Jemen-Report
Mitteilungen der Deutsch-Jemenitischen Gesellschaft e.V.

Jemenitische Behörden
Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe
Jemen in München
Friends of Soqotra
Salafis in Yemen
The Salafis in Yemen at a Crossroads
An obituary of Shaykh Muqbil al-Wadi’i of Dammaj (d. 1422 / 2001)

Introduction

On July 21, 2001 Shaykh Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman Muqbil b. Hadi al-Wadi’i died in Jidda, Saudi Arabia, having suffered for some years from cirrhosis of the liver. Earlier in the year he traveled to the United States to undergo treatment involving a liver transplant. Not finding a compatible liver, Muqbil decided to return to Saudi Arabia to perform the pilgrimage and await his fate, stating to his followers: “My brothers, for me return to the US and death amount to the same thing.”

Associated with the successful spread of Salafi Islam in Yemen since the early 1980s, Muqbil was known by the honorary title of “Muhaddith al-Yaman.” He was the supreme leader of the Salafi movement and had students and followers throughout the Muslim world, especially in Indonesia.1 Venerated by followers of the more historically rooted sects of Islam in Yemen, such as the Zaydis, Shafi’is and Sufis, Muqbil was able to spread centers of Salafi learning throughout Yemen. In addition, he and his followers played an instrumental role in defeating the Communists who ruled the former PDRY. Muqbil’s death marks a watershed for political Islam in Yemen and it remains unclear what the fate of his movement will be. The situation for the Salafis is particularly acute at present since some of them are accused of having close links to Usama Bin Laden and to be part of the al-Qa’ida organization; Yemeni security forces have recently attacked the Salafi center at Ma’rib, the one headed by Abu al-Hasan al-Misri, a prominent student of Muqbil’s.2

This study will take the form of an obituary of Muqbil al-Wadi’i and through this recount the history and doctrines of the Salafiyya in Yemen from the late 1970s and until the present day. The religious polemics the Salafis have engaged in will be highlighted. Finally, it will be argued that the official political climate in Yemen in the last few years appears to have shifted in favour of the opponents of the Salafiyya, those historically-rooted Islamic groups, namely the Zaydis, the Sufis and the Shafi’is. This is because the utility of the Salafiyya to the regime in Sana’a has been exhausted after the defeat of the Socialists in the South. Another reason may be that in the present climate of Saudi-Yemeni rapprochement, the Yemeni Salafis represent an irritant for further improvement of the relationship because a good number have been openly critical since the 1990 Gulf War of the Saudi regime.

The sources for this article are the books and articles of the Salafiyya, in particular Muqbil’s autobiography and last will and testament as well as recorded interviews and sermons. In addition, I have researched written materials by the opponents of the Salafiyya as well as conducted interviews with them. This article is also in part based on fieldwork that was conducted throughout the 1990s and more recently in the summer of 2001.

Shaykh Muqbil’s biography

Muqbil left a large corpus of published works and gave a number of interviews to the press. We therefore have a clear picture of his life, ideas and teachings. He was born in the late 1920s into the tribe of Wadi’a of the Bakil tribal confederation and that is centered on the Wadi Dammaj region east of Sada, the most important Zaydi city and centre in northern Yemen. As a child, Muqbil attended a traditional elementary school (maktab) where he learned the Qur’an and the basics of reading and writing. After completing the maktab curriculum, Muqbil wanted to continue his studies and tried to study in the Great Mosque of al-Hadi Yahya b. al-Husayn in Sada.3 He claims that he was hindered in this by the fanatical Zaydi sayyids and was discriminated against because of his tribal origins. As a result, Muqbil left Yemen for “The Land of the Two Holy Sanctuaries” (Arḍ al-Haramayn) and here he worked as a security guard in Mecca.

While in Saudi, Muqbil became exposed to Salafi ideas and writings; he read voraciously the hadith collections and decided that what he had learned in Yemen was simply not true Islam. Among the works he read was a Wahhabi work entitled Fath al-majid sharekh Kitiib at-tawhid by ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Hasan Al-Shaykh. After some time, Muqbil returned to Yemen and began to criticize the beliefs and practices of the people of his region, stating that these were contrary to Islam. He was severely rebuked by his elders and it was arranged for him to re-enter the Mosque of al-Hadi to study and “to rid him of his erroneous beliefs (shahadat).” He acquiesced to this and pretended to be a Zaydi, praying in their fashion for example, while hiding his true beliefs.

With the outbreak of the 1962 republican revolution, Muqbil left Yemen for Saudi Arabia and only returned home to settle permanently in 1979. During these two decades abroad, he studied in Najran, Mecca and finally at the Islamic University in Medina from which he received several degrees and where he attended the study circles of such eminent shaykhs as the late Nasir al-Din al-Albani and the late Ibn Baz, the head mufti of Saudi Arabia. In 1979, however, Muqbil was arrested by the Saudi authorities who accused him of being implicated in the uprising that was led by Juhayman al-‘Utaybi at the Meccan sanctuary. He languished in prison for several months and denied all involvement with Juhayman’s cause but was later expelled from Saudi Arabia to his native land. Soon after returning to his village, Dammaj, Muqbil established his teaching center, Madrasat Dar al-Hadith al-Khayriyya, that has since become one of the leading centers of Salafi teaching and propaganda in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Dar al-Hadith

The Dar al-Hadith has 600 – 700 students at any given time and Muqbil claims that several tens of thousands have studied there since the early 1980s. The curriculum stresses in particular the study of the hadith collections, mainly the Sahih of Bukhari and Muslim, and in matters pertaining to the Qur’an, students study the Tajfsir of Ibn Kathir. In his autobiograpy, Muqbil singles out 234 of his students, many of whom have followed his example to establish their own “teaching centers” (marakiz ‘ilm), often in their places of origin, and from which they propagate the da’wa or “call” to Salafi Islam. He honours these students with such epithets as Asal al-Sunnah (Lion of the Sunnah), Sunni sabiib (Untyingield Sunni), Shia ir al-da’wa (Poet of the Movement), Khatib Al al-Sunnah (Preacher of the Ahl al-Sunnah). Several features are worth noting on this list. First, the students are from all the regions of Yemen and from further afield, the wider Arab, Muslim and western worlds. Among the
nations represented are: Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Indonesia, as well as Belgium, the US and the UK. Second, Muqbil makes a point that a number of the Yemeni students have returned to their places of origin and have set up teaching centers from which they continue to propagate the da'wa. Third, a number of the students are singled out by Muqbil for having edited treatises, mainly by the noted 18th century Yemeni jurist Muhammad al-Shawkani (d. 1834). In their writings and through their choice of manuscripts to edit, Muqbil and his students claim to adhere to the same tradition as that of the pre-modern Salafi-Yemeni jurists who became prominent in the 18th century. One of Muqbil’s most prominent students, Aql al-Maqtari, explained that “this linkage with the Yemeni jurists is a conscious tactic aimed at presenting Salafism as an indigenous Islamic tradition to Yemenis and in so doing attracting the greatest number of followers.”

The example Muqbil set by establishing a teaching center in his native tribal region has been replicated successfully by his students time and again. His tribe Wadi’a provided him with protection against his ideological enemies. In his writings, Muqbil continually praises Wadi’a for defending him against his foes, especially the Zaydis who have traditionally dominated the region of Sa’d. To illustrate this, Muqbil tells us of an incident that took place in al-Hadhi’s mosque in the mid-1970s. This occurred on one of Muqbil’s visits back to Yemen when he entered al-Hadhi’s mosque and began preaching Salafism. The Zaydis, he says, reacted to this violently, wishing to kill him and he narrowly escaped because his tribesmen came to his defense. This tribal protection has since the early 1980s permitted his movement to propagate its teachings in relative security and autonomy, especially from the central government in San'a. Muqbil has this to say about Wadi’a:

“I praise God because the majority of Wadi’a, who live in proximity of Sa’d, defend me and the movement. Some do this for the sake of religion, others do it because of tribal solidarity. Were it not for God and then them [i.e., Wadi’a] the enemies of our movement, especially the Shites of Sa’d, would have annihilated us.”

Spreading the message

Muqbil has set about spreading his teachings by pursuing three distinct activities all of which he says are important in affecting the change he desires. His aim is to convince all Yemenis of becoming Salafis and to abandon their inherited beliefs, whether Zaydi, Shafi’i or Isma’ili. His activities in order of importance are:

- teaching (al-ta’lim);
- preaching (al-khitaba);
- writing and publishing (al-kitaba).

Muqbil has undoubtedly had considerable success, especially among a younger generation of Yemenis. An example of this can be gleaned from an encounter I had with a tribesman from Khawlan ‘Amir, a tribe adjacent to Wadi’a and that traditionally is counted as being solidly in the Zaydi camp. The man I met was in his early twenties and was reasonably conversant in matters of religion and law, reciting verses of Qur’an and hadith by heart to bolster relevant points he was making in conversation. He had studied briefly in Dar al-Hadith and admitted, in aushed tone, that he admired Muqbil and believed in his teachings. He said, however, that his father, who was sitting in the same room, was not in favour of Muqbil. His father, a man in his fifties perhaps, was Zaydi by inclination and sentiment. The young man continued to say that one of Khawlan ‘Amir’s powerful sheikhs, Shafi’i Fazir Bishar, was very much in favor of Muqbil.

Muqbil often went out on trips throughout Yemen to preach his teachings and to spend time at the various centers his students have established. He has also written over forty published works, some several volumes in length. These are listed in his autobiography and fall into several categories:

1. hadith studies and compilations, e.g. al-Jami’ al-sahih min mana layya fi al-sahihayn;
2. creedal works, e.g., al-Mukraj min al-fima;
4. works condemning aspects of popular culture, e.g., hadiths enunciating from the West, e.g., satellite TV and wrestling (al-musara’ a);
5. transcripts of sermons and compilation of fatwas he has given.

Salafi teachings

Salafis believe that the Muslim world is in a state of crisis and in desperate need of reform by returning to the true sources and principles of Islamic belief and practice. The crisis has been brought about by Muslims having deviated from the sources of revelation: the Qur’an and the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. This distancing from God’s revelation is a consequence of the adoption by Muslims of reprehensible innovations (sing. bid’a), such as the blind imitation of the opinions of jurists without knowing the revealed texts on which these are based, a practice known as taqlid. Other adopted innovations of more recent vintage are the western concepts of democracy, equality of the sexes, human rights, secularism etc. Salafis have an obsession with avoiding reprehensible innovations. This is summed up in an oft-repeated statement: “The most evil matter is novelty, and every novelty is an innovation, and
every innovation is an error, and every error leads to hellfire’ (shahr al-‘anma muhbatathuha, wa kull muhbatathuha bid’u, wa kull bid’u daalata, wa kull daalata fi ‘I-mur). In order to awaken the Muslim community (umma) from its slumber, Salafis advocate a radical reorientation, in belief and practice, back to the Qur’an and the Sunna. Only a Salafi interpretation of these, which they claim to be literal and therefore consistent with the true meaning of the texts, is to be accepted and followed. One of the assertions of the Salafis is that their Islam is that of the Prophet and his Companions, the Salaf al-Salih (Venerable Forefathers), whence the etymology of their name. Salafis state that all Muslims who disagree with them are deviants, practitioners and believers in innovations. All Shi’is as well as Sufis and followers of the established Sunni schools of law (e.g., Shafi‘is, Hanafis) are innovators and deviants. An instance of this is when Muqbil states that the Isma‘ilis (a Shi‘ite sect), whom he calls pejoratively Makramis, have misled Muslims into their false beliefs through their claim of loving the Prophet’s family.10 Zaydis receive similar treatment and are called innovators (mubaddi‘a) and Shi‘ite extremists (ghalat al-Shi‘a, al-ra-jhi). In his autobiography, Muqbil has a chapter on the Salafi creed. I have summarized this in eighteen points that will provide a fuller sense of his beliefs and political agenda. These are: 1. Belief in one God based on a literal understanding of the texts of the Quran and hadiths. 2. Invoking the dead constitutes polytheism (shirk).13 3. No allegorical interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunna is allowed unless an explicit indicator (dallil) allows for it in specific cases. 4. Belief in the visio beatifica, the intercessory powers of the Prophet on the Day of Judgement, and that all the believers in the Oneness of God (muwahhidun) will not dwell eternally in hell. 5. Love for the Companions of the Prophet and hatred for those who speak ill of them; love for the Family of the Prophet within the limits of the law (isbaabah shar’iyyan) and avoiding the excesses of the Shi‘is. Any slander or calumniation of the Companions constitutes an attack on religion. 6. Love for the Ahl al-Hadith and all the ancestors of the Ahl al-Sunna. 7. Hated of theology (‘ilm al-kalam), the source of most divisions among Muslims. 8. No blind adherence to or acceptance of the works of law (fiqh), Qur’an exegesis (tafsir) and the Prophet’s biography (sira) in matters pertaining to the issuance of legal opinions and judgments. In matters of fiqh, reliance is to be on the books of the Sunna, such as the Sunan of Abu Da‘ud which states: ‘God sends to this community at the head of every century one who will renew its religion.’ We hope that the present Islamic awakening (al-yaqqa al-Islamiyya) is in preparation for his arrival.

The Declared enemies of the Salafis

The points above make it clear that Muqbil was actively engaged on the Yemeni political stage and religious scene. His followers played a critical role from 1990 till 1994 in deeming the Socialist party and declaring its members infidels who should be fought. During the civil war of 1994, Salafis and other Islamists were active on the battle fronts against the Southern forces and some claim that they played a decisive role in the latter’s defeat. Other groups who have been declared to be enemies and have been targeted by the Salafis are the various nationalist political parties and the different traditional Islamic sects of Yemen. In a statement issued after the defeat of the Socialists, Muqbil lists his enemies clearly when he says:

"The enemies of our movement in past times were the Communists, the Ba‘thists, the Nasserists; today, one needs to add to these Muslims who pray and fast but who remain ignorant. These [Muslims] oppose all that they perceive to contradict their ancient customs. They are encouraged in this by the enemies of Islam, among the Communists, Ba‘thists, Nasserists and those praying Rufidis [i.e., Zaydis]. The predictions of such people is known to us from ancient times. And among these are the Sufis, some ignoramuses among the Muslim Brothers and also the fanatical adherents of the schools of law (muwahhidun) who practice blind imitation (taqlid)..."
The Salafis in decline

The Zaydis have responded vigorously to the Salafis as have the Muslim Brothers. This has often taken the form of sermons that circulate on cassette as well as newspaper articles and short published treatises. The enemies of the Salafis target them with polemics, accusing them of being Wahhabi extremists, of being sympa- thists of the Saudi regime and of pervern- ing Islam in their insistence on an absolutely literal interpretation of the sources. The most serious threat to the Salafi movement, however, has risen from within the form of a split dating to the mid-1990s. Though the exact etiology of this rift remains unclear, it is certain that a number of Mubq'1's students have parted ways with their teacher on matters of doctrine and politics. The most prominent students to have done this is Qa'il al- Maqtabi who is based in Ta'izz. Mubq'1's followers accuse al-Maqtabi of having become a "Surusi" and therefore a di- viant innovator worse than all others because of having known the truth while still inside the movement. 

Some are followers of Muhammad Ibn Surur, a scholar who was based in Kuwait until the 1990 Gulf War and is now residing in the United Kingdom from where he publishes two journals entitled respectively al-Sunna and al- Bayan. Ibn Surur is a breakaway Salafi who criticized the top Salafi scholars, most notably al-Din al-Albani and Ibn Baz, for remaining loyal to the Saud- i regime after the arrival of US troops in the Kingdom as a consequence of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Mubq'1 has in- veighed against Ibn Surur, accusing him of practising takfir, i.e., declaring fellow Muslims to be infidels, and therefore to have abandoned the true faith. This cleavage among the Yemeni Sala- fis reflects a wider rupture within the worldwide Salafi movement; its resolution will depend on how the Salafis out- side Yemen, and in particular those in Saudi Arabia, resolve their differences. It is not clear how influential or numerically significant the Surusis are at present in Yemen. It is clear, however, that they have dented the movement and that the Yemeni government has taken note of the split within Salafi ranks.

A further blow to the Salafis has been the passing away of Mubq'1 in July 2001. The loss of a charismatic leader for a tight-knit religious community may prove fateful. In addition, Mubq'1's last will and testament may have sown the seeds of the movement's demise insofar as it lists two persons to succeed him in his different capacities. The supreme leader of the movement is to be his stu- dent Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab al- Wusabi, while the person to take over his teaching centre at Dammaq is to be another student, Yahya ibn 'Ali al- Hajuri. Competition over the Mubq'1's mantle is now being agitated, further dividing the movement.

Finally, and as was mentioned earlier, it appears that some Salafis are associat- ed with Usama bin Laden's al-Qa'ida organization and the government in Sana'a has decided recently to destroy Bin Laden's tentacles in Yemen. In addition, an observable shift has occurred over the last few years in Sana'a's policies towards the traditional religious communities in the country, e.g., the Zay- dis, Shaf'ites and Isma'ilis. President Saud- i appears to be courting and even co-op- erating elements within these religious communities. For all these reasons, it appears that the winds that had blown so favourably for the Salafis since the early 1980s are changing direction now in fa- vour of others. This will lead inexorably to a change in the religious dynamics within Yemeni society.

Shaykh Mubq'1 has a favor in legitimizing the jih- ad in Malaya, Indonesia. This appears to be an important element in the legitimation of the ji- had for the Laskar Jihad, the group spearheading the war against the Christians on the islands. See: http://www.laskarjihad.or.id/english/press/ fawzi-09emy22.htm.


3 This is the mosque of the first Zaydi imam in Yemen who died in 911 CE.

4 In his written works and sermons Mubq'1 has consistently referred to Saudi Arabia by this name, thereby displaying a degree of antagon- ism towards the House of Saud. As we shall see, he dramatically reversed his stance vis-a- vis the Saudis in the last months of his life.

5 At Mubq'1's request, he has been buried next to Ibn Baz grave.

6 Poetry, as an idiom of communication, plays a major role among the Salafis. Their writings are full of poems, mainly panegyrics of the da' wa or a certain teacher or leader.

7 Mr. John Walker, who is presently being prose- cuted by U.S. authorities for involvement with al-Qa'ida, had studied in Mubq'1's course in Ye- man before leaving for the jihad in Afghanistan.

8 These centres are located invariably near a mos- que and a bookshop in which one can find all the writings of Shaykh Mubq'1 and other prominent Salafis.


10 Interview held in Ta'izz in October 1994.

11 Mubq'1 al-Wad'i', 1999, Taqsimat Abi 'Abd al- Ruhman Mubq'1, Hadith al-Wad'i', Sana'a: Matbatat Sun' al-Adhariyya, p. 18.

12 Mubq'1 al-Wad'i', 1999, p. 131.

13 See the photographs of the destruction of tombs in Sana'a as well as Aden that was done by the Salafis in 1994.


Haykel has written a number of articles on Islamic movements in Yemen and Saud- i Arabia, namely in the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Fellowships/Awards: Member of the School of Historical Studies, Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton (2000-01); Prize Fellow, Magdalen College, Oxford (1995-97); Fulbright award (Yemen 1992-93). Research interests: Islamic political mo- vements and Islamic political and legal thought (particularly in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and South Asia).