as spatial direction and bodily division”.

<sup>27</sup> “Al-shaykh ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Rifā‘ī”.

<sup>28</sup> Pierret, “The Syrian Islamic Council”.



The assembly of prayer for the Prophet (*majlis as-ṣalāt ‘alā l-nabī*) usually takes place in the early morning. Participants remain seated and repeat ‘a hundred thousand times’ (or 92.000 times as per other versions) the formula “O God pray for our master Muhammad, his Family, and his Companions” (*ṣallā Allāh ‘alā sayyidinā Muḥammad wa-‘alā ālihi wa ṣahbihi wa-sallim*). “One hundred thousand” is a theoretical number that is reached by adding up the repetitions of each participant. The prayer was originally repeated aloud, but in some of the assemblies I attended, it was silent, arguably out of a concern for orthopraxy. The ritual is often followed by the recitation of Sufi poems, litanies (*awrād*), hymns (*anashīd*), and, in some cases, a standing *dhikr* according to the Shādhilī way. Owing to the leading role of the followers of the latter Sufi tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century revival of this ritual, texts chanted during the assembly often include the litanies of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, al-Jazūlī’s *Dalā’il al-Khayrāt* (“Proofs of Good Deeds”), and recent contents such as the *Farīdat al-tawḥīd* (“Gem of Divine Unicity”) of Muḥammad al-Hāshimī (1880–1961), the Algerian scholar who propagated the Shādhilī tradition in Syria.<sup>29</sup>

Although a comparable ritual known as *maḥiyā* existed in Damascus between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries,<sup>30</sup> local hagiography chiefly concerns itself with its modern reinstatement at the hands of Shaykh Muhammad ‘Ārif ‘Uthmān (1872-1965).<sup>31</sup> ‘Uthmān was a former student of Palestine-born Sufi scholar Yūsuf al-Nabhānī (1850-1932), a prominent defender of Prophetic devotion against reformist attacks, whose poetry was included by ‘Uthmān in his assembly’s repertoire.<sup>32</sup> It was during one of his many stays in Medina that ‘Uthmān came across an assembly of prayer for the Prophet, and that the Messenger himself ordered him, in a dream, to institute this practice in his homeland.<sup>33</sup>

‘Uthmān became the first “chairman” (*ra’īs*) of the assembly, which he initially held in private houses for a small number of ‘ulamā’, before it moved to mosques and attracted a growing number of scholars and ordinary believers. Upon al-‘Uthmān’s death, the assembly’s chairmanship was assumed by Sa’īd al-Burhānī (1894-1967), the shaykh of the al-Tawba mosque (one of the largest places of worship of Damascus’ old neighbourhoods), and a leading Ḥanafī scholar and Sufi Shādhilī master. Then, for more than four decades, the position was held by Aḥmad al-Ḥabbāl al-Rifā’ī alias Abū Kamāl (1911-2009), an unlearned, yet highly esteemed figure. Besides the “main” assembly chaired by ‘Uthmān and his successors, many other scholars started to run their own one.

The Damascene ‘ulamā’’s enthusiastic embrace of this ritual, which was still widespread at the time of my fieldwork in the 2000s, is best explained by the fact that it has allowed for addressing criticisms of Sufi rituals while at the same time reasserting a conception of religious authority that centers on the personal charisma of the shaykh.

Salafi and modernist polemicists have frequently faulted traditional Islam for the divisive cultishness of Sufi brotherhoods and modern-day *jamā’āt* (informal congregation consisting of a scholar and his disciples). In Damascus, such divisions have been driven by a number of factors: local identities, some groups being named after their neighbourhood, such as *jamā’āt al-Mīdān*; alliances with competing factions of urban notables and political parties;

<sup>29</sup> Abāza and Hāfiẓ, *Tārīkh*, 2:787; personal observations, 2006-2008. On al-Hāshimī, see Weismann, “The Chadhiliyya-Darqawiyya”; Thibon, « L’Orient des soufis ».

<sup>30</sup> De Jong, “MAḤYĀ”.

<sup>31</sup> On narratives of re-foundation among 20<sup>th</sup>-century Syrian ‘ulamā’, see Pierret, *Religion and State*, 28-29.

<sup>32</sup> Abāza and Hāfiẓ, *Tārīkh*, 2:787. On al-Nabhānī, see Chiabotti, “Yūsuf b. Ismā’il al-Nabahānī”.

<sup>33</sup> Dr ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Khaṭīb, interviewed in “Majlis as-ṣalāt ‘alā al-nabī fī al-Shām”.

after 1963, support for the regime (which often entailed factional rivalries over official favours) or for the opposition; last but not least, struggles over the spiritual legacy of a shared master.<sup>34</sup> In the 1930s, chronic rivalries within the ‘ulamā’ milieu were supplemented with an exceptionally acute episode of internecine strife known as the “Tijāniyya affair”. The latter emerged when ‘Alī al-Daqr, the founder of the influential al-Gharrā’ Islamic educational association (est. 1924), was attacked by rival scholars for his affiliation with the Algeria-based Tijāni Sufi order, whose teachings they denounced as heretical.<sup>35</sup>

No available evidence allows to link the reinstatement of the assembly of prayer for the Prophet to the Tijāniyya affair, which occurred when ‘Uthmān was in his sixties. Yet, it is at least likely that the incident created fertile ground for this ritual. Having been reestablished upon a direct order from the Prophet, the assembly echoed the main claim to legitimacy of the Tijāniyya, that is, its quality as a “Muḥammadan path” taught directly to its founder by the Messenger of God.<sup>36</sup> Just as importantly, it featured distinctly ecumenical overtones that seemed designed to reconcile rival ‘ulamā’ groups. Symbolically, ‘Uthmān conceived his assembly as an itinerant ritual that was held every Wednesday in a different mosque of Damascus, thereby cutting across factional lines. Likewise, in a funeral oration pronounced upon the death of the assembly’s chairman Aḥmad al-Ḥabbāl, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ya’qūbī, the then lecturer of theology (*‘aqīda*) at the Umayyad Mosque, emphasized that the deceased did not belong to any religious faction:

He had no *jamā‘a*, and this is the hallmark of the real scholars and people of God (...). He did not organise his disciples in study circles (*halqāt*) while saying: “it is forbidden to attend other assemblies than ours, otherwise you’ll be expelled!”<sup>37</sup>

The assembly of prayer for the Prophet was also used as a unifying ritual within specific subgroups of scholars. In addition to the itinerant assembly, al-Burhānī had established another weekly one that was supposed to bring together all of the city’s Shādhilī masters, that is, whoever had received a license to train disciples (*ijāza*) from al-Burhānī or from his own master Muḥammad al-Hāshimī. Following al-Burhānī’s death, however, two competing assemblies came to be held, one chaired by his son and successor Hishām, and another one by ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Shāghūrī, who became the dominant Shādhilī master in Damascus due to the former’s long absence as a guest worker, then political exile, in the United Arab Emirates. As time passed, and personal rivalries lessened, however, the original, all-inclusive assembly was eventually reinstated in the mid-2000s, as al-Burhānī held it in presence of al-Shāghūrī’s own successor Shukrī al-Luḥafī (1920-2015) and other prominent Shādhilī shaykhs of Damascus.<sup>38</sup>

In the face of reformist attacks, the assembly of prayer for the Prophet also offers the advantage of being bereft of the most controversial aspects of Sufi rituals, namely, bodily movements and inarticulate sounds during *dhikr* session: participants remain seated, immobile, and, in some cases, silent all along. This has been particularly important for the Shādhilī tradition, which has been widespread among Syrian ‘ulamā’ over the last century,

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<sup>34</sup> On factionalism among the Syrian ‘ulamā’, see Pierret, *Religion and State*.

<sup>35</sup> Reissner, *Ideologie und Politik*, 87.

<sup>36</sup> Triaud and Robinson, *La Tijāniyya*, 9-10.

<sup>37</sup> Ya’qūbī, “Faḍl al-‘ulamā’”.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with the assistant of a prominent Shādhilī sheikh, Damascus 17 April 2006, and observations by the author.

yet features a standing *dhikr* that, in Damascus in particular, has lent itself to Salafi and modernist attacks. For Shādhilīs, the assembly of prayer for the Prophet has represented the functional equivalent of the silent, seated *dhikr* of the Naqshbandīs, which has constituted a distinct advantage for the latter in an era of anti-Sufi polemics.<sup>39</sup>

Whereas, as mentioned above, the assembly of prayer for the Prophet was originally followed by a standing *dhikr*, some scholars have chosen the former as a means to purely and simply replace the latter, thereby, asserting their orthopraxy in the face of Salafi criticisms. Sa'īd Ḥawwā (1935-1989), a Sufi-leaning ideologue of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, promoted the assembly of prayer for the Prophet as part of the spiritual training of the organisation's members, which took place in private homes after the Brotherhood was banned in 1963.<sup>40</sup> More recently, Damascene Shādhilī master and *faqīh* 'Abd al-Hādī al-Kharsā, a vocal anti-Salafi polemicist, did the same in his mosque out of awareness of the reservations provoked by the standing *dhikr*.<sup>41</sup>

Notwithstanding the above, the re-emergence of the assembly of prayer for the Prophet should in no way be interpreted as indicating either a rejection of the hierarchical dimension of Islamic mysticism, or any process of de-personalisation of religious authority. On the contrary, it has been instrumental in reasserting a conception of the spiritual experience that centers on the physical presence of a shaykh, whose personal charisma is perceived as a central feature of the ritual by participants in the latter. This is best illustrated by the profile of al-Ḥabbāl, who was widely considered as a saint and whose "teachings" were of an entirely non-textual nature. As I left a mosque after an assembly held in the presence of al-Ḥabbāl, a regular attendant asked me if I had "looked" at the latter during the evening. I answered that I had "seen" him, but not particularly "looked" at him. "What a pity!", my interlocutor exclaimed: "Do you know that, by just looking at him, you benefit from his spiritual state (*ḥāl*)?"

The above was not an idiosyncratic opinion, but the literal reproduction of a discourse propagated by well-established guardians of the "old orthodoxy". In his aforementioned oration for al-Ḥabbāl, al-Ya'qūbī explained that

Aḥmad al-Ḥabbāl was not a scholar (*'ālim*), but he was nevertheless a heir of Muḥammad because he was the greatest pious man (*ṣāliḥ*) of his generation. He taught people just with his spiritual state. Looking at people like him excuses you from reading books.<sup>42</sup>

The quote above, as well as al-Ḥabbāl's designation by al-Burhānī, shows that the model of sainthood he embodied was not seen as a challenge by the established 'ulamā': al-Ḥabbāl's saintly reputation was in fact validated and propagated by the 'ulamā' themselves. Moreover, leading experts in theology and *fiqh* have held their own assembly of prayer for the Prophet to supplement their exoteric teachings with a spiritual dimension, and, arguably, as a means to remind their students that books do not entirely replace the physical presence of scholars as a source of religious knowledge.

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<sup>39</sup> Weismann, *The Naqshbandiyya*.

<sup>40</sup> Ḥawwā. *Hādhihi tajribatī*, 149-150.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with 'Abd al-Hādī al-Kharsā, Damascus, 15 April 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Ya'qūbī, "Faḍl al-'ulamā'".

Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (1929-2013), Syria's most prominent Sunni scholar until his assassination during the civil war, used to hold a weekly assembly of *silent* prayer for the Prophet in the mosque named after his father, Mullā Ramaḍān al-Būṭī. The assembly was attended for the most part by students of vocational Islamic institutes. On that occasion, revealingly, the famous polemicist would dress in an unusual manner: whereas he habitually wore a *tarbush* and suit that symbolized the combination of his Azharī training and mastery of modern ideological debates, he chaired the assembly dressed with an *'abā'a* (cloak) and *ḥatta* (white-cloth headgear), which in Syria are strongly associated with mosque-based (as opposed to academic) Islamic scholarship.<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, a similar assembly was held prior to the Ḥanafī fiqh lesson of 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Ḥalabī (1925-2012), who was called "Shaykh of the Umayyad Mosque" because he was entrusted with giving the prestigious morning session under the Eagle's Cupola of Damascus' grand mosque. "This assembly is pure blessing (*baraka*)", a participant told me: "the place, the time, the Shaykh". Tellingly, by the time of my fieldwork, the "lesson of Shaykh 'Abd al-Razzāq" was in fact given by one of his disciples, because the ageing scholar had become too weak to teach it himself. Yet, al-Ḥalabī's mere *presence* remained of utmost importance of the attendants, who would respectfully stand in line after the lesson to kiss his hand.<sup>44</sup>

After 2011, the assembly of prayer for the Prophet further acquired prominence in Damascus due to the support of Assad's Ministry of Religious Endowments (*awqāf*). This policy was a means for the regime to reward Shādhilī networks that had remained loyal to it,<sup>45</sup> and to promote Sufism as an alternative to the Salafi doctrines embraced by its fiercest rebel opponents.

In February 2015, Minister of Religious Endowments Muḥammad 'Abd al-Sattār al-Sayyid presided over a lavish ceremony held at the Umayyad Mosque to launch the "Assembly of Muḥammadan Light for Perpetual Prayer on the Beloved Envoy" (*majlis al-nūr al-muḥammadī li-l-ṣalāt al-dā'ima 'alā al-ḥabīb al-muṣṭafā*), which hereafter would gather day and night in Damascus' greatest place of worship. The name of the new assembly obviously referred to the doctrines of Ibn 'Arabī, whose *Litany of Protection for Whoever Seeks Protection* (*wird al-wiqāya li-man arāda al-wilāya*) was recited during the evening.<sup>46</sup> This choice was an inherent challenge to the Salafis and Wahhabis, who have been the fiercest representatives of a long tradition of hostility to the doctrines of Ibn 'Arabī.<sup>47</sup> This was explicitly articulated in the speech of Minister al-Sayyid, who framed the ceremony as a religious response to the Islamist ideologies of the regime's enemies:

From Damascus, and from the pulpit of the Umayyad Mosque, rose the voice of the true Islam that was revealed by God, pure and spotless, unlike what we see today: crime, murder, anathema (*takfīr*), Wahhabism, the Muslim Brotherhood, Daesh, Salafi Jihadism have no relation whatsoever, with

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<sup>43</sup> Observation by the author.

<sup>44</sup> Observation by the author.

<sup>45</sup> Not all Shādhilī sheikhs sided with the regime. Al-Ya'qūbī, most notably, fled Syria in 2011 and called for Assad's downfall.

<sup>46</sup> *Iftitāh majlis an-nūr al-muḥammadī*.

<sup>47</sup> De Jong and Radtke, *Islamic Mysticism Contested*.

either the pious ancestors or jihad. They are entirely unrelated to Islam, and they are in fact an insult to our religion and our Islam.<sup>48</sup>

Patronage of the new ritual was also an occasion for the regime to endear itself to part of the Shādhilī milieu, which had traditionally counted few enthusiastic regime supporters. The head of the permanent assembly was Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Bū ‘Āfiya, a relatively discreet figure prior to 2011, after which he was allowed to open the first Syrian institute whose name specifically referred to the teaching of Sufism, the Imam Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī Institute for Sharia, Arabic Language and Sufism.<sup>49</sup>

Although the Ministry’s extolling of Sufi Islam has undoubtedly pleased certain religious circles, it has also sparked hostile reactions. The latter have not come from proponents of competing interpretations of Islam, which have been completely eliminated or silenced in regime-held areas, but from secular and/or non-Sunni (in particular, Alawite) pro-government constituencies, which have become wary of any public expression of Sunni religious conservatism.<sup>50</sup> In early 2020, ironic and angry reactions spread on pro-regime social media following the announcement that the Ministry had received a delegation from the Assembly of Muhammadan Light, which on that occasion presented al-Sayyid with the “final numbers of the campaign of prayer on the Greater Beloved” that had just been held for two months in the mosque of Ibn ‘Arabī. Popular anger, which led the Ministry to delete the post from his Facebook page, was heightened by the fact that the announcement came at a time the country’s economic situation was steadily worsening due to the unprecedented collapse of the Syrian currency.<sup>51</sup>

Besides Sufi rituals like the assembly of prayer for the Prophet, Syrian proponents of traditional Sunni doctrines have also responded to Salafi criticisms by counter-attacking on their detractors’ favourite playing field, namely, the Prophetic Sunna. During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Damascus witnessed a marked increase in the religious elites’ interest in ḥadīth studies and ḥadīth-related rituals that were conspicuously framed as responses to the Salafi challenge. In spite of fierce state repression, indeed, Salafi views were steadily gaining ground in Syrian society thanks to satellite TV channels and the internet.

### **Public hearing of ḥadīth collections**

Throughout the last century, lessons in ḥadīth commentary (*sharḥ*) never ceased to be a key component of the teachings provided in Damascene mosques and sharia institutes. For decades, by contrast, the memorization (*taḥfīz*) and public reading (*samā’* or *riwāya*) of canonical collections of ḥadīth had been confined to narrow scholarly circles, or abandoned altogether. They underwent a marked resurgence in the first decade of the current century.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>49</sup> *Iftitāḥ majlis an-nūr al-muḥammadī*.

<sup>50</sup> See, in particular, the moral panic provoked among the aforementioned constituencies in 2018 by the release of decree nr. 16, whose real implications were strictly limited to the internal organization of the state’s Sunni religious bureaucracy (*Al-nā’ib fī majlis ash-sha’b Nabīl Ṣālīḥ*).

<sup>51</sup> *Wizārat al-awqāf al-sūriyya taḥdhifu*.

<sup>52</sup> This section includes material published in Pierret, *Religion and State*, 115-117.

The memorization of ḥadīth collections, which was long part of the training of the ‘ulamā’, lost much of its importance with the rise of the modern print industry.<sup>53</sup> In any case, it was never promoted among broad audiences until this century, for obvious reasons: until then, the priority was to propagate the memorization of the Koran, which only started to become a mass-phenomenon in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is precisely because this endeavor was remarkably successful that a growing number of Syrians became available for memorizing the Prophetic Sunna.

The turn towards ḥadīth memorization was spearheaded in Damascus by the Qubaysiyyāt, an all-female, Sufi-inspired movement of religious education that operated through private home based informal study circles until it was formally allowed to use mosques in 2006. Since their inception in the 1960s, the Qubaysiyyāt trained thousands of *hafīzāt* (“those who memorized the Koran”) principally drawn from the middle and upper classes.<sup>54</sup> In the 2000s, members of the group started to memorize the content and chain of transmission (*matn wa-sanad*) of thousands of *aḥādīth*. In 2007, an institute entirely dedicated to that purpose, the Nūriyya Ḥadīth School for Girls (*madrāsāt al-ḥadīth al-nūriyya li-l-ināth*), was opened by the movement next to the Umayyad Mosque, and placed under the patronage of leading ḥadīth scholar from Aleppo Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itr.<sup>55</sup>

The public reading of canonical collections of authentic *aḥādīth* (*al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*) is, by contrast, an ancient religious practice that was introduced in Damascus by Ḥanbalī ‘ulamā’ in the thirteenth century. It was conceived as a collective ritual, rather than as a means to transmit knowledge: the ḥadīth’s content and chain of transmission was read aloud by a scholar without the explanations that would generally feature in a usual ḥadīth lesson; unlike the latter, moreover, reading sessions were not reserved for religious students, but open to all.<sup>56</sup> This tradition reportedly died out in Damascus in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, until it was resuscitated in the 1990s by the aforementioned Muḥammad al-Ya‘qūbī. Initially reserved for a select audience of scholars and religious students, al-Ya‘qūbī’s reading sessions attracted a much broader audience from 2007 onwards, when he performed the complete reading (*khatm*) of the collections of Muslim and Tirmidhī in major mosques of Damascus, including that of Ibn ‘Arabī.<sup>57</sup> In 2008, he was imitated by Na‘īm al-‘Arqūsī, one of the disciples of the aforementioned ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Rifā‘ī, who read the collection of al-Bukhārī in front of thousands people who had gathered for that occasion in the huge al-Īmān mosque.<sup>58</sup>

Neither al-Ya‘qūbī nor al-‘Arqūsī did pretend that they had memorized the ḥadīth collections: the value of their reading rather stemmed from the fact that they relied on copies which were presumed perfectly reliable. Indeed, their owners had corrected them by listening to readings performed by ‘ulamā’ who were themselves part of oral chains of transmission that go back to the compilers of the canonical collections. Accordingly, the

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<sup>53</sup> Most ‘ulamā’ used to memorize relatively short collections of *ḥadīth* such as al-Nawawī’s *Arba‘īn*. Only a few exceptional figures would memorize the thousands of *ḥadīth* contained in the canonical collections.

<sup>54</sup> See Omar, “Al-Qubaysiyyāt”.

<sup>55</sup> *The National* (Abu Dhabi), 13 September 2008 ; interviews with the husband of a senior member of the Qubaysiyyāt and a male Muslim scholar, Damascus, May 2008. On the medieval feminine tradition of ḥadīth relation, see Amri, « Entre Orient et Occident musulmans ».

<sup>56</sup> Leder, *Spoken Word*, 13.

<sup>57</sup> “Iḥyā’ majālis samā’ al-ḥadīth”.

<sup>58</sup> “Majlis ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī fī jāmi‘ al-Īmān”.

*samāʿ* was followed by the enunciation of the links of this chain.<sup>59</sup> Due to the dereliction of ḥadīth reading in twentieth century Syria, both al-Yaʿqūbī and al-ʿArqūsī based their claim to authority in this matter on their connections with foreign traditions: al-Yaʿqūbī received a reading license (*ijāza bi-l-riwāya*) from his father Ibrahim, who received it himself from his Moroccan ancestors, whereas al-ʿArqūsī was certified in Medina by an Indian scholar nicknamed Habibullah al-Mazahiri after Mazahir al-Ulum, the Deobandi madrasa in which he was trained.<sup>60</sup>

The public that attended al-ʿArqūsī's reading was drawn from various parts of the country. It was predominantly young and relatively diverse, since it included students from both religious institutes and secular schooling, a reflection of his group's interest in recruiting graduates of elite faculties such as medicine and engineering.<sup>61</sup> Attracting such large numbers of participants was a remarkable feat considering that it took al-ʿArqūsī eight to ten hours' reading a day over the weekends of two months to achieve the *khatm*. Participants who wished so were issued an *ijāza* on two conditions: first, exams were subsequently organized to ensure that they had corrected their own copy of the *Ṣaḥīḥ* according to al-ʿArqūsī's version; second, attendance of the full series of reading was verified thanks to a barcode system that allowed participants to check in and out each time they entered and left the mosque—the *ijāza* system, indeed, was designed centuries ago for small study circles where the master could easily check the regular attendance of his disciples, not for crowds of listeners.<sup>62</sup>

Like the emergence of the assembly of prayer for the Prophet, the revival of ḥadīth reading in early twenty first century Damascus is best understood as a means to, first, reassert the role of the 'ulamā' as the chief holders of religious authority, and second, defend traditional conceptions of religious knowledge in the face of Salafi attacks.

The public reading of al-Bukhārī et al. was part of a successful attempt at re-concentrating religious authority in the hands of the 'ulamā', as illustrated by the procedures of mass-certification that were established for the occasion. By spending days in a mosque to get an *ijāza* validating the mere hearing of the reading of a text that is easily available in any bookstore or on the internet, thousands of young Syrians gave credence to the Muslim scholars' claim that authentic knowledge does not reside in books, but in their persona and voice. This is because traditional epistemology sees the latter as the only guaranteed connection to the uninterrupted chain of transmission (*isnād*) linking up present generations to founding figures of Islamic scholarship such as al-Bukhārī, and ultimately the Prophet Muḥammad himself.

Moreover, the ḥadīth reading (re)placed the 'ulamā' at the core of the politics of Islamic identity. Indeed, as is the case for any religious or national identity, the construction of Muslim identity relies on the idea of continuity between a particular community and a founding moment or figure (in this case, the Prophet). Through the ritual reading of al-Bukhārī or Muslim, the 'ulamā' present themselves as the very embodiment of this

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with religious students, spring 2008; observation of the final session of al-ʿArqūsī's reading, 25 April 2008.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*. For a comprehensive history of ḥadīth transmission, see Davidson, *Carrying on the Tradition*.

<sup>61</sup> See Pierret, *Religion and State*, 54-60.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with religious students, Damascus, spring 2008.

continuity. Moreover, they show themselves able to substantiate that claim in a quasi-scientific way through the enunciation of the chain of transmission.

Ḥadīth reading is also a means to counter the Salafis, more specifically the branch of Salafism commonly known as the neo-*ahl al-hadīth* (“People of ḥadīth”). The latter’s tutelary figure was Albanian-born Syrian scholar Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (1914-1999), whose emphasis on ḥadīth studies exerted immense influence upon Salafism worldwide, and on Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia.<sup>63</sup> By reviving ḥadīth-centered scholarly practices and rituals, traditionalist ‘ulamā’ aim to return the Salafis’ favourite weapon against them: first, by demonstrating that proponents of traditional Islam are just as reverential towards the Sunna as Salafis are, and second, by promoting a distinct, alternative epistemology in matters of ḥadīth studies.

In the speech he gave on the last day of his reading of al-Bukhārī, al-‘Arqūsī implicitly evoked the Salafis, some of whom, easily recognizable to their above-the-ankles robes and hoary beards, were counted among the audience. The scholar referred to their controversial positions on the gestures of prayer, emphasizing the divisive effect of such controversies and the need to overcome them in the name of Muslim unity:

There is a tendency to overstate minor differences, to the extent of forgetting the essentials that bring us together. For instance, one does not hear “this man prays” or “this man does not pray”. No, one hears: “when he prays, does he go down on his legs, or on his hands?” (...) Do you think God is pleased with that? I will not go by the names of these categorisations, I do not like them. Any other categorisation than “worshippers of God” or “Muslims” divides the Umma. Al-Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ* has brought us all together at the same table, despite our differences of schools and persuasion. ... Among the values of the Prophet, there is love for all Muslims, for all those who say the profession of faith (*shahāda*).<sup>64</sup>

Al-‘Arqūsī also mimicked, in a rhetorical question, the Salafis’ usual objection to their opponents, and addressed it in their own terms:

You will ask, what is your scriptural evidence [*dalīl*] for this? Well, let’s go back to al-Bukhārī. One of the *aḥādīth* we just read recounts that one of the Companions used to drink wine, and was punished for that. He did it again, and was punished anew. He did it one more time, and the other Companions got upset with him. Muhammad then told them: “Don’t insult him, because he loves God and his Prophet”. So, do you think it is acceptable to insult someone because he prays in such and such manner?<sup>65</sup>

At the close of his remarks, the shaykh asked his thousands of listeners to take each other’s hands and to raise their arms as one to heaven as a sign of unity among Muslims, a request accepted with great enthusiasm by the audience. Calls for harmony did not mean surrendering one’s (Sufi) religious identity, however. Having completed the reading twenty minutes before the sunset prayer, al-‘Arqūsī filled the gap by asking participants to repeat aloud the last words of the *Ṣaḥīḥ*: “Glory be to God and praise him, glory be to God the

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<sup>63</sup> Lacroix, “Between Revolution and Apoliticism”.

<sup>64</sup> Observation by the author, 25 April 2008.

<sup>65</sup> Ibidem.



almighty”<sup>66</sup>. In other words, al-‘Arqūsī improvised a *dhikr* session, though one that was conspicuously anchored in scriptural sources.

Ḥadīth reading also challenge the neo-*ahl al-ḥadīth* to the extent that it approaches ḥadīth scholarship through a different epistemology. In Syria in particular, Salafis have chiefly concerned themselves with the authentication of *ḥadīth* through the verification of its chain of transmission. Al-Albānī devoted much of his life to that endeavor, famously challenging the authenticity of some of the *aḥādīth* contained in the canonical collections.<sup>67</sup> From that perspective, seeking an *ijāza* for merely listening to the reading of both authentic and inauthentic *aḥādīth* is, a Salafi-leaning scholar explains, pointless:

Everyone agrees that the Koran must be memorized and transmitted from mouth to ear, but I don’t see the point of doing that with the *ḥadīth*, because in our time, with modern print technologies, it is easy to find reliable editions of the canonical collections. I am surprised to see that Shaykh Na‘īm (al-‘Arqūsī) is behind that. I always encouraged my students to attend his lessons in the explanation (*sharḥ*) of al-Bukhārī, they are extremely beneficial. But listening to him reading for hours, without any explanation, I don’t see the point. Shaykh Shu‘ayb al-Arnā’ūt [1928-2016, another Damascene *ḥadīth* scholar of Albanian origin], who was al-‘Arqūsī’s master and my own, did not have that kind of reading *ijāza*, but that didn’t prevent him from becoming Damascus’ greatest *ḥadīth* scholar. He would never have read a *ḥadīth* collection for hours: he could speak of a single *ḥadīth* for a whole night.<sup>68</sup>

The Damascene Salafis’ focus on the critique of *ḥadīth*, and their lack of interest in an *ijāza*-certified chain of transmission between the compilers of the canonical collections and the present time were, precisely, the targets of those who revived the public reading of *ḥadīth* in early twenty first century Damascus. Al-Ya‘qūbī made it clear in the opening speech of his reading of Muslim, during which he told the audience that unlike him, “neither Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, nor ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Arnā’ūt [1927-2004, another leading Albanian-born Damascene Salafi scholar] had an *ijāza* in *ḥadīth* relation”.<sup>69</sup>

The emphasis on *ijāza* served two purposes: first, it amounted to a reassertion of belief in the authenticity of the entire canonical books of *ḥadīth* against Salafi critique. Second, it promoted a traditionalist epistemology which contradicts Salafis with regard to the scholarly heritage (*turāth*), that is, religious elaborations that appeared after the era of the Pious Ancestors. From the Salafis’ viewpoint, heritage, although not entirely bad, is also suspect, because it contains forged or weak *aḥādīth* as well as the many innovations (Ash‘arī theology, imitation of the schools of jurisprudence, Sufism), which, over the centuries, have led Islam to deviate from scriptural sources. For traditionalists, on the contrary, the multiple layers of scholarship that constitute heritage have *enriched*, not corrupted, Islam. These fundamentally conflicting perspectives explain why traditionalists attach great importance to the idea of a personal, *ijāza*-certified connection with the previous generations of scholars, whereas Salafi scholars like al-Albānī and ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Arnā’ūt did not hide their lack of

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<sup>66</sup> *Subḥān Allah wa bi-ḥamdihī, subḥān Allah al-‘aẓīm*.

<sup>67</sup> Brown, *The Canonization*, 321-334; Lacroix, “Between Revolution and Apoliticism”.

<sup>68</sup> Interview, Damascus, May 2008.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with a participant, Damascus, April 2008.

interest in *ijāzāt*.<sup>70</sup> For the same reason, traditionalists hold the genre of commentary (*ta'liq*) of classical works in much greater esteem than the Salafis do.<sup>71</sup>

This contrast has obvious consequences for the ways 'ulamā' define their relation to the Prophet, hence for their status as religious authorities. Indeed, only those scholars who claim a direct connection with Muḥammad via an uninterrupted chain of *ijāzāt* can describe themselves as the embodiment of sacred knowledge, rather than as mere experts of a bookish knowledge whose sacredness cannot be taken for granted, because it must first go through meticulous authentication. In other words, only the former category of 'ulamā' can claim the title of "heirs of the Prophet" in a literal, rather than merely metaphorical sense. This concern for the standing of the 'ulamā' might explain why the last decade has also witnessed a revival of public *ḥadīth* reading chaired by Salafi scholars in places like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Egypt.<sup>72</sup>

### Conclusion

In modern Syria, Prophet-related rituals have been at the forefront of the traditionalist 'ulamā's effort to reassert their relevance and legitimacy in the face of mounting challenges to their authority. This applies to both long-established celebrations such as the Mawlid, and to revived rituals such as the assembly of prayer for the Prophet and public readings of *ḥadīth*. Each of these rituals fulfills a specific purpose, however.

The Mawlid serves at least two main functions. One could be termed "contextual", to the extent that in particular contexts, the Mawlid provides the 'ulamā' with the opportunity to posit themselves as the leaders of the Muslim community in the face of domestic and foreign oppression. The other function of the Mawlid is of a more structural nature, since it is imbedded in the ritual's formal aspects: the spatial organisation of the ceremony, which materializes the divide between urban elites and the rest, and the theatrical welcome of notables, in particular merchants, make the 'ulamā' appear as the dominant element in an idealized social order from which real power-holders, namely (Alawite) statesmen, are conspicuously absent.

The assembly of prayer for the Prophet re-emerged in Damascus among circles of Sufi 'ulamā' who, by the mid-twentieth century, were faced with growing Salafi criticisms against brotherhood parochialism and "blameworthy" ecstatic practices. A rotating ritual, the assembly of prayer for the Prophet was designed to symbolically unify rival religious networks around the love of the Prophet. Due to its silent character, it did not lend itself to the same kind of reproach as the standing *dhikr* of established Sufi traditions such as the Shādhiliyya. This was a change in form rather than in content, however. Indeed, in an era of rising religious literacy and mass media, the assembly of prayer for the Prophet provided a less controversial ritual framework to promote a conception of religious authority centered on the personal charisma and physical presence of the sheikh. Modern uses of this ritual thus echo contemporary elaborations by other Syrian 'ulamā' who championed core Sufi principles while filtering out controversial terms, a trend that Itzchak Weismann described as "Sufism without *tasawwuf*".<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> See for instance "Tarjama faḍīlat al-shaykh al-muḥaddith 'Abd al-Qādir al-Arnā'ūṭ rahimahu-llāh".

<sup>71</sup> Hamdeh, "The Role of the 'Ulamā'".

<sup>72</sup> See for instance "Qitā' al-masājid ikhtatama"; "Majālis samā' Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī".

<sup>73</sup> Weismann, "Sufi Fundamentalism".

The more recent revival of public readings of *ḥadīth* collections, which gained momentum in the second half of the previous decade, responded to another dimension of the Salafi challenge, that is, the accusation directed against *madhhab*-affiliated ‘ulamā’ of neglecting the Sunna as an object of scholarship. However, this revival was shaped by a different context, namely, the retreat from modernism, which facilitated the restoration of traditional patterns of Islamic scholarship that had seemingly lost any sort of relevance with the rise of the print industry. As illustrated above, earlier traditionalist responses to Salafi polemicists were of an essentially defensive nature, since they essentially consisted in ridding rituals and doctrines of their most contentious features. By contrast, the restoration of public *ḥadīth* readings was an *offensive* move that did not only demonstrate the traditionalists’ commitment to the study of Muḥammad’s words and deeds, but also extolled an alternative epistemology to the Salafis’ book-based approach to the authentication of *ḥadīth*. This alternative epistemology relies on the idea that the authenticity of holy scriptures is attested by a chain of transmission, not just between the Prophet and canonical compilers (which is what Salafis are concerned with), but also between the latter figures and the present time. From that viewpoint, the ‘ulamā’ are not mere experts in matters of sacred texts: they literally embody the latter’s authenticity.

Since I conducted field research inside Syria, a number of scholars mentioned in this chapter were forced into exile, died a violent or natural death, or had their group disbanded as part of the regime’s crackdown on the opposition. Of the three rituals studied in this chapter, one, the public hearing of *ḥadīth* collections, seems to have ceased entirely in Damascus and regime-held areas at large. Evidence drawn from available video recordings suggest that the Mawlid was bereft of its most political aspects after 2011. Outside of the regime’s domain, the celebration of the Mawlid also continues in the Turkish-controlled northern border areas, as well as in the Kurdish-dominated Autonomous Administration East of the Euphrates. Available video material often shows very small audiences,<sup>74</sup> yet short of field research, it is not possible to tell whether this is due to a decrease in popular interest for this ritual, or to other factors such as a politically-motivated refusal to attend officially sponsored ceremonies.

In any case, however, devotion to the Prophet has remained a staple of those brands of Islam that stand in opposition to the Salafis and Jihadis. Besides the Assad regime’s sponsoring of a permanent assembly of prayer for the Prophet, this found an illustration in the new approach to *ḥadīth* recitation promoted by Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ya’qūbī. After he fled state repression in 2011 and relocated to the land of his ancestors, Morocco, the scholar compiled five hundred *aḥādīth* under the title *Characteristics of the Beloved Envoy (shamā’il al-ḥabīb al-muṣṭafā)*, which he has been reading aloud—for nine hours each time—in mosques and on Youtube ever since. In his selection, al-Ya’qūbī explained, he aimed to emphasize the moral qualities Muḥammad displayed in everyday life rather than in his military campaigns (*maghāzī*). The latter were, in his view, a short period of Muḥammad’s existence that has received excessive attention in non-specialist religious discourse, with deleterious effects on the young generations of Muslims.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> See for instance the 2019 celebrations at the grand mosques of al-Bab (Turkish-controlled) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nF04XGRRdfM>) and Raqqa (Autonomous Administration) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=barhRDScv4M>).

<sup>75</sup> “Qirā’a fī kitāb”; “*Shamā’il al-ḥabīb al-muṣṭafā*”.

Among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, similarly disaffection with Salafi Jihadi organisations like the Islamic State (due to the atrocities they committed, or to their failure to deliver on their promises of victory) has been seized upon by local Sunni traditionalist movement al-Aḥbāsh, an ally of the Syrian regime whose attempts at “re-educating” target audiences focus on the love of the Prophet.<sup>76</sup> Considering that context, Prophet-related rituals, be they inherited or (re)invented, are likely to retain their relevance in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>76</sup> I thank Emma Aubin-Boltanski for this information. On al-Ahbash, see Pierret, “Aḥbāsh (al-)”.

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