A Zaydi Revival?

Last October I visited Yemen and heard that a Zaydi revival movement was making itself felt in the country, especially in the areas in and around Sa'da. I had suspected this fact for quite a while now because I had seen as early as 1991 in some of Sa'nd's bookshops many Zaydi pamphlets and booklets, some consisting of treatises on 'usul al-fiqh and others, of a more polemical nature, presenting the Zaydi case against such opponents as the Wahhabis and the Salafis on issues of ritual practice, theology and politics. So I decided to head north and see for myself what this movement was all about. Before leaving, however, I read many of these pamphlets so that the names and issues which cropped up would become familiar to me.

It seemed from my reading that the leading ulema of this movement have been Badr al-Din al-Huthi, who wrote as early as 1979 a rebuttal of Ibn Bazz's fatwa prohibiting prayer behind a Zaydi imam. Other names that cropped up were those of Majd al-Din al-Mu'ayyid, the famous Zaydi scholar living close to Sa'da and a new name on the Zaydi scene, that of Muhammad Yahya Salim Tzaz. The main issue of concern in all of these works was the preservation of the Zaydi-Yemeni heritage from extinction because of the onslaught of the proselytizing Wahhabi movement in such traditional Zaydi provinces as Sa'da and the Jawf combined with neglect and opposition to Zaydi concerns and issues by the government in Sa'nd.1 Judging by the number of booklets and pamphlets he had written or edited, it seemed to me that by far the most active member among the Zaydi scholars was Muhammad Tzazan, so it was to meet him that I travelled to Sa'da to find out more about Zaydiism in Yemen today.

Tzazan is a young man in his late twenties, and is not of sayyid descent. He was originally from Rasaz but now lives in Sa'da's suburbs. A student of the great Zaydi ulema of Sa'da, like Majd al-Din al-Mu'ayyid, Tzazan now teaches next to his home all the traditional Islamic sciences including 'ilm al-halâm and, of course, Zaydi figh. He is also extremely active in editing and publishing Zaydi works, and has thus far edited at least nine pamphlets ranging from matters of invocation (du'a') to those relating to prayer postures in accordance with Zaydi authorities by way of works by Zaydi imams such as al-Qasim b. Ibrahim al-Rasat and al-Qasim b. Muhammad (al-Kabir, the founder of the Qasimi dynasty). Tzazan has also edited major Zaydi works like al-Falak al-dawwar by Sariim al-Din Ibrahim b.

Muhammad al-Wazir in the hadith sciences and, more importantly for the contemporary Zaydi scene, a work entitled al-Ghitamam al-zakhhâr by Muhammad b. Sa'di al-Sanawi (d. 1825) but known to all as Ibn Hariwa.

This last work lies squarely within the debates between the Zaydis and the Wahhabis and other Sunna-oriented scholars and activists hostile to Zaydism, and particularly its Yemeni followers, namely the Hadawis (the followers of the legal school of al-Hadi ilâ al-Haqq Yahya b. al-Husayn, the founder of the Zaydi Imams in Yemen). Ibn Hariwa was a Zaydi-Hadawi scholar who had attacked Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Shawkani (d. 1834), probably the most famous of all the Sunna-oriented Yemeni scholars and who is upheld by all Wahhabis and Salafis as one of the great revolutionists of Sunni Islam of his time. As a result of his attack on Shawkani and al-Mahdi 'Abd Allâh, the imam of his day, Ibn Hariwa was executed and has thus become a martyr for the Zaydi cause. For this reason, Zaydis like Tzazan are keen to publish his works in their attempt to rebut what they see as continuing attacks against Zaydi thought and history. Ibn Hariwa's name also adorns a teachers' institute in Sa'da where Tzazan and like-minded scholars are active in spreading Zaydi thought.

Like the so-called Scientific Institutes (al-maahid al-ilmiyya) which are dominated by the Islamists of the Islah party, and where a Sunni brand of Islam is taught, the Zaydis have set up their own institutions called the Scientific Schools (al-madaris al-ilmiyya). For the curriculum of these madaris, new textbooks have been penned reflecting the Zaydi bent of the education they provide. The books were being distributed during my stay, and one of these was an abridgement by Sayyid Ahmad al-Shami of Kitab al-Azhur, the standard Zaydi legal text; he is the president of Hizb al-Haqq and a notable Zaydi scholar in his own right.

The curriculum of the Zaydi madaris, I was told, is divided into three stages and covers all the Islamic sciences: grammar, fiqh, 'ilm al-halam, et al. It would seem that this is the first attempt in Zaydi history to formalize the educational process into a set curriculum with standard text books. These schools are apparently spread throughout the highlands: Sa'da, Jawf, Dhamar, San'and Mahabasha. In addition to these pedagogical reforms, Tzazan told me that a Club of Young Believers (Muntada al-Shabab al-Mum'in) was founded and ran summer educational activities where young boys and men would study the Islamic sciences in accordance with Zaydi precepts. It would seem that 12,000 students had participated in the summer of 1994 throughout the highlands in these summer activities.

The general tone of the Zaydias I met in Sa'da was
defensive, and all felt they had to support the educational activities outlined above in order to preserve Zaydism from the Wahhabi-Salafi onslaught and a continuing government policy of neglect and, at times, active persecution. On no issue was the Wahhabi onslaught more heartfelt among the Zaydis than over the matter of Zaydi tombs. Muqmil al-Wādī, who is generally regarded as the Salafi ideologue par excellence in Yemen, lives in Dammaj among the Wādī’s tribe of Hamdān just outside Sa’da — a bit too close for comfort for the Zaydis. While Wādī openly declares his intention of destroying the tombs of the Zaydi Imams and their domes in Sa’da, I was told that, in the meantime, his scythes were destroying many of the grave stones in the cemeteries just beyond Sa’da’s city wall. I went to see for myself, and effectively most had been broken into pieces which were strewn all over the place. I was told the Salafis came in the middle of the night to do this but none had been caught and punished.

Despite their feelings of marginalization and of somehow being left behind by the train of history, the Zaydis are trying to put up a spirited fight lest they be forgotten. It is, however, the younger and more energetic members, like Tazzān, who are most active since many of the older generations are not willing to engage fully with them. The reason for this is that the community is not immune from factionalism, with some of the older members apparently maintaining a strict understanding of Zaydism and refusing to participate fully in a less than ideal environment.

Refusing any accommodation with the present status quo in Yemen which they regard as corrupt, some of the diehard Zaydis have opted to migrate from cities like Sa’da in order to create their own hijra, in this case hamlets consisting of little more than a couple of homes in the tribal areas of Sa’da province. One such Zaydi is Sayyid ‘Abd Allah b. Yahyā al-Hāthi who has set up a hijra just outside Sa’da in a place called Takhya. He told me he did this because towns like Sa’da are polluting and full of corruption. It was with the help of local tribesmen, who gave him the land and helped out with the orchards and the digging of the well, that he has managed to accomplish his hijra: a small haven of the Zaydi ideal in a world that has become hostile.

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1 The most lucid account of this Zaydi concern can be found in a little booklet by Muhammad al-Sa’idi, Ša’da li-mādhāri, Beirut: Dār al- Baṣāir, n.d.)