The battered dervishes of Bab Zuwayla: A religious riot in eighteenth-century Cairo

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One of the most important motivating forces behind eighteenth-century Islamic renewal and reform is undoubtedly Islamic fundamentalism. By its nature, fundamentalism is activist and militant and tends therefore to produce movements and organizations aimed at implementing the Islamic ideals. The best known of these movements are those that succeeded in creating states or statelike organizations and were politically significant. Other movements, however, failed or were suppressed before they could ever reach that stage. These are, of course, usually less well known. In this chapter, I shall deal with a short-lived fundamentalist movement of the latter category—a movement among Turkish soldiers in Egypt, led by a Turkish student of religion. Fundamentalist fervor made them attack dervishes performing sufi rituals and brought them into open conflict with the Egyptian ulema. After a few days of unrest, the military authorities suppressed the movement by force and restored order. Although little is known about the leader of the movement—even his name remains a mystery—the events are well documented. Since both al-Djabarti and von Hammer-Purgstall have reported the episode, it has drawn the attention of several authors. However, apart from Barbara Flemming's informative article, which is an assessment of a Turkish chronicle as a source for the incident as compared with al-Djabarti's account, the events have not been dealt with in a more detailed study.

In the first part of this chapter I shall give an account of the occurrences. This is essentially a translation of the richest source available, Ahmad Shalabi’s chronicle Awdah al-isharat fi-man tawalla

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Other sources cited:


Misr min al-wuzara wa-l-bashat, complemented with two other contemporary sources, Yusuf al-Mallawani’s Tuhfat al-ahbab bi-man malak Misr min al-muluk wa-l-nuwwab and Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Hallaq’s Tarih-i Misr. Passages from these other sources are printed in italics, the source being identified in the footnotes. In the second part the behavior and motives of the different actors will be analyzed against the background of the existing religious trends and traditional roles, with the aim of giving some insight into the conflict between fundamentalism and the established religious and political order.

In the beginning of Ramadan (October 1711) a Turkish student of religion (sufta, sufta) with a group of companions took up lodgings in cells (khawla) belonging to the Mu-ayyad Mosque in Cairo. The following day they sat together to study a treatise by Birgili. On the 10th of Ramadan the student started to preach in one of the galleries of the mosque. He gave his sermons on several consecutive days and, as more and more people flocked in to hear him, he moved to the main hall of the mosque and ascended the pulpit there. His audience filled up the mosque; they were not only sitting in the main hall, but also stood in the galleries and took up half of the central court. His sermons dealt with the following issues:

1. Miracles of saints cease after death and accounts of miracles performed by them after their death are therefore false.
2. What al-Sharani reports in his al-Tab'at, namely that some saints can see the Well-Preserved Tablet (al-Lawh al-Mahfuz) is untrue and groundless, and he who holds this opinion is an unbeliever. For the Well-Preserved Tablet cannot be seen by prophets, so how would it be possible for saints? He even denied that the Prophet—may God bless him and grant him salvation—has ever seen the Well-Preserved Tablet.
3. It is not allowed to burn candles and oil lamps at the tombs of saints and it is to be feared that those who kiss their thresholds and tombs are unbelievers. Muslims and their authorities must strive to put an end to this.
4. It is obligatory for Muslims to destroy the cupolas built over graves (tekkes), like the Gulsevi and the Mevlevi tekke, and over the tombs of saints.
5. The tekkes that have been constructed for a crowd of dervishes, like the Gulsevi, the Mevlevi, the Bektasi and similar tekkes must be abolished, the dervishes living there must be ejected, their places be taken over by students of religion, and the tekkes thereafter be converted into madrasas.
6. It is forbidden to visit in groups Imam Shafii and other tombs during the nights before Saturday in order to perform public dhikrs.
7. It is forbidden and an act of polytheism (shirk) that a band of ignoramuses among the groups that during the nights of Ramadan are to be found near Bab Zuwayla (Demirkapu), shout and jump until midnight on the pretense of performing a dhikr. It is incumbent upon the qadi and others to stop them, for a person who fails to forbid what is abominable (al-nahy al-munkar) will be punished in the Hereafter.

Spurred on by these words, his followers (hizbuh) lay in ambush until after evening prayer. Then they attacked with swords and cudgels those who were holding a dhikr there and beat them up. Upset, the crowd took to their heels. The attackers then began to beat the door with their cudgels and to tear off the balls and the pieces of red cloth that were hanging from the door, saying, “Where are the saints?” Then a Turk, called Yusuf, a retainer of Faruh Katkhoda, went to the niche behind one of the doorleaves and pissed in it. But God afflicted him then with jaundice until he died.

Some people went to Shaykh Ahmad al-Nafrawi and informed him of what the student had said. Thereupon a fatwa was written and signed by the Malikite Ahmad al-Nafrawi, the Hanafite al-Sayyid Ali and the Shafiites Ahmad al-Khalifi and Abduh al-Diwi. Its contents were as follows:

1. The wonders of saints are a reality and they are possible both during their life and after their death. Whosoever denies this is a Mutazilite.
2. Denying that the Prophet—may God bless him and grant him salvation—can see the Well-Preserved Tablet is a statement that one is not allowed to make. If someone says so, he must be rebuked by the ruler and [if he does not come to reason] be killed.
3. It is not allowed to change the nature of tekkes and to convert them into madrasas, for the founder’s (waqif) stipulations are like clear provisions of the Divine Law and cannot be changed.
Some people took the fatwa to the al-Muuyyad Mosque, waited for the preacher to climb the pulpit, and handed it to him. When he saw it, he became furious and said: "O you men! Your ulema, those Arabs (aulad al-Arab), have issued a fatwa contrary to what I have mentioned to you, saying that it is allowed to kill me. I want a disputation with them in the presence of the qadi askar. Are there among you people who want to help me in upholding and supporting the Truth and in suppressing the power of these heretical unbelievers (al-kafarah al-zandiqa) who have issued an unfounded fatwa?" Then the group who supported him rose and said: "Lead us to any place you want. We are with you in anything you intend to do." He descended from the pulpit and about a thousand of those present gathered around him, all of them [illiterate] Turks, who could not distinguish between a written mim and nun. Thereupon he led them through the centre of Cairo to the house of the qadi. All this took place on Monday 19 Ramadan (30 October), just before the afternoon prayer.

When the qadi saw them, he was annoyed and said: "What do they want?" They answered: "We want you to summon for us Shaykh Ahmad al-Nafrawi, Shaykh Ahmad al-Khalifi and al-Sayyid Ali, who have signed this fatwa." They showed the fatwa to the qadi and when he had read it he said to them: "Send those crowds away; we will summon them for you and hear your case." Then they said to him: "What do you think of this fatwa?" He answered: "It is unfounded, since they do not adduce evidence for it." And so they asked for a document to this effect. But he replied that there was not much time left, that the clerks (shuhud) had already gone home and that they should be patient until the next day. Thereupon the interpreter (tarjumam) of the qadi went outside to submit the matter to them. They, however, did not listen to his words but attacked him and gave him a good hiding. Then the qadi got up and entered his private rooms (harim). All those present in court fled... As for the deputy-qadi (naib), he had no choice but to write a document as they required.

Next day they assembled as usual at noon to listen to the preacher, but he did not show up. They sent someone to look for him in his room, but they did not find him. Then they asked the other religious students but they replied that they did not know where he was. They began to wonder what had prevented him from coming. Then one of them said: "I think the qadi has prevented him from preaching." Thereupon another man said: "O you men! Whosoever wants the truth and wishes to support it, let him come with me to where I intend to go." About a thousand people followed him as he led them to the qadi. The crowd became larger as they took along not only those who were present in the assembly, but also those whom they had met in the markets and the bazars. When the qadi and those present in court saw them, they lost their minds from fear and panic. All the clerks and bailiffs (rusul) fled and only the qadi remained. Having entered they said: "Your Honor, where is our shaykh?" When he answered that he did not know they said to him: "Get up and ride with us to the Diwan so that we can ask the Pasha about him and request him to summon for us our adversaries who have issued a fatwa to the effect that our shaykh is to be killed. We will hold a disputation with them and if they can prove their case, they will be safe, but if they cannot, we shall kill them." Then they forced the qadi to ride to the Diwan, while they were walking behind him. There the Pasha asked him about the reason for all the commotion and why he had appeared at such an unusual time. He answered: "Look at those who are filling the courtyard of the Diwan. They came to me and forced me to ride to here." And he informed him of what had happened the day before and the same day; they had beaten up the interpreter and had taken a document from him stating what they wanted. "And now they have forced me to ride [and I had to yield] for fear that they would take my life." Thereupon the Pasha sent for the lieutenant-commanders (katkhoda) of the Janissaries (Mustahfizan) and the Azaban and said: "Ask them what they want." They answered: "We want al-Sayyid Ali, al-Nafrawi and al-Khalifi so that they can have a disputation with our shaykh about their fatwa. If they fail to show up, we shall attack their houses." The Pasha gave them a written order (furman, buyuruldī) in accordance with their wishes and said: "Come tomorrow, then your case will be dealt with." Thereupon they descended in a large crowd and entered the Muuyyad Mosque. They sent people to bring the shaykh from his cell, told him what the situation was, and showed him the buyuruldi that they had obtained. In the afternoon the same crowd sent for him to [ascend] the pulpit. He then started to exhort them to come to the Muuyyad Mosque the following day. And all the time they were as deluded as ever in their obedience to this Mutazilite and their deep attachment to him. I (Ahmad Shalabi) once sat in the
Muayyad Mosque and sent the
in. They entered and in­

day Ali Agha (the commander of the Janissaries) rode out to the
they were
whereas the others had taken off the shawls
(taylasan)
reached a decision on these measures, they broke up. The next
and finally to intimidate them and those heretics. Having

to interrogate them
the students living in the cells (khalawi),^^
to eject
those of them whom he might see, to enter the mosque,
ordered the commander of the Janissaries to ride out, to arrest
those who sat and waited for the preacher to come
in order to benefit from his sermons. They were all sent to their
regiments and then some of them were beaten and others were
sent into exile. Then the sedition (fitna) came to an end. As for
the preacher, news arrived that he had escaped from the place
where he had been hiding, that he had secretly boarded a ship in
Bulaq, that he had reached the Syrian coast via Damietta, and
that he had gone to Jerusalem.24

So much for the events. What I shall do now is to explain what
has happened by successively concentrating on the various actors
and trying to discover the motives that prompted them to act as they did,
the roles they assumed, and the religious trends and traditions they
were part of. But before going into this, I will describe the stage
where the main scenes of the narrative were enacted.

The story begins and ends in the Muayyad Mosque, one of the
biggest and grandest mosques in Cairo, constructed in 818 H/1415
CE by sultan al-Malik al-Muayyad Shaykh al-Mahmudi. It was
meant to serve both as a suf center and as a madrasa and in the
waqf-deed the founder had made provisions for the salaries of sufis
shaykhs and teachers of the religious sciences and for scholarships to
students. In the seventeenth century it had fallen into disrepair, but
was restored in 1690 by the governor Ahmad Pasha.25 Immediately
adjacent to it is Bab Zuwayla, known among the Turks as Demur
Capu, the Iron Gate, on the southern end of the Qasaba, the main
thoroughfare of Fatimid Cairo. The present gate was built in 485 H/
1092 CE. It is also known as Bab al-Mitwalli since popular belief has
it that a niche behind one of the leaves is inhabited by a very im­
portant saint (mitwalli, qutb), who is invisible. People asking the
intercession of the saint would tie a piece of cloth to the door or drive a
nail in it. On the walls of the gate some large stone balls are sus­
pended, probably as protective amulets.26

In the Muayyad Mosque we meet the first actor, the instigator
of the ensuing events: a Turkish softa or student of religious sciences,
who, with a group of companions, had taken residence in the cells
adjoining to the mosque. They distinguished themselves from their
Egyptian colleagues by donning the taylasan, a shawl worn over the

company of our teacher, Shaykh Ali al-Tayluni, talking about the
fanaticism of this errant band and their affection for this Muta­
zilite. Then the shaykh said: “The person who has said: The
first people to obey the Dadjdjal are the inhabitants of Egypt
has certainly spoken the truth.” The preacher continued exhort­
ing them to come the following day, to assemble in the Muawyad
Mosque, and to go en masse to the qadi. “Anyone who failed to
turn up would be a sinner,” he said. He went on: “Help the
truth, then God will help you [cf K. 47:7]: How can you be silent
when someone says that saints can perform miracles after their
death?” They answered him that they were with him in every­
things he wanted and then they dispersed.

As for the Pasha, after he had given the order to them, he
sent another order to Ibrahim Abu Shanab and Ghitaz Bey [the
two Mameluke commanders] to inform them of what had hap­
pened. He mentioned that these people, by committing these
impertinent acts, meant to cause another civil war (fitna), that
the case of the preacher was only a pretense, that their flocking
to the court, their humilation of the judge, their beating of his
men, their disrespect in making him ride and come to him at an
untimely hour and their attack on the imperial Diuwan were not
their own deeds and that there was someone who had incited
them. Finally he declared that if they [the army commanders] in­
tended to foment another civil war (fitna), he and the qadi
would go to Istanbul before the Sultan’s and his honour could
be injured.21 When they [the two Mameluke commanders] had
read the order, they were upset and summoned the other san­
diqas [Mameluke beys] and army commanders (aghawat) to
the house of the Chief Treasurer (defterdar). They submitted the
matter to them and agreed to investigate which regiments the
gang following the preacher belonged to, to discharge them
[once this was known], and to send the preacher into exile. They
ordered the commander of the Janissaries to ride out, to arrest
those of them whom he might see, to enter the mosque,
to eject
the students living in the cells (khalawi),22 to interrogate them
and finally to intimidate them and those heretics. Having
reached a decision on these measures, they broke up. The next
day Ali Agha (the commander of the Janissaries) rode out to the
Muawyad Mosque and sent the caussan in. They entered and in­
spected the place but did not find anybody. The preacher had
gone into hiding in the house of one of his followers (Murid),
whereas the others had taken off the shawls (taylasan) they were

wearing on their heads [over their turbans].23 All of them had
fled and evacuated their cells. He then had their cells nailed up
and arrested those who sat and waited for the preacher to come
in order to benefit from his sermons. They were all sent to their
regiments and then some of them were beaten and others were
sent into exile. Then the sedition (fitna) came to an end.
Turban, characteristic of the Turkish ulama. We have no way of ascertaining why our softa and his friends had come to Egypt. What we do know, however, is that the situation for religious students in Turkey was not very bright. The upper strata of the judicial and educational hierarchy was impenetrable for those who did not belong to the right families or had not enough money to bribe their way into them. The ranks of students and lower ulama were swollen with youngsters from rural areas who had fled the misery of the countryside and were in first instance attracted by the austere but secure life of softa with its free daily food rations. However, gradually realizing that they had no social prospects, they became radicalized and often participated in political or religious upheavals.

The situation of the Egyptian students of religion was very different. Except for some positions in the Ottoman religious hierarchy to which usually Turks were appointed by the central government, all religious functions were in principle open to all graduates of the religious schools. For bright boys of simple descent the ulema profession was the only path to social mobility and it is indicative that most of the shuyukh al-Azhar were of peasant stock. These prospects, or rather the fear of spoiling them, kept many an Egyptian student out of mischief. They were certainly much less radical than their Turkish counterparts, and when they participated in demonstrations or revolts they did so together with their teachers, often on behalf of the population in protest against certain measures taken by the ruling groups.

That our Turkish softa was a radical is beyond dispute. His radicalism was of a religious kind and appears in his fierce stance vis-à-vis certain popular Sufi rituals and saint veneration. It is significant that he and his friends had been studying a treatise by Birgili, a popular author well known for strict views on these matters. These attitudes are typical of fundamentalist Islam, by which I mean those trends in Islam that emphasize the transcendence of God versus His imminence, the authenticity of religious experience as based on the revelation (direct and indirect), i.e. Quran and hadith, unity of religious experience, and, finally, the basic equality of all believers in the face of God. As a rule, fundamentalism is action-oriented; it wants to change the world by subjecting it to fundamentalist ideals. Central to fundamentalist thought is the claim that the gate of idjtihad is not entirely closed and the condemnation of saint veneration.

Since I have done so elsewhere I shall not go into the relationships between these issues and the trends just mentioned, except for their relationship with equality, as this is pertinent to our argument.

The link between the rejection of saint veneration and the idea of equality between all believers is not difficult to see. Worshiping holy men not only infringes upon the right of God to be worshiped alone—in fact the most important reason for fundamentalists to be against it—but also gives some people a much higher status than ordinary believers. They are placed, in eternity, between man and God and are believed to possess supernatural powers to which other men can appeal. Now this is in patent conflict with the notion that all believers are equal to God. Although fundamentalists accept the common doctrine that God, as a token of respect to the very pious, may grant them the faculty of miracle working, they usually maintain that this faculty ceases after death and normal order is restored. The relation between the doctrine that the gate of idjtihad is still open and the idea of the equality of believers is more complicated. Orthodox doctrine holds that after the fourth century H., the gate of idjtihad was closed and that, in order to know the sharia, one must follow the opinions of the great founders of the madhhab and those who have elaborated the doctrine within the madhhab after them. This is known as taqlid. The claim that any Muslim with a minimum amount of knowledge has the right to consult the Quran and the Sunna in order to find the prescriptions of the sharia on any specific point, undermines the monopoly of the ulama and saps the carefully formulated chronological hierarchy of absolute mudjitahids, madhhab and fatwa mudjitahids and what other ranks you have.

This basic notion of equality was highly relevant for the situation the softa found himself in. It enabled him to regard himself as the peer of all those established ulama that blocked his entry into the ranks of professors and judges. In our particular case it gave him the audacity to summon the leading Azhar-shaykhs for a discussion on an equal footing.

Despite the fundamentalists' insistence on idjtihad, the number of practical rules on which they differ with established opinion is usually very small. This is also apparent from the issues the softa dealt with in his sermons. Two of them contain nothing new or controversial and are to be found in most books on fiqh of whatever madhab—the prohibition of building cupolas over graves and the
prohibition of burning candles and lamps in tombs and of kissing the floor of the thresholds of these shrines. Controversial are his opinion that saints cannot perform miracles after their death, his claim that neither prophets nor saints can see the Well-Preserved Tablet in Heaven, his view that *dhikr*-sessions with dancing are forbidden (although it seems that a great number of legal authorities are with him here), and finally, his assertion that all *tekkes* must be converted into madrasas.

The Arabic sources mention that the protagonist of our episode was a Turkish student of religion. It is evident, therefore, that we must place his ideas in a Turkish-Ottoman intellectual context. This is corroborated by the names of the *tekkes* he mentions — those of the Gulseniye (a branch of the Khalwatiyya order, singled out here because of its popularity with the Turkish soldiers and the vicinity of its *tekke* to Bab Zuwayla), the Mevleviye, and the Bektasiye. These *tarigarbs* were the most popular ones in the Central Ottoman Empire, but not very prominent in Egypt, where their followers were in the main found among the Turks residing there.

Fleming has already drawn attention to the similarities between our *softa*’s ideas and the movement of the Qadizadililer (also called *Faqiler*, from Ar. *faqih*) in seventeenth-century Istanbul, a movement also inspired by the works of Birgili. It is named after Qadizade Mehmed Efendi (d. 1045/1635-36), a student of Birgili’s son and a preacher notorious for his polemical stance in doctrinal matters and his fierce attacks on *bidas*, especially those connected with Sufism. Among other things he condemned saint veneration, *dhikrs* with music and dancing, a number of collective festive prayers not warranted by the *Sunna*, and expressions of humble respect before notables (like kissing their hands or feet and bowing before them). Apparently these controversial issues occupied the minds of many of his contemporaries and in 1632 a public disputation was held between him and Sivasi Efendi (d. 1049/1639), another renowned preacher and deputy *shaykh* of the Khalwati order. After Qadizade’s death his followers began putting his ideas into practice by disturbing *dhikr*-sessions, closing down or destroying *tekkes* and attempting to prevent musical recitals of laudatory poems on the Prophet. The movement raged for twenty years and was only suppressed in 1656 by the newly appointed grand vizier Mehmed Köprülü. Their program was very similar to our *softa*’s, with one notable exception. They had wanted to demolish the sufi *tekkes* where musical *dhikrs* and dancing had taken place, as in their opinion such buildings had become impure. This point carried such weight with them that in order to cleanse the place, they regarded it necessary to remove all the building materials as well as several inches of the surface soil. This view is probably an exaggerated version of a Hanafite opinion that the mats on which sufi s have danced must be ritually purified before they can be used for prayer again. For our *softa* this point did not seem to be of great consequence. For practical reasons, as Fleming has also noted, he proposed the conversion of these *tekkes* into schools, so that *softas* could more easily finish their studies and find lodgings. This, too, emphasizes his Ottoman background and that he was a foreigner in Egypt, since, as we have seen, there was no “*softa* problem” in Egypt. Interestingly, the Arab contemporary sources do not mention this proposal, probably because they could not make sense of it.

As important as ideology is action in fundamentalist Islam. As I mentioned before, fundamentalists want to change the world and to subject it to their ideals. This aspect is very clear in the *softa*’s preaching. He mentioned a number of practices and customs that have to come to an end and be checked by either the authorities — as representatives of the community of Muslims — or the believers themselves, and appealed to the duty of “commanding what is reputable and forbidding what is disreputable” (*al-amr bi-l-maruf wa-l-nahy an al-munkar*, cf. K. 3:110), which is a collective duty (*fard al-kifaya*) for all Muslims. After several days of haranguing his appeals began to have effect; the crowds that had gathered around him came under his control and assaulted the dervishes holding a *dhikr* at Bab Zuwayla.

The texts tell us that these followers were mostly illiterate Turkish soldiers. There were seven regiments (*ocak*) then stationed in Egypt: Janissaries, Azaban, Cavusan, Muteffarika, and three cavalry (*Ispabiye*) regiments, but probably only the first two of them were involved. The Muteffarika and the cavalry regiments served mainly in the provinces and that the Cavusan had nothing to do with it may be deduced from the fact that although the Janissaries and the Azaban were the normal police troops, the Janissary commander took Cavus soldiers to restore order in the Muayyad Mosque, evidently because he did not want to use Janissaries and Azaban against their regimental comrades.

The sources mention that the band of followers totalled around...
one thousand men. Of course, one has to take such round numbers with a grain of salt, but even if there were, say, seven hundred of them, this would be at least 10 percent of the troops garrisoned in Cairo, and probably more. If we take into account that these soldiers were not known for their orthodox leanings and that Sufism was very popular amongst them, this is a considerable proportion that needs explanation.

In order to understand this sudden outbreak of religious zeal, we have to link it to the internecine struggle between different military factions earlier that year. Certainly, violent quarrels and even large scale fighting were then endemic among the military establishment in Egypt. The Mameluke emirs were divided between hostile factions, the Qasimites and the Fiqarites. Among the Ottoman soldiers, there was a traditional rivalry between the largest regiments, the Janissaries and the Azaban, over the control of financial resources, such as the lucrative rights to protect certain groups of merchants. In the civil war of 1711, however, the lines of division had shifted and split the existing factions and regiments; Janissaries fought Janissaries, Azaban fought Azaban, Cavusan fought Cavusan and the officers of the cavalry regiments stood against their own men. The struggle was fiercer than ever before and the three months of fighting took a heavy toll in human lives, estimated by some at about 4,000 people. For soldiers brought up in the ethos of regimental solidarity, the events must have been unsettling, as they seemed to flout some of their basic values. In these troubled times the soldiers must have been responsive to religious calls implying a break with the past and offering a clear and simple way of salvation.

During the fighting the people of Cairo had attributed the calamity that had befallen them to their own impiety and sinfulness, and these soldiers may have had similar feelings. So, when a preacher showed them a new way of being pious—a departure from their habitual, mystical religiosity or indifference to religion—which, because of its active and practical character appealed to their soldierly temperament, many must have felt attracted to it. And more than attracted; they identified with the movement to the extent that they were willing to risk their lives for it.

As for the dervishes who were chased from Bab Zuwayla, we must be brief. The sources represent them only as the passive objects of the soldiers' punitive action. Frightened away, they did not play a role of their own. The scuffle, however, brought another party on the stage, the Egyptian ulema, who became the softa's intellectual opponents.

As I have mentioned before, there were two groups of ulema in Egypt: a small number of judges who formed part of the Ottoman clerical hierarchy, and the Egyptian ulema, who worked as teachers and occupied the lower positions in the judiciary. As a rule, the first group consisted of Turks who came for a very short term of service to Egypt. Unfamiliar with the vernacular, they depended on the services of interpreters and on their Egyptian deputies who generally did most of the work. There were often severe and prolonged disputes and contentions between these Ottoman dignitaries and the Egyptian ulema. The latter, constituting an indigenous elite, often acted as intermediaries between the population and the alien rulers, or even as the leaders of popular protest movements. If the people had grievances, they would first go to the Egyptian ulema at the Azhar Mosque, the center of higher learning in Cairo. The ulema, however, were no radicals. They had their stake in the existing political system and did not want to overthrow it. By fulfilling the role as intercessors for the people with the Turkish rulers, they actually strengthened the established order and protected it from disintegration. Since this order was essentially legitimized by religion, the ulema corroborated it by showing that Islam was an ideological system that had something to offer to all classes in society and not only to the ruling groups.

So when Turkish soldiers assaulted Egyptian dervishes, it was only natural for the bystanders to go to the Azhar Mosque to have recourse to the ulema. Their response came in the form of a fatwa signed by the most important of them at that time: Ahmad al-Nafrawi, who was then probably the Shaykh al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Khalifi, a prominent Shafiite scholar; Abd al-Diwi, the chief of the Shafiites; and al-Sayyid Ali, a Hanafite shaykh. The three first persons were among the most eminent and popular scholars of their time and their names are frequently mentioned as teachers in the biographies of the ulema of the next generation. The fatwa is a short one and deals only with three issues of which the second is the most crucial.

The first point is a reply to the softa's contention that the faculty of saints to perform miracles ceases after their death, a typically fundamentalist issue. Interestingly, the matter is not touched upon in the
more mainstream works of dogmatics, but this does not prevent the authors of the fatwa to pronounce firmly that this power is not affected by a holy man's death. Had they ruled differently, they would have sapped the theoretical foundations of the cult of saints, which was obviously something they did not want. They condemned the preacher's view as being Mutazilite, which is not very precise, since the Mutazilites denied the possibility of saints performing miracles categorically, both during their lifetime and after their deaths.

The third point is an answer to the softa's claim that all tekkes ought to be converted into madrasas and argues that this is impossible since it would involve changing the stipulations of the founder of the waqf, which is illegal. This argument, however, passes over the real issue raised by the softa: that these tekkes—with their domes built over graves and their Sufi gatherings with music and dance—ought to be demolished or converted into something else because they were illegal and a means toward forbidden actions (the dhikrs).

The second point is the most vital one because it provided the authorities with a legal weapon to take action against him and, were he to persevere in his opinions, to execute him. Although they do not expressly mention so, they probably charged him with having insulted the Prophet by denying that he could see the Well-Preserved Tablet. Actually, this was not essential to his main argument that saints lacked this ability. It would seem that in the fire of his argument he had overstated his case by lumping holy men and prophets together in this respect without sound scriptural argument. Thus he provided his adversaries with a weak spot through which they could attack him without having to deal with the principal issue.

It is clear that the interest of the fatwa lies not so much in its contents, but rather in what it remains silent on: the central issue of the softa's preaching—the unlawfulness of saint veneration and ecstatic Sufi practices. This must have been deliberate, and the question then arises: why did they fail to deal with these issues? There are three answers to this question. The first is that prevailing opinion was on the side of the softa in these matters. Assuming that the ulema wanted to draft a fatwa against him, they would find it hard to disprove his views firmly embedded in orthodox doctrine as most of these were. However, jurists are resourceful and it is not impossible that they could have come up with some refutation, although that would have meant walking on thin ice.

There has to be a second, more cogent answer to this question. I believe it is to be found in the fact that the ulema were of two minds about these phenomena. In spite—or perhaps even because—of their dominantly rural background, many of them must have felt an aversion to these popular, and in their eyes vulgar, religious practices of the lower classes. The contemporary Azhar scholar and poet Hasan al-Badr al-Hidjazi (d. 1131/1719) expressed these feelings in two poems berating saint veneration and the practices of certain Sufi shaykhs. Most ulema must have felt some sympathy for the softa's opinions, although probably not for all their radical consequences. But on the other hand, many of them had their links with Sufism and were members of a tariqah. The fact that Abduh al-Diwi, mentioned as one of the signatories of the fatwa, was a member is expressly mentioned in Djabarti's brief biographical note about him. However, this does not imply that the others were not. These bonds with Sufism may have made many of the ulema more tolerant toward these popular practices. Thus, being divided among themselves, they considered it prudent to remain silent on the matter.

In addition to all this, there was a third consideration why they should pass over the issue. This revolves upon the relationship between the ulema and the population. As I have argued, the ulema were bent on maintaining the all-embracing character of Islam, even if this might to some extent compromise doctrinal purity. Now, any explicit stand in matters of popular religion would involve an outright condemnation of certain customs, and this is exactly what the ulema wanted to avoid so as not to alienate the lower classes. Their position in Egyptian society and their authority vis-à-vis the rulers was in part based on the idea that they represented the indigenous population and on the support in the form of popular movements they could must to sustain this role. Therefore they wanted to maintain a form of symbiosis that was also reflected in a common religious ideology.

The preacher's reaction upon reading the fatwa was vehement. He inveighed against the ulema, calling them heretical unbelievers. This actually implies that they were to be killed for apostacy. He then urged the assembled crowds to follow him to the qadi askar, a man called Rasulzade. He wanted him to summon the signatories of the fatwa to his court in order to hold a public disputation. Convinced of the soundness of his case, he was certain that he would be victo-
rious and that the qadi would take measures against the ulema.

The idea of having recourse to the qadi askar was logical from his point of view, since this official was the highest religious and judicial authority in Egypt and had the power to force the ulema to come to his court. But there was also another consideration that played a role: the fact that the chief judge was a fellow Ottoman-Turk. For in the background of the events there lay an element of ethnic friction which came to the surface when the softa emphasized the ethnic origin of the ulema by calling them depreciatorily “those Arabs (awlad al-Arab).” Since the Egyptians had gone to their ulema, he resorted to the Ottoman religious officials.

Initially the qadi, despite his annoyance, seemed well disposed toward the delegation of fellow Turks that suddenly entered his court. He agreed to summon the ulema and to hear the case and pronounced the fatwa to be unfounded. This had more to do with the animosity existing between the Ottoman and the local ulema than with intimidation. Only gradually did he realize that the crowds outside the court could be dangerous. If he had not expected that they would obey and disperse, he would not have sent his interpreter without any protection to tell them to come back next day. When they gave the interpreter a sound thrashing, the qadi, understanding that events had got out of control, fled into his private apartment.

The following day the preacher, fearing the repercussions of the incident at the qadi’s court, kept a low profile. His supporters, however, suspected that the qadi had a hand in his absence and marched again to the court. When they then coerced him to ride to the Pasha, matters became really serious. The religious issue was overshadowed by considerations of public order. The troops’ unruly behavior and their assault on one of the highest ranking Ottoman officials demanded disciplinary measures to be taken by the military leadership. I shall not elaborate on how and by whom order was restored. Those events would belong to the field of military or institutional history and fall therefore outside the scope of this study that centered on the religious aspects of the events.

In order to understand the significance of the movement we have just dealt with it is essential to realize that, although Cairo provided the scenes of the action and the decors, the movement itself was embedded in Ottoman-Turkish traditions. The preacher’s ideas and actions were rooted in both Turkish softa radicalism and a brand of Turkish fundamentalism that went back, via Birgili Mehmed, to Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Djawziyya. So far little is known about this tradition and it certainly deserves a closer study in order to find out how the essentially Hanbalite ideas of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Djawziyya could survive in Hanafite Ottoman religious culture.

Had the softa preached in Istanbul, his audience certainly would have consisted mainly of his fellow students. In Egypt this was different. The only larger audience that, for reasons of language, did present itself were the Turkish soldiers serving in Cairo. That many of them responded to his call was due, I believe, to a state of mind on their part that was receptive to radical religious messages linked to practical action and had been brought about by the bloody and psychologically unsettling civil war that had ended only a few months earlier. As the movement developed they began dominating the form of action, and the religious controversy that had triggered off the events was more and more overshadowed by the riotous and mutinous behavior that Ottoman soldiers so often displayed toward civil authorities.

As is becoming in a basically Ottoman-Turkish episode, the Egyptian ulema played their part behind the scenes and did not appear on the stage. Their fatwa, however, whose contents and omissions are indicative of the ulema’s position in Egyptian society, had its impact on the course of events in the sense that the signatories replaced the dervishes as objects of the movement’s hostility. Yet, fortunately for them, a confrontation between them and the softa’s supporters did not take place. In the end it was the Ottoman judge and his court personnel that had to bear the brunt of the soldiers’ aggression.

The trend that I have labeled fundamentalism—and that for equally good reasons may be called revivalism—has its roots deep in Islamic history. Over the centuries, fundamentalist opinions have been expressed by Islamic scholars. Time and again, fundamentalist movements of protest arose arguing that religion had become corrupted and that they wanted to purify it by going back to the revealed sources and ridding it of unwarranted accretions. These movements often had a militant and activist character because they wished to change the world and subject it to the values of a pure and unadulterated Islam based on tawhid, the recognition of God’s unity and
uniqueness, and the *sunna*, the ideal standard of behavior set by the Prophet Mohammed.

Because of their militancy and their opposition to the existing order, rife, in their view, with *shirk*, polytheism, and *bidas*, customs contrary to or not authenticated by the Prophet's example, these movements could serve as powerful vehicles of protest, especially in times of social and political crises. Fundamentalist idiom would provide grounds to castigate and assail the religious and political establishments and open vistas of communal salvation in this world once a truly Islamic society had been founded. Fundamentalist movements have emerged all over the Islamic world in various types of societies. Their social carriers also were diverse; in fact, almost any social class or coalition of classes that had cause to oppose the established order could rally behind the banners of fundamentalism.

During the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, there was an upsurge of fundamentalism and numerous fundamentalist movements arose in different regions of the Islamic world. Since, on a world scale, this coincides with an acceleration of European economic, political, and military expansion, it is tempting to hypothesize a causal relationship between the latter and the former phenomena. Wherever fundamentalist movements organized resistance against Western military invasions, this relationship is obvious, although closer inspection reveals that sometimes these movements already existed and flourished before the foreign occupation. In many instances the causal relationship is much more complicated. This is true, for example, for al-Hajj Umar Tal's *jihad* in West Africa which gained momentum by organizing resistance to slave raids by indigenous coastal states for the sake of Western slave trade, and for the Padri Movement in Central Sumatra, which was connected with the growth of indigenous trade as a result of Western commercial expansion and for which the fundamentalist program was meaningful since an increased Islamization of society would create better conditions for traders. Often, however, like in the cases of the Wahhabi movement or the Fulani *jihad*, it is difficult if not impossible to establish a relationship with Western expansion.

It will be evident that the episode analyzed in this chapter belongs to the last category. It is true that Egypt had, to some extent, been affected by the shift in trade routes due to the rise of Western commercial capitalism. Yet, it is impossible to relate the events I have mentioned to these economic changes. It would appear that our movement—which began as a form of protest of a very small group of Turkish religious students and then became the expression of the unsettled psychological mood of Turkish soldiers in Egypt—is unique with regard to its setting (few, if any, fundamentalist movements arose in big cities) and its social carriers. It is linked only to apparently similar movements because of the employment of the same fundamentalist idiom. This chapter shows once more that behind the uniform ideological facade of Islamic fundamentalism, very disparate social and political movements are hidden.

Notes


4. See Flemming, "Die Vorwahhabitische.


8. This point is only mentioned by Ibn al-Hallaq.
9. This point is only mentioned by Ibn al-Hallaq.
10. Ibn al-Hallaq. The other sources only mention that the preacher incited his audience against the dervishes holding dhikrs near Bab Zuwayla.
11. According to al-Mallawani they only frightened them.
12. These must be the iron cannon balls that are still visible on the outside of the wall. These balls were probably regarded as amulets to protect the gate against attacks. The practice seems to have existed also in other Ottoman towns. Cf.: E. W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, edited by M. M. Hasluck, 2 vols. (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1929), I, 203; Peter W. Schienerl, “Eisen als Kampfmittel gegen Damonen: Manifestationen des Glaubens an seine magische Kraft im Islamischen Amulettwesen,” *Anthropos* 75 (1980): 504. I am grateful to Dr. Schienerl for explaining to me the significance of these balls and drawing my attention to the aforementioned references.
14. This point is only mentioned by Ibn al-Hallaq.
15. Al-Mallawani. Ahmad Shalabi calls him *Shaykh al Islam*, but from the rest of the story it is clear that he meant the *qadi askar*. Contrary to the Ottoman capital, where the title was reserved for the grand *mutfi*, the honorific *shaykh al-Islam* could be given in Egypt to any religious scholar of great importance. Cf.: Ahmad Shalabi, 310, where both the *qadi askar* and the *shaykh al-Azhar* are given this title.
16. The last phrase is from Ibn al-Hallaq.
19. Al-Mallawani and Ibn al-Hallaq both have *buyuwrusidi*, which is the more correct term. However, it has become customary to use the term *firman*, officially reserved for decrees with the *tugra* of the sultan and for decrees of the government of Egypt. Cf.: Huseyn Efendi, *Ottoman Egypt in the Age of the French Revolution*. Trans. from the original Arabic by Stanford J. Shaw. (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Middle Eastern Studies/Harvard University Press, 1964), 115.


41. Naima, VI, p. 235.

42. Al-Khadimi, *al-Bariqa il-Mahmudiyya*, IV, p. 137.

43. Huseyn Efendi/Shaw, pp. 82–94.

44. According to Dr. Layla Abd al-Latif Ahmad (as quoted by Daniel Crecelius, *The Roots of Modern Egypt: A study of the Regimes of Ali Bey al-Kabir and Muhammad Bey Abu Dhabab*, 1760–1775 [Minneapolis etc.: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1981], 21) the total strength of the Janissaries and Asaban in Egypt numbered 8,500 in 1710. Part of these served in the provincial towns and further we have to take into consideration the heavy toll of lives that the revolt of 1711—which ended only four months earlier—had taken. It is improbable that the regiments had already been brought to their original strength. Taking these factors into account, my estimate is that their numbers in Cairo cannot have been more than 7,000 and were probably much less.