

7-4-2016

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Scholarly Commons Citation

Hamdeh, E. (2016). The Formative Years of an Iconoclastic Salafi Scholar. *The Muslim World*, 106(3).
<https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12157>

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The Formative Years of an Iconoclastic Salafi Scholar

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Despite his great influence on modern Salafism and Islamic studies, relatively few works focus on the life of Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999), a scholar whose life and brand of Salafism are marked by controversy and stand in stark contrast to madhhab Traditionalism. This article provides a translation of one of his autobiographical interviews. I shed light on the biographical details of Albānī's formative years, namely his sour relationship with his father, quarrels with the Albanian community in Syria, and his controversial professorship at the University of Medina. Among the arguments I make is that Albānī created an image of himself as an unchanging scholar in order to remain consistent in his claim to follow the absolute truth.

Introduction

In 1999, the Salafi world went into mourning with the news of Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī passing.¹ Considered one of the century's most controversial Muslim scholars, this towering figure in Salafi circles is often considered to be the greatest ḥadīth scholar of his time (*muḥaddith al-‘aṣr*) due to the popularity of his writings, articulation of the problems faced by the Muslim community, and his proposed solutions. Despite Albānī's prestige among Salafis, *madhhab* Traditionalists despise him for his controversial attempts to “clean up” *fiqh* and reexamine the ḥadīth corpus.

¹ On Albānī see K. Amin, “Nāṣiruddīn al-Albānī on Muslim's Ṣaḥīḥ: A Critical Study of His Method,” *Islamic Law and Society* (2004), 149–176. S. Lacroix, “Between Revolution and Apoliticism: Nasir al-Din al-Albani and His Impact on the Shaping of Contemporary Salafism,” in *Global Salafism*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 58-80.

A watch-repairer by profession, Albānī was a self-made ḥadīth expert who attempted to reexamine the canonical ḥadīth corpus. He compensated for his lack of a formal Islamic education by studying on his own, mainly in the Zāhiriyya library in Damascus, to which he was eventually given his own key. In his capacity as a scholar and a religious leader Albānī attempted to purge Islam both at the scholarly level and also among the general Muslim masses. A prolific scholar, he wrote 217 books on various topics such as ḥadīth, *fiqh*, and creed.² Some of his most famous works are *Silsilat al-Aḥādīth al-Ḍaʿīfa wa l-Mawḍūʿa wa Atharuhā al-Sayyiʿ fi l-Umma*,³ *Ṣifat Ṣalāt al-Nabī*,⁴ *Al-Tawassul Anwāʿuhu wa Aḥkāmuhu*,⁵ *Sharḥ al-ʿAqīda al-Taḥāwiyya*,⁶ and *Taḥdhīr al-Aʿjīd min Itikhādh al-Qubūr Masājīd*.⁷ The large amount of audio lectures his students have recorded and propagated indicates that he equally spent a great deal of time preaching his message as he did writing about it.⁸

Albānī was the century's most ardent propagator of Salafism and is perhaps the best known Salafī among non-Salafīs due to his scripturally charged and heated debates with many *madhhab* Traditionalists. These disputes were not limited to scholarly circles, but large numbers of students and religious activists served as audiences. By the 1990s, Albānī's followers had grown to such a point that they actually competed in size, number, and influence with Jordan's largest Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood. They were a force to be reckoned with in mosques, public gatherings, and educational institutions.⁹

² For a list of Albānī's published and unpublished works see A. ʿAwda, *Ṣafahāt bayḍāʿ min ḥayāt al-imām Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī* (Al-Sanaʿa: Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, 2001), 64-92.

³ (Riyadh: Maktbat al-Maʿārif), 1992.

⁴ (Riyadh: Maktbat al-Maʿārif), 1996.

⁵ (Riyadh: Maktbat al-Maʿārif), 2001.

⁶ (Riyadh: Maktbat al-Maʿārif), 1984.

⁷ (Riyadh: Maktbat al-Maʿārif), 2001.

⁸ For example, Albānī lecture series "Al-Hudā wa l-Nūr" consists of 901 lectures, all of which were recorded and distributed by his students. See <http://www.alalbany.net>.

⁹ M. Abu Rumman and H. Abu Hanieh, *Conservative Salafism: A Strategy for the "Islamization of Society" and an Ambiguous Relationship with the State* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2010), 46.

Many Salafis see this influential Islamic figure as *the* representative of an authentic and scriptural-based Islam. They consider his social, political, and religious stances to be based on solid scriptural proof-texts. To these Salafis Albānī is a *mujaddid* who has arrived to return Islam to its authentic roots, mainly the path of the Muslim forefathers. Others, however, view him as a thinker who has gone astray (*mubtadi*) due to his bypassing of the *madhhab* institutions and dismissing centuries of scholarly tradition. The crux of his message promotes a literalistic understanding of authoritative scriptures focused on secondary ritualistic aspects of Islamic law. He spent his career trying to establish the “correct” and “pure” versions of Islamic law and was not primarily concerned with political, social, or economic justice.

He considers reliance on the *madhhabs* and a lack of close adherence to the apparent meanings of scripture as the reasons for the Muslim world’s decline. His critics, like Muḥammad Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (d. 2013), consider that Muslims cannot formulate a proper methodology for comprehending and developing “the essence of Islam” if they do not move beyond a merely literal understanding of proof-texts. In other words, the problem is Albānī’s inability to distinguish between eternal and unalterable texts and texts that were formulated to meet a temporary need, an existing custom or tradition, or certain circumstances that can be changed when those particular circumstances change.¹⁰

Albānī’s Image Creation

Since Albānī was an autodidactic he did not have a school of law or an educational history that provided him religious authority. Therefore, it was essential for him to create an image of himself that stood in stark contract to the image of his detractors. He portrayed his opponents as blind followers of fallible legal institutions and created an image of himself as an

¹⁰ A. Christmann, “Islamic Scholar and Religious Leader: A Portrait of Shaykh Muḥammad Sa‘īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* (1998), 149-169: 162-163.

unaffiliated scholar who chose to break free from the *madhhabs* and follow the Prophet directly. Albānī's critics believe that the epistemological worldview he introduced ignored the contextual understanding of the reasons, circumstances, events, and purposes underlying the scriptural texts.

It was not only Albānī's worldview and ideas that made him simultaneously controversial and influential, but also the manner in which he delivered them. Albānī's words, as well as the confidence and conviction with which he spoke, made him an influential and charismatic individual. He remained uncompromising throughout his life and always presented his interpretation of scripture as being synonymous with scripture itself. This was appealing to many in the Muslim world because he provided them with assurance, authenticity, and certainty. While it is highly unlikely that his thoughts and opinions remained static, he nevertheless tried to present them as such.

Albānī had to remain uncompromising and consistent in his positions in order to maintain his image as a scholar who was not involved in the interpretive process, but rather one who passively understood the direct meaning of scripture. Had he compromised on his positions he would have been forced to acknowledge that his conclusions were based on a fallible interpretive process rather than the direct meaning of infallible texts. In other words, conceding that his conclusions involved an interpretive process would invalidate his claim to possess the absolute truth based extracted directly from scripture.

An analysis of his audio recordings reveals that Albānī portrayed himself as a scholar who was constantly promoting a particular point of view. He recognized no development in himself or his opinions because doing so would have been perceived as weakness. He wanted to portray himself as an unchanging archetype scholar, almost like an Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), who never deviated from his stance and willingly faced criticism and hardships for it.

When Albānī adopted a specific position, wrote a book, or delivered a public speech, he usually did so in reaction to someone else's criticism of him. After having many disputes with his father he began clashing with other Albanians and *madhhab* Traditionalists in Damascus. He took his iconoclasm with him everywhere he went even to relatively conservative countries like Saudi Arabia. His relationship with Saudi Traditional Salafism (or Wahhabism) changed due to his experiences in Medina. Right from the outset he was dissatisfied with Traditionalism; but as time went on, he refused to become part of the Saudi Traditional Salafī hierarchy because he was committed to the truth rather than the Salafiyya, *madhhabs*, or any particular individual.

His self-created image always remained that of an unchanging detached scholar who was interested only in the truth. Unconcerned with people, he did very little to counter his iconoclastic image and thus became a very detached independent figure and Muslim thinker. With time Albānī became more independent, separated from all religious movements, and became a religious authority on his own which was natural as he successfully garnered followers. He was a rebellious figure because he did not want to be part of a system, he wanted to ensure that he would not end up defending the system rather than the truth, although he might have ended up doing precisely that.

The Autobiography

To date, many communitarian translations of Albānī's books are available. And yet his audio recordings have not attracted as much attention from translators and western scholars, despite their popularity among religiously oriented Arabic speakers. Throughout the interview Albānī recounts his interactions with his Ḥanafī father and other *madhhab* Traditionalist scholars in Syria. He perceived them as individuals who had strayed from the Prophet's authentic teachings on account of their adamant adherence to the *madhhabs*. Albānī spends a significant

portion of his interview highlighting how over-reverence and uncritical acceptance of the *madhhabs* was dividing the Muslim community to the extent that its members appeared to belong to different religions. He responded by propagating a strict adherence to the Qur‘ān and Sunna with a straightforward approach that resulted in confrontation with other scholars.

The autobiographical interviewer Ḥijāzī Muḥammad Sharīf, better known as Abū Iṣḥāq al-Ḥuwaynī, was a close student of Albānī and remains dedicated to his teachings. In the interview, Albānī also highlighted this close relationship by saying: “It has been permitted for you what was not permitted for other than you.” Like many Salafis, Ḥuwaynī initially became aware of Albānī after reading his famous book on the Prophet’s prayer and was fascinated with his heavy reliance on ḥadīth. Ḥuwaynī resolved to follow in his teacher’s footsteps and is currently a leading Salafi in Egypt with a similarly strict textual disposition.¹¹ Although the timing of the autobiography is unknown, the context of what is mentioned in other parts of the autobiography make it clear that it took place in the latter part of Albānī’s life and in Jordan. This translation ultimately serves as a window into Albānī’s life and concerns.¹²

Translation of Albānī’s Autobiographical Interview¹³

[Ḥuwaynī’s Introduction]

All praise is due to God, the Lord of the Worlds, and blessings and peace be upon the Messenger of God. These five tapes are a brief biography of Shaykh Albānī. A few years ago I compiled our

¹¹ See A. ‘Awda, *Ṣafahāt*, 52.

¹² The audio clips have been obtained from www.alalbany.net, a website dedicated to maintaining Albānī’s legacy by spreading his teachings, lectures, and writings. The audio files can be found online. In this article each audio will be referred to as follows: [Audio file B001] *Sīrat al-imam al-Albānī 1* on <http://www.alalbany.net/?p=4654> [Audio file B002] *Sīrat al-imam al-Albānī 2* on <http://www.alalbany.net/?p=4665> [Audio file B003] *Sīrat al-imam al-Albānī 3* on <http://www.alalbany.net/?p=4667> [Audio file B007] *Sīrat al-imam al-Albānī 7* on <http://www.alalbany.net/?p=4675>. There are a few problems in the recordings, such as a few interruptions that caused the interview to stop. These interruptions are noted in the translation. Furthermore, in a few instances the words of either Albānī or Abū Iṣḥāq al-Ḥuwaynī were unclear; they are marked accordingly.

¹³ Audio file B001.

shaykh's biography in my writings.¹⁴ The most important things mentioned therein are the issues on which he differed with the scholars of his time, along with the preferred opinion without showing bias to anyone. I mentioned this in detail to the shaykh and he was pleased with it. All praise is due to God the most Exalted. However, when authoring a biography it is necessary to mention what relates to the person such as his birth and the stages of his education. This motivated me to ask his permission to write his biography; but he refused because our brother Shaybānī, who is from Kuwait, wrote a 500-page biography of him.¹⁵ I replied to the shaykh in praise, saying: "Being lower is unfortunate, and I want to be higher. I hate to narrate from you using an intermediary."¹⁶ So the shaykh agreed. I bear witness to God, the most Exalted, that no one was described to me except that I found the description to be greater than the actual person, except for Shaykh Albānī, who was greater than the description. He treated me very well and brought me close to him to the point that he said to me: "It has been permitted for you what was not permitted for other than you."¹⁷ This can be found in tape number two of the series. Naturally, these tapes do not cover the complete life of the shaykh but provide some glimpses of his life. May God the most Exalted preserve him and benefit the Muslims with his long life. This is being said by Abū Ishāq al-Ḥuwaynī al-Atharī. May God the most Exalted treat him with clandestine gentleness.

[Interview begins]

¹⁴ This work appears to be unpublished. Some websites state that he has a book titled *Spring of Hope in the Biography of Shaykh al-Albānī* [*Nab' al-amānī fī tarjamat al-shaykh al-Albānī*]. However, this work is not listed as a publication on his personal website or on in WorldCat Catalogue.

¹⁵ M. Shaybānī, *Ḥayāt al-Albānī wa-āthāru-hu wa-thanā' al-'ulamā' 'alay-hi* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Sarrāwī, 1986).

¹⁶ Ḥuwaynī is repeating a statement used among ḥadīth transmitters that describes the number of people between the narrator and the Prophet: the fewer the better. This terminology would regularly be used in the context of narrating from the Prophet; however, Ḥuwaynī uses it to praise Albānī.

¹⁷ Albānī's remark that "It has been permitted for you that which has not been permitted for other than you" reveals that he did not give this time to others.

Ḥuwaynī: Can we use this free time to complete the autobiography? ¹⁸

Albānī: Go ahead.

Ḥuwaynī: In what year were you born?

Albānī: Obviously we do not have anything that we can rely on for this date other than a birth certificate, an identity, card or a passport. The year recorded on it is 1914.

Ḥuwaynī: Were you born in Damascus or Albania?

Albānī: In Shkoder, which at that time was the capital of Albania. This was during the reign of the revolutionary Ahmet Zogu.¹⁹ He later moved the capital to Tirana.

Ḥuwaynī: Did you move to Damascus with your father due to any persecution?

Albānī: No persecution took place. However, there was a gloomy atmosphere when Ahmet Zogu came to power because he immediately began to impose laws that women had to remove their hijab and forced the police and army to wear suits.²⁰ My father, may God have mercy on him, considered him as a bad sign and decided to relocate his family to Damascus. He [chose Damascus] because he read many ḥadīths on Syria and Damascus. It is well known, or later became known, that some of these ḥadīths were authentic, acceptable, weak, or even fabricated. But the general idea was correct and he adopted it, may God have mercy on him. Therefore he migrated when he saw these bad signs but there was no direct coercion.

Ḥuwaynī: How old were you at that time?

¹⁸ Some brief unclear chatting takes place here before the interview. Albānī then agrees to be interviewed for a limited period of time.

¹⁹ Ahmet Zogu (d. 1961) was both the president (1925-28) and self-declared himself king of Albania. He abandoned his Turkic name Ahmet and the “u” from Zogu. He ruled as Zog I, King of the Albanians, until 1939. See M. Vickers, *The Albanians: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 117-125; W. Miller, *The Ottoman Empire and its Successors, 1801-1927* (New York: Frank Cass, 1966), 561.

²⁰ Albānī is conveying how Ahmet Zogu was trying to secularize Albania à la Atatürk in Turkey. In his own biography, ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (d. 1997) notes that Atatürk also forced women to remove the *ḥijāb* and forced men to wear a *badla* or *ṭuqma*, which Abū Ghudda refers to as the exact dress of the disbelievers. M. Āl Rashīd, *Imdād al-fattāḥ bi-asānīd wa-marwīyāt al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ: wa-huwa thabat al-‘Allāma al-Muḥaddīth al-Faqīh al-Uṣūlī al-Adīb al-Musnid Faḍīlat al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Imām al-Shāfi‘ī, 1999), 143.

Albānī: From my recollection, I was nine years old.

Ḥuwaynī: Did you speak Arabic?

Albānī: No. I didn't even know the alphabet. It appears that my father, may God have mercy on him, was not very concerned about our education even though he was an imam. He may have even been the *shaykh* of the *kuttāb*.²¹ When we arrived in Damascus we did not know how to read or write Arabic. As they say in Syria: "We did not know the five (*khamṣa*) from the smear (*tamsa*), nor the letter A (*alif*) from the *nastīja* (a long stick used by the *shaykh* of the *kuttāb*). Whenever he wanted to catch the last child who was playing around he would take out the stick. My father enrolled me in a civil school, a non-profit organization called The Society of Charity Relief (*jam'iyat al-is'āf al-khayrī*).²² That is where I began my education and learned Arabic, or to be more precise I learned the Syrian dialect by mingling with the students. I learned Arabic better than those who did not go to school. I clearly remember that I completed the first and second year in one year and obtained my elementary diploma in four years. This was perhaps as a result of being older than the other students. It seems that God, Mighty and Glorified, gave me an innate love for Arabic. This love of Arabic became which a tangible means after the Divine grace that enabled me to excel over my Syrian peers in Arabic and grammar. I also clearly remember that when the language and grammar teacher wrote a line or verse of poetry on the board he would ask the students about its Arabic grammatical form (*i'rāb*). The last student he would ask was the Albanian [Albānī referring to himself]. In those days I was known as the *Arna'ūt*. I became associated with the word "Albānī" after I dropped out of school and began to

²¹ The *kuttāb* provided elementary education (e.g., reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic and basic religious obligations) outside the mosque and sometimes adjacent to it. See W. Kadi, "Education in Islam-Myths and Truths," *Comparative Education Review* (2006), 311-324: 313-314.

²² This might appear to contradict Albānī's earlier statement about his father's lack of concern about his education. Moreover, Albānī later notes that he studied with and took classes from his father. Perhaps what he meant was that his father was not concerned with teaching him while he was young. However, this indicates that Albānī felt that his father neglected him to a certain degree, and thus the father-son relationship appears to have been unstable from its early stages.

write. *Arna`ūt* was a general term similar to “the Arabs.” Just like the Arabs are divided into groups like the Egyptians, Syrians and those from Hijāz, similarly the *Arna`ūt* are divided into Albanians, Serbians, meaning Yugoslavians, and Bosnians. Therefore, the relationship between *Albanian* and *Arna`ūt* is general and specific; *Albanian* is more specific than *Arna`ūt*. The grammar teacher used to call on me if no student could give the grammatical form: “Oh *Arna`ūt*, what do you think?” I would answer correctly on my first try which would cause him to scold the Syrians [Albānī laughs], saying: “Shame on you! This is an *Arna`ūtī!*” This is from God’s favor on me. Do you have another question?²³

Ḥuwaynī: After you finished studying did you pursue your academic studies at a secondary level or another school?

Albānī: I only completed my elementary school studies. The reason for this goes back to my father. Perhaps he did not plan or mean for it to happen because based on what I witnessed later had I followed that method of study I would not have been where I am now. Although it is true that the modern way of studying makes the path easy for those who wish to take many courses in academic research, it is extremely rare that such students graduate. My father, may God have mercy on him, had a negative perception of public schools, and rightfully so, because they taught Islamic law (*sharī‘a*) in form rather than in reality. Therefore, he did not enroll me in any preparatory school, which was the country’s secondary school at that time. After this I began to study Ḥanafī *fiqh* and Arabic morphology under him. I also studied Ḥanafī *fiqh*, specifically *The Steps of Success: The Explanation of the Light of Clarification (Marāqī al-falāḥ sharḥ nūr al-īdāh)*,²⁴ as well as modern grammar and syntax from the works of modern authors with Shaykh

²³ Albānī paints the events in his life in a way designed to show that God was guiding him to become the person he saw himself as eventually becoming: a *mujaddid* (renewer) of Islam. This style is regularly found in his speeches.

²⁴ This work is an explanation of one of the Ḥanafī school main *fiqh* of worship texts. The original book and commentary are written by Ḥasan b. ‘Ammār al-Shurunbūlālī (d. 1069/1659), a major Ḥanafī scholar and verifier

Sa'īd al-Burhānī.²⁵ I later realized that he belonged to a Sufi path (*tarīqa*).²⁶ My father taught me the Qur'ān with elocution (*tajwīd*) and simultaneously, “Arabic” carpentry. I interned with two instructors in carpentry, one of whom was my uncle Ismā'īl, may God have mercy on him. The other was a Syrian called Abū Muḥammad. I worked with both of them for two years mainly fixing and renovating old wood and brick homes. Due to the passing of time and adverse weather conditions (e.g., rain and snow), these homes would become worn on the sides. They needed an Arabic carpenter to repair them so I would accompany him. Normally on the cold winter days we could not do anything so I would drop in on my father who was working as a watch repairman, which was his profession back in Albania. One day after I returned from my supervisor, my father saw that I was not working. He said: “It appears there is no work today.” I replied: “Yes, there is no work.” Then he asked: “What do you think of leaving your job, as it is neither a proper job nor a profession, and coming to work for me instead?” I said to him: “As you wish.” He told me: “Climb up” because his store was slightly elevated from the ground so that it would not become wet from rain. Since then I accompanied him to work until I became a skilled repairman and opened my own store. Do you have another question?

Ḥuwaynī: I asked Shaykh Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūt²⁷ about some things, which led him to say that he frequently studied *fiqh* with Shaykh Nūḥ [Albānī's father] and that Shaykh Albānī did not usually attend their gatherings.

Albānī: I used to attend those gatherings, but we also had private lessons with my father along with two young men from the *Arna'ūt*: 'Abd al-Raḥīm Zayn al-'Ābidīn, who is still living a

(*muḥaqqiq*). See , Ḥasan b. 'Ammār Shurunbūlālī (d. 1069/1659), *Marāqī al-falāḥ sharḥ nūr al-īdāḥ wa najāt al-arwāḥ* (Damascus: Dār al-Nu'mān li l-'Ulūm, 1990).

²⁵ Sa'īd al-Burhānī (d. 1386/1967) was a Ḥanafī Sufi scholar and imam of al-Tawba mosque. See M. Ḥāfiẓ and N. Abāza, *Tarīkh 'ulamā' dimashq fī l-qarn al-rābi' 'ashar hijrī* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1986), 2: 794-802.

²⁶ On Sufism in modern Syria see I. Weismann, “Sufi Brotherhoods in Syria and Israel: A Contemporary Overview,” *History of Religions* (2004), 303-318.

²⁷ Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūt was born in Damascus in 1928, two years after his father migrated from Shkoder, Albania. He was a ḥadīth scholar who differed with Albānī on a few issues.

healthy life, and the other, who has passed away. We used to read *al-Qudūrī*²⁸ in Ḥanafī *fiqh*. We also read *The Place of Rest (al-Marāḥ)*,²⁹ in the science of morphology to him and completed the entire Qurʾān. Because I was not present when he was does not mean that I did not study with my father. Similarly, the fact that he did not attend our private lessons with my father does not mean that he did not study with my father.

Ḥuwaynī: A question that interests many is about how you become interested in ḥadīth since both you and Shuʿayb have described your father as being devoted to the Ḥanafī *madhhab*. How did you escape?³⁰

Albānī: That was a favor from God. It is said that if God wants something He prepares the means for it to happen. I used to live in a fanatical Ḥanafī atmosphere. My father was considered the most knowledgeable, especially among the *Arnaʿūt*, in Ḥanafī *fiqh* and therefore served as their reference point. When I graduated from elementary school and began studying with some of the scholars, I studied in a very strange way, one that outsiders might consider as unbeneficial or even harmful. However, the positive aspects of my method of study later became clear in my Arabic language skills which were strengthened in my speech. Strangely, I was a fervent reader

²⁸ The author was Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Qudūrī (d. 428/1037). His *Mukhtaṣar al-Qudūrī* is one the most celebrated introductory manuals on Ḥanafī *fiqh*. See Abū al-Ḥasan Qudūrī (d. 428/1037), *Mukhtaṣar al-Qudūrī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1997); M. Ben Cheneb, *EP*, art. *Al-Kudūrī, Abu l-Ḥusayn*.

²⁹ The entire title is *The Souls Place of Rest in Morphology (Marāḥ al-arwāḥ fī l-ṣarf)*. Little is known about its author ʿAlī b. Masʿūd, who is believed to have lived in the eighth/fourteenth century. See J. Åkesson, *Arabic Morphology and Phonology: Based on the Marāḥ al-Arwāḥ by Aḥmad b. ʿAlī b. Masʿud* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 7. See Aḥmad b. ʿAlī ibn Masʿūd, *Marāḥ al-arwāḥ fī l-ṣarf*. (Qom: Iʿtimād, 1994).

³⁰ Ḥuwaynī's choice of wording when he asks Albānī how he escaped (*kayfa aflat*) from his devout Ḥanafī father and the *madhhab* illustrates that those who adhere to the latter's brand of Salafism view the *madhhabs* as institutions that restrict their followers. Albānī himself does not say that he "escaped" by becoming a *mujtahid*. He agrees that one who is not a *mujtahid* must consult a scholar, even though there is no indication that he ever did so in religious matters, particularly those that went against the *madhhab*. Albānī's answer shows that he began reading books, came across verses and ḥadīths that appeared to disagree with the Ḥanafī *madhhab*, and then challenged his father. Moreover, he makes implicit attacks on the *madhhabs*. For example, he characterized his ability to escape from the rigidity of the *madhhab* environment in which he lived as an indication that he was a *mujaddid*. He perceived himself as one of the few, if not the only, reviver of the Prophet's true teachings in modern times. He clashed with everyone who criticized him on the grounds that they were criticizing him personally and Islam's "true" teachings as well.

of modern novels, in particular I used to read the novels about the famous American detective Arsene Lupin. I was really fond of this genre. I gradually progressed to another phase that was perhaps better than the first: Arabic stories, even if they were fictional. I read *A Thousand Nights and One Night* (Alf Layla wa Layla),³¹ the story of ‘Antara b. Shaddād,³² the story of Salāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī,³³ the story of *The Princess of High Resolve and the Hero* (Dhāt al-Himma wa l-Baṭṭāl),³⁴ and others. I was very passionate about this material.³⁵ Praise be to God’s complete planning and kindness with me, I had a lot more free time when I worked with my father. We used to take turns sitting in the store; I would be with him in the morning until the afternoon (*zuhr*), after which he would go home to rest and not return until the late afternoon (‘*aṣr*). I had free time when there were no watches to repair and I would ask his permission to leave. I would attend some of the general classes held at the Umayyad Mosque, which was also guidance from God. I was influenced by some of these classes from a *fiqh* perspective. It later became apparent that some of the things I witnessed there were correct and some were incorrect. The incorrect things concerned unquestioning submission (*taqlīd*) and Sufism (*taṣawwuf*). While I was absent from the store God sent to me an elderly Egyptian man who would buy some leftover books and display them outside his store facing the western door of the mosque. Whenever I passed by the small store I would go inside and search for the novels I wanted so I could rent them and return

³¹ *A Thousand Nights and One Night* is the title of the most famous Arabian collection of fairytales and other stories. See E. Littmann, *EP*, art. *Alf Layla wa Layla*.

³² ‘Antara was a warrior poet of 6th century. The romance of ‘Antara is considered the model of the Arabic romance of chivalry. See B. Heller, *EP*, art. *Sīrat ‘Antar*; R. Blachere, *EP*, art. ‘*Antar*.

³³ Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī (d. 589/1193), who defeated the Crusaders, went on to become an iconic figure of chivalry in Arabic literature. See D.S. Richards, *EP*, art. *Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn*.

³⁴ A popular story of Arabic literature concerning the Arab-Byzantine wars as well as the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods. See R. Kruk, “Warrior Women in Arabic Popular Romance: Qannāṣa bint Muzāḥim and Other Valiant Ladies. Part One,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* (1993).

³⁵ Albānī’s reading of this literature and his attachment to books illustrates how keen of a reader he was. It is perhaps this skill that facilitated his autodidactic scholarship. Albānī’s reading increased his Arabic vocabulary and certainly sharpened his analytical skills. Moreover, it highlights his present difference from his youthful self: When he was young he was interested in un-beneficial knowledge, but God has now guided him to beneficial knowledge. Albānī points out that even his interest in fictional stories was part of the process of God’s guiding him to become a great scholar.

them to him after reading them. One day I stumbled upon some volumes of the *al-Manār* journal. I clearly remember reading an article by Sayyid Rashīd Riḍā, may God have mercy on him, in which he speaks of the merits of al-Ghazālī's *The Revival (al-Iḥyā')*³⁶ and criticizes parts of it for its Sufism and use of weak and fabricated ḥadīths. In this case, he mentioned that Abū l-Faḍl Zayn al-Dīn al-'Irāqī³⁷ had written a book about *The Revival (al-Iḥyā')* in which he found all of the narrations (*kharrāja*) of its ḥadīths and distinguished the authentic ḥadīth from the weak ones. Its title was *That Which Suffices From Carrying Scriptures During Travels in the Takhrīj of what the Iḥyā' Contains of Narrations (Al-Mughnī 'an ḥaml al-asfār fī l-asfār fī takhrīj mā fī l-Iḥyā' min al-akhbār)*.³⁸ I was extremely excited to get my hands on it. I went to the market searching for it like one who is insanely in love until I finally found it. It turned out to be four volumes published by Dār al-Ḥalabī³⁹ on smooth yellow paper. However, I was poor like my father and could not afford to buy it so the owner agreed to let me rent it. I do not remember now if it was for the period of a year or more.

Ḥuwaynī: You rented it?

Albānī: Yes. I got the book and was about to fly out of happiness. I took it to the store and took advantage of my father's absence after *zuhr* to be alone with my book. I purchased paper and made a ruler for myself out of some carton that was stitched with multiple lines of string from both sides and then started to copy it.

³⁶ Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1982).

³⁷ (d. 806/1404)

³⁸ Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) was Albānī's inspiration, not his early source of knowledge, and this is the only case in which he mentions him. Riḍā's influence on him was limited to inspiring him to challenge weak ḥadīths. In fact, one can argue that his real inspiration came from Zayn al-Dīn al-'Irāqī's work that attempted to purge the *Iḥyā'* of its "impure" sources. Additionally, one notices that Albānī has a special contempt for al-Ghazālī, whom he consistently references in a negative light. But many other scholars rejected Ghazālī's *Iḥyā'* on the grounds that it was too controversial. Some even demanding that it be burned See K. Garden, *Al-Ghazālī's Contested Revival: Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn and its Critics in Khorasan and the Maghrib* (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2005) 152-153.

³⁹ Karīma Ḥasan, "Al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī akthar min 130 sana fī nashr 'ulūm al-dīn," *Al-Maṣrī al-Yawm*, September 2, 2009 <http://today.almasryalyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=224645&IssueID=1517>.

Ḥuwaynī: Before I forget, how old were you when you began reading the *Manār*?

Albānī: Around 20. I could have been 17 or 18. So I would put the ruler on the top and press on the string. Then the original paper could not be seen because it was not black due to the steadiness of my handwriting. A thought came to me after I finished copying the first volume. At that time I was a beginner in seeking knowledge as well as a non-Arab Albanian. Many times I would come across ḥadīths that I did not understand or that contained strange phrases and words. I later found out that they were from a category called strange (*gharīb*) ḥadīths. So I decided to clarify these unclear words by using some of the books in my father's library. However, as I began adding commentary and going over my work I started to feel regret because the first volume had two very different styles. The first part had no commentary but the second part had a commentary and I was not pleased with this. So I discarded what I had done and began writing the first volume all over again adding commentary where necessary. Next I began copying the second volume. There was a very clear difference between these two volumes in terms of their commentary. Most of the first volume's pages consisted of *The Sufficient (Al-Mughnī)* with little commentary. However, the second volume was the exact opposite. It would have one line of text on the very top of the page and below it were footnotes in very clear print that covered most of the page.⁴⁰

In Syria we used different feathers for writing Arabic and foreign languages. I preferred writing Arabic using the ones for foreign languages because they had a very sharp point. I wrote the commentary in Arabic with the French feathers to differentiate the footnotes from the original text. The entire commentary was filled with detailed handwriting. The writing on the upper part of the page written with the Arabic feather had a thick font. These tools made me very happy and

⁴⁰ End time 00:30:48. Beginning of Audio file B002

made up for the feelings of shortcoming I had during the early stages of learning. I benefited from this work a lot and I still have it.

Ḥuwaynī: Did your father notice your interest in the science and reevaluation of ḥadīth?

Albānī: He certainly did but God kept me steadfast. While we were sitting in his shop and I was learning his trade we would debate while we were working. That was from the wisdom of God in what He decreed for me. I used what I knew from the Sunna and ḥadīth and he would use what he learned in Istanbul and other places during his long years of study [interview stops due to an interruption from a third person].

Ḥuwaynī: As we were saying, shaykh, about your relationship with your father during uh...

Albānī: Yes, we used to have debates. I would use ḥadīth and Sunna as evidence and he would say the *madhhab*. When the debate became long-winded – I could go on for a very long time because I was young and he was very old he would end up saying: “The science of ḥadīth is the profession of the bankrupt,” may God have mercy on him and forgive us and him. We spent most of our time in the store debating. With my continued study of the Sunna and ḥadīth some of the mistakes that were widespread and prevalent among the people, even scholars, became apparent to me. For example, among all of my siblings I was the only one who would accompany my father to the mosque. It was his habit, may God have mercy on him, to pray at the Umayyad mosque.

He was influenced by some narrations in the Ḥanafī books about the virtues of praying there. For example, a narration that is transmitted in the latter relied upon books of the Ḥanafīs, *The Glossary of Ibn ‘Ābidīn (Ḥāshiyat Ibn ‘Ābidīn)*,⁴¹ on the authority of Sufyān al-Thawrī, that one prayer in the Umayyad mosque equals 70,000 prayers. I could not understand how a mosque

⁴¹ Muḥammad Amīn ibn ‘Ābidīn (d. 1252/1836) was a prominent Ḥanafī scholar who lived in Damascus. He is sometimes considered the school’s final verifier (*muḥaqqiq*). This work is important because it is considered the final word on most Ḥanafī legal issues. See Ed. *EP*, art. *Ibn ‘Ābidīn*.

built after the Prophet, peace be upon him, could have so much virtue. Naturally, I was not prepared to accept such an exaggeration.⁴² Days and years passed and my research and academic work led me to study Ibn ‘Asākir’s⁴³ *The History of Damascus (Tārikh Dimashq)*, the largest work of Islamic history. This particular narration which is mentioned in *The Glossary of Ibn ‘Ābidīn (Hāshiyat Ibn ‘Ābidīn)*, is traced back to Ibn ‘Asākir. Therefore, a scholar who authored one of the latter relied upon books⁴⁴ convinced them that the ḥadīth is traced back to a reliable source, even if it was only back to Ibn ‘Asākir, until it became, as the lay people say, a ḥadīth that was followed.⁴⁵ Years later, I had the opportunity to study all of the manuscripts in the Zāhiriyya library.

Ḥuwaynī: What year was that?

Albānī: I do not memorize years because I am not a student of knowledge according to systematic studies, in the sense that a supervisor guides me in what I write. When my research and studies led me to Ibn ‘Asākir’s history in that library I went through all of its 17 large volumes. Upon discovering this narration and finding its *isnād* to be darkness upon darkness I said: “May God be exalted. How do these jurists, due to their negligence of the study of ḥadīth, narrate a saying, first, even if its chain were correct it would have been considered *mu‘ḍal*⁴⁶ in

⁴² Such statements about the exaggerated virtues for certain actions were highly questionable. Their wide acceptance demonstrates that the community at the time was not overly concerned about the authenticity of the available knowledge.

⁴³ ‘Alī ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571/1175), perhaps the best known member of the Ibn ‘Asākir family, was the historian of Damascus and a Shāfi‘ī. His principle work was a biographical dictionary on the city’s history. According to the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, the entire 18-volume manuscript is located in the Zāhiriyya library. See N. Elisseeff, *EP²*, art. *Ibn ‘Asākir*.

⁴⁴ Referring to Ibn ‘Ābidīn.

⁴⁵ Incidents like this might explain why Albānī did not accept or trust communal actions as a method of strengthening or authenticating a ḥadīth. Does the general Muslim community’s application of an action indicate that the action is sanctioned and guided by God, or is it a widespread fabrication that *madhhab* scholars never pointed out? Some of his detractors, such as Abū Ghudda and Ismā‘īl al-Anṣārī (d. 1997), believe that the such ongoing communal action is stronger evidence than the *isnād* itself. See Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Laknawī, (d. 1304/1886), *Al-Ajwiba al-fāḍila li l-as’ila al-‘ashra al-kāmila*, ed. A.F. Abū Ghudda (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2009), 237-238; I. Anṣārī, *Taṣhīḥ*, 11-13.

⁴⁶ A ḥadīth that has two or more narrators successively missing in the *isnād*.

the science of ḥadīth? What about when the chain is, as I said, darkness upon darkness?

Therefore they harm when they wish to benefit.”⁴⁷ Then I looked at the story of Prophet Yaḥyā’s burial place peace be upon him. According to Ibn ‘Asākir it is supposed to be located in the Umayyad Mosque. What is important here is that my research led me to conclude that it is not permitted to pray in the Umayyad mosque.⁴⁸ [It appears that a third person now does something respectful to Albānī which leads Albānī to make a joke.] Look at this Sufi Salafi! [Ḥuwaynī and Albānī laugh]⁴⁹

Ḥuwaynī: And he has the right to be (*Wa ḥuqqa lahu*).

Albānī: [laughs] This does not exist, how can they be combined in one person? He respects his shaykh according to the way of the Sufis, but he is a Salafi [Albānī laughs]. What I mean is that prayer in this mosque is not correct. I did not reach that conclusion immediately; rather, it dawned on me gradually and slowly because it was a repetitive conclusion in my research. Therefore, I decided to seek the opinions of some shaykhs, among them my father and Shaykh al-Burhānī.⁵⁰ So one day after I prayed the afternoon prayer, God knows best, I informed him that any prayer performed in a mosque that contains a grave is invalid.

⁴⁷ Albānī sees no benefit in weak ḥadīth. Some scholars allow such ḥadīth in matters of virtues. However, this instance shows that such a practice can cause some inauthentic beliefs or practices to become widespread. On this debate see J. Brown, “Even If It’s Not True It’s True: Using Unreliable Ḥadīths in Sunni Islam,” *Islamic Law and Society* (2011), 1-52.

⁴⁸ Albānī generally raised two reproaches against the *madhhabs*: either their contents contradict the authentic texts, or the concept and following of a *madhhab* has no roots among the first three generations of Muslims. In this instance, he points out that such positions do not withstand even the simplest review of their purported textual authenticity. In his view, the content of the *madhhab* institution presents a historical and a textual problem, which give rise to grave theological and legal consequences concerning the beliefs and practices attributed to God and the Prophet. Hence, this content must be countered with authentic Islamic revelation.

⁴⁹ In this case, someone appears to be doing something nice to him and he responded by mocking the idea that someone can be a Salafi and Sufi at the same time. His student Ḥuwaynī immediately comments that Albānī deserves such treatment.

⁵⁰ Albānī’s criteria for *ijtihād* are far different than those of his critics. He refers to his conclusions as *ijtihād* while simultaneously acknowledging that he was gradually researching the issue. *Madhhab* Traditionalists maintain that anyone in the early stage of research is a novice student of knowledge. Albānī never speaks of when he was unable to find the absolute truth due to a lack of scholarly tools. He maintains that he never changed his mind about a certain opinion or action. Naturally he must have developed into a scholar, but to admit so would be perceived as a weakness.

Ḥuwaynī: You said that to your father?

Albānī: No, to al-Burhānī. He replied: “Write down what you have found.” I did so and presented it to him in perhaps three or four pages. From what I recall this happened during Ramadan. When I presented these papers to him he said: “God willing I will give you a response after the holiday.” After the holiday he told me: “Everything that you wrote has no value.” Surprised, I asked: “Why?” He replied: “We do not rely upon the books that you referenced.”

Ḥuwaynī: We?

Albānī: Yes, Burhānī said: “We only rely on *The Steps of Success (Marāqī al-falāḥ)* and its commentaries.” I quoted from *The Shining of Flowers: The Explanation of Bright Lights (Mabāriq al-azhār sharḥ Mashāriq al-anwār)* by Ibn Malak⁵¹ as well as from *The Elevation of the Keys: The Explanation of the Niche of Lamps (Mirqāt al-mafātīḥ sharḥ Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ)* by Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī,⁵² both of whom are Ḥanafīs,⁵³ and mentioned some other texts. However, he warned me that these sources have no value. He did not even care about the ḥadīths that I gathered. He said that our sources in religion are the books of *fiqh* not the books of ḥadīth. My father held the same position. Therefore, I wrote *Warning the Prostrator from Taking Graves as Mosques (Taḥdhīr al-sājīd min ittikhādh al-qubūr masājīd)*.⁵⁴ I stopped going with my father to the Umayyad mosque because I did not want my actions to contradict my words. This bothered him and made him angry but he kept it all inside. I also differed with the people on holding a second congregational prayer in the mosque. Shaykh Burhānī used to lead the prayer in the Tawba mosque which was close to my father’s house. My father and Burhānī were close friends

⁵¹ ‘Abd al-Laṭīf Ibn Malak, a Ottoman scholar who lived under Bāyezīd I, was famous for his *fiqh* and ḥadīth works. There date of his death is uncertain: the gravestone dated 797/1394-5. His *Mabāriq al-azhār* is considered a classic ḥadīth work. See A. Huici Miranda, *EP*, art. *Firishte-Oghlu*.

⁵² Mullā ‘Alī Qārī (d. 1014/1605) is a staunch Ḥanafī and Ash‘arī scholar known for his encyclopedic commentaries on mainstay ḥadīth texts such as this work. See J. Brown, “The Rules of Matn Criticism: There Are No Rules,” *Islamic Law and Society* 19, (2012), 356-396: 376.

⁵³ Here Albānī quoted from Ḥanafī scholars who held opinions that differed from those of later Ḥanafīs.

⁵⁴ N. Albānī, *Taḥdhīr al-sājīd min ittikhādh al-qubūr masājīd* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 2001).

so he would take his place whenever shaykh Sa‘īd was absent. This mosque had two *miḥrābs*⁵⁵ and two imams: a permanent Ḥanafī imam, namely, al-Burhānī, and a Shāfi‘ī imam who would be a different figure for each prayer.⁵⁶

Ḥuwaynī: Did they pray in congregation at the same time?

Albānī: No. During the Ottoman period the Ḥanafī imam would always pray first, whether it was in the larger mosques like the Umayyad mosque or other mosques like the Tawba mosque. When shaykh Tāj al-Dīn the son of the shaykh Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī,⁵⁷ the known ḥadīth scholar of his time, became president of the Syrian Republic, he decreed that the Shāfi‘ī imam had to pray first because he followed the Shāfi‘ī *madhhab*. Naturally when the person in charge issued a command it was applied in all mosques. Thus, the Shāfi‘ī imam would pray before al-Burhānī. When I learned that the second congregation had no basis in the Sunna I started praying behind the Shāfi‘ī imam.⁵⁸ This drove my father crazy,⁵⁹ first because I went against his *madhhab* and second because I contradicted his actions since he would only pray behind al-Burhānī. He went his way and I went mine. Once Shaykh al-Burhānī asked my father to replace him while he travelled for obligatory pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) or voluntary pilgrimage (*‘umra*), I do not remember which one. I refused to pray behind my father. I made no distinction between either of them because both of them did not attend the first congregational prayer. My father joined the second congregational prayer and I joined the first one.

⁵⁵ Albānī considers the niches found in the walls of some mosques’ *miḥrāb* to be an evil religious innovation (*bid‘a*). Additionally, since the Prophet’s pulpit only had three steps, he states that a pulpit with more than three steps is also an innovation. See N. Albānī, *Ṣifāt ṣalāt al-nabī*, 113.

⁵⁶ Albānī strongly disagreed with performing multiple simultaneous congregational prayers in one mosque let alone having two in one mosque.

⁵⁷ Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī (d. 1935) was one of the 19th century’s most respected scholars. His son Tāj al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī (d. 1943) was a French-appointed Syrian leader and politician. See Sami S. Moubayed, *Steel & Silk: Men and Women who Shaped Syria 1900-2000*. (Seattle: Cune, 2006), 242-243.

⁵⁸ Once again Albānī is describing his early scholarly career in such a manner to show that he was slowly learning and rebelling. In the view of scholars at the time he was not a *mujtahid* and thus felt that his opinions had no serious value. However, he began sharing and spreading them as being very logical and textually grounded.

⁵⁹ The Arabic states *taqūm qiyāmat wālidī*, which literally means “caused my father’s resurrection day to occur” or “was the end of the world,” a colloquial phrase used to mean it drove him crazy.

From there matters got worse. My father had to leave the village for a day or two so he asked me to lead the second prayer in his place.⁶⁰ I refused, saying: “You know my opinion on the issue and it is very difficult for me to go against it.” Several other incidents increased my father’s anger towards me. In my opinion, his anger was instigated by those who opposed me for one reason or another. One evening while we were eating dinner he told me in plain Arabic: “Either comply or leave.”⁶¹ I replied: “Allow me three days to think about it.” He said: “You have three days.” I came to him after three days with the following answer: “Since you have left me with the decision, I will move out so that I do not bother you.” So I left with nothing, no money (*dirham* or *dīnār*). I clearly remember that he offered me only 25 Syrian *layras*.

Ḥuwaynī: He gave you the money when you moved out?

Albānī: Yes. However, during this time I had been establishing a group among my Salafi brothers. One of them owned a shop that sold wheat, barley, beans, and similar things. I rented a small shop in the same place. He gave me 200 Syrian *layras* so I could pay the rent. My father gave me some old tools that he no longer used or needed. I established my business and due to God's bounty on me I was good at my job and I attracted more customers. As they say in Syria: “The Generous said ‘take,’ referring to the Lord of the Worlds.” [Ḥuwaynī laughs.]

Ḥuwaynī: Were you about 23 years old at that time?

⁶⁰ One can imagine that this request was done to win Albānī’s heart back and his rejection of it added insult to injury for his father. Moreover, it shows how important the application of the ḥadīth was to Albānī. Albānī was prepared to sever all relationships, even with his father, in order to not go against the Sunna. It could be argued that disobeying his father for such a trivial *fiqh* opinion was itself going against the Sunna. However, he chose to hold on to a ḥadīth’s direct meaning regardless of the consequences of its application. Ḥuwaynī understood that Albānī violated the command to obey the parents in an attempt to obey a less serious command. To avoid this embarrassing situation, Albānī speaks of following the ḥadīth as an issue of great seriousness like *kufr* and *tawhīd*, as noted in a later part of the autobiography.

⁶¹ This ultimatum sheds light on the importance of the Ḥanafī *madhhab* to the community and how strict some its adherents were. Additionally, it also sheds light on the social pressure Albānī’s father was experiencing as a result of his son going against the *madhhab*.

Albānī: Yes, I had passed 20. The book that I refer to sometimes is called *The Green Garden in Organizing and Takhrīj of Ṭabarī's Small Lexicon (Al-Rawḍ al-naḍīr fī tartīb wa takhrīj mu'jam al-Ṭabarānī al-saghīr)*.⁶² I might have been 21 or 22 when I finished it. I was set in my work and thoughts. We used to attend evening classes led by some of the brothers. Afterwards, when the Salafi circle grew larger we rented a hall where we would give classes on ḥadīth, the *fiqh* of ḥadīth, the classification of ḥadīth, etc.⁶³

Questioner other than Ḥuwaynī: Did you and your father work together in things like trading watches?

Albānī: There was nothing from his side. I got engaged and married by myself. He did not visit me, send me good wishes, or congratulate me. However, sometimes he would visit me at the shop without coming in. One thing that he said might make up for his *madhhab*-based hostility was: “I do not deny benefitting from you.”⁶⁴ I am his youngest son. I am certain that he benefited from me because he used to mention issues to me and I would reply: “Oh my father, this is not allowed because it consists of this and that etc.” He certainly benefitted from me regarding authentic and weak ḥadīths. However, his age and social status among the *Arna'ūt* meant that he could not be pleased with this son of his who had turned out to be a deviant, at least according to the majority of them. This is part of my story regarding my first steps and subsequent establishment in knowledge. Certainly, the *Manār* journal paved the way for me to work in the science of ḥadīth.

⁶² This book has not been published.

⁶³ Albānī's entire career revolved around ḥadīth. He did not trust *fiqh* because it allowed reason to play too large a role. Instead, he believed in the *fiqh* of ḥadīth, which is more of a literal understanding of the ḥadīth text.

⁶⁴ This statement indicates that his father still cared for him. It is fascinating that he does not mention any visits to or attempted reconciliation with his father. Albānī left the home in order to avoid bothering his father. There is no mention of his children or his grandparents, visitations, or anything of the nature. He just shares those portions of the relationship he wishes to highlight; however, there must be many other points that may never be known.

Ḥuwaynī: But the first actual *muṣannaḥ*⁶⁵ was *The Green Garden (Al-Rawḍ al-Naḍīr)*, right?

Albānī: Yes.

Ḥuwaynī: The first *muṣannaḥ*?

Albānī: Actually, what I copied from it and my subsequent comments would not be called a *muṣannaḥ*.

Ḥuwaynī: How did you divide the chapters in *al-Rawḍ*? Were they based on *fiqh* issues?

Albānī: I categorized my compilation of each Companion's narrations under his name, similar to the *musnads*.⁶⁶ However, I organized their ḥadīths in alphabetical order which was not the case with the *musnads*. Afterwards I gathered them all together and made a general alphabetical index for them.

Ḥuwaynī: Did you and your father ever reconcile?

Albānī: As I mentioned before, he would visit and greet me in my store but would not enter it.

Ḥuwaynī: Is this not considered an act of disobedience toward parents?

Albānī: [Albānī laughs.] Some fanatics might think and clearly say so. However, no scholar in the world would ever say that preferring to follow the Sunna instead of my father's *madhhab* is considered disobedience. According to them disobedience means disobeying your father without a valid reason based on *ijtihād* and without the intention of following the Qur'ān and Sunna. I do not think any practicing Muslim would consider this disobedience; if that were the case, Abraham, peace be upon him, would also have been considered disobedient. You might say that

⁶⁵ A *muṣannaḥ* (plural *muṣannaḥāt*) is a technical term in Arabic literature applied to a collection of religious learning organized upon an abstract, structured subdivision in chapters. See G. H.A . Juynboll, *EP*, art. *Muṣannaḥ*.

⁶⁶ *Musnad* (plural *masānīd*) is technical term in ḥadīth literature used to describe a ḥadīth collection organized on the basis of the first authority in the *isnād* above the Prophet, that is, the Companion. A *musnad* collection may comprise either the *musnad* of one, a few, or all Companions. See G. H. A. Juynboll, *EP*, art. *Musnad*.

concerns disbelief (*kufr*) and the Oneness of God (*tawhīd*).⁶⁷ I would reply: “Yes, but here it is Sunna and *taqlīd*.”⁶⁸

Ḥuwaynī: Shaykh Shu‘ayb al-Arna’ūṭ told me that he used to visit frequently when you moved your library, or something like that, to your store.

Albānī: This is a fabrication and lie. He only came to see me once. I asked him so many times to meet [interruption from a third person]. He was, as I mentioned before, a bitter enemy of those who called to the Sunna.⁶⁹ He was a very fanatical follower of his *madhhab* studies under his shaykh Ṣāliḥ Farfūr.⁷⁰ He would spread lies and fabrications about me as is always the case with the followers and the *muqallids* towards *Ahl al-Sunna*.

A third person asks: Who?

Albānī: Shu‘ayb al-Arna’ūṭ. He did one thing that I will never forget. When my first wife Umm ‘Abd al-Raḥmān died I laid her in her grave. This went against the way of the shaykhs, especially the Ḥanafīs, who consider that when a woman dies the marriage contract ends and therefore her husband cannot look at her. Such a belief violates the known actions of the Salaf who would wash each other before burial. It also contradicts the Prophet’s, blessings and peace

⁶⁷ Albānī immediately answers the possible response that his questioner might have brought up, but without noting that there is a difference between the two situations. He applies three attributes to anyone who thinks he was disobedient: 1) A fanatic 2) One who is not practicing 3) One who must also think Abraham was disobedient.

⁶⁸ His relationship with his father soured not because of *kufr* and *tawhīd*, but because of Salafism and *madhhabism*. When asked during the interview about this relationship and his apparent disobedience, Albānī responds by comparing his situation to that of Prophet Abraham. He always aligned himself with the Prophet so that any criticism of him would be criticism of the Prophet as well. In this case he cited Prophet Abraham even though their situations are different. Albānī amplifies his subpar relationship with his father so it can be compared to that of Abraham and his father. Abraham’s issue was the clear and serious creedal issue of *shirk* and *tawhīd*; Albānī’s issue was the *madhhabs* and its acceptance of probabilistic *ijtihad*. He neglects to state this distinction. He did not have a school of law or a history to back him up and give him authority, hence he gave authority to himself by always relating himself to the Prophet. Furthermore, Albānī’s desire to equate all *taqlīd* with the *taqlīd* of the idolaters is not too far from the *khārijī* attitude of considering anyone who disagrees with them to be a *kāfir*. This attitude is being considered as dangerous today as *takfīr ahl al-qibla* has always been considered. This is one of the many reasons his critics felt the strong need to engage Albānī in debate over his use of proof-texts.

⁶⁹ A common term Albānī uses for those who disagree with him.

⁷⁰ Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Farfūr (d. 1986) was a prominent founder of private Islamic seminaries in Damascus. See T. Pierret, *Religion and state in Syria: the Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 44.

be upon him, statement to ‘Ā’isha when he entered upon her and she said: “Oh my head” [complaining of a headache]. The Prophet said: “I should say Oh my head, what would happen if you die and I wash and shroud you?”⁷¹ Therefore my action really upset the fanatics. Shaykh Shu‘ayb participated in following the funeral but not because he wanted to follow the Sunna or offer his condolences; rather, he did so because both he and my wife were *Arna`ūts* and he had to attend the funeral. If this were not the case he would not have attended because he considers me misguided. What he did after the funeral proves this. He gathered everybody and began screaming and rebuking me for what I had done. Some of our brothers, who were Salafi and belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood, had attended the funeral. Their leaders were ‘Iṣām al-‘Aṭṭār, who you must have heard about, and Zuhayr Shāwīsh. They took him aside, calmed him down, and removed the tension he was trying to build against me so that his actions bore no fruits. I would always say to those around me and those who told me of his harsh feelings against me: “Let’s talk to him and see what he has to say.” Eventually, he came to the shop and we talked with him for about four or five hours.⁷²

At the end of this meeting he agreed that I could give fatwas based upon my opinion and *ijtihad*, provided that it would be done in a restricted circle and would not be propagated. I replied that this would be impossible from a practical perspective and even more so from a theoretical one. In other words, what is the difference between giving religious advice to Zayd while ignoring ‘Amr?⁷³ I gave him an example of my older brother Muḥammad Nādī Abū Aḥmad, who used to work as a carpenter in the *Qadam* factory. He used to memorize every statement he heard from me even though he was practically a layperson. Therefore he was unique in the factory and

⁷¹ See Muḥammad b. Yazīd Ibn Māja (d. 273/886), *Sunan Ibn Māja* (Damascus: Dār al-Risāla al-‘ālamīyā, 2009), *Ghusl*, ii. 449, no. 1465.

⁷² End time 00:31:18. Beginning of Audio File B003

⁷³ These two names are similar to “Richard Roe and “John Doe” in English.

became like a shaykh among them. ... I said that if my brother were to ask me a question such as: “I performed ablution, but then cut myself in the factory and some blood came out. In your opinion and knowledge, does the bleeding invalidate my ablution?” Naturally I would tell him my opinion because one cannot conceal knowledge. I would reply: “No, it does not break your ablution.” You are saying that I can give fatwas only to those around me. But this circle would naturally spread. My brother will take this answer and if anything happens to any worker in the factory, they will say: “Let’s go to Abū Aḥmad and tell him the story. The man will say ‘I performed ablution and then got a cut.’ ‘Abū Aḥmad would say that my brother said that it does not break the ablution.’”⁷⁴ So how could you restrict it from a practical perspective? From a theoretical perspective, what is the difference between me giving a religious ruling to my blood brother and fellow Muslim while not giving a fatwa to another one of my fellow Muslims? This discussion helped decrease some of his fanaticism. However, until now the affect of ḥadīth is not apparent on him or his character, obedience, and his worship because he remains overwhelmed with strong hatred and envy. Moreover, he criticizes the Salafis as much as he can, as though he is saying: “I do not accept the Salafi *madhhab* as a *madhhab*.” So we were far from each other and he did not frequent my store. However, I came to know that he first leaned towards some things when he and his brother ‘Abd al-Qādir attended a few of the classes that I gave in the rented hall. But then they stopped coming because they feared that they would be labeled as being part of the group.

Shaykh Shu‘ayb edited some of my books, which Zuhayr would publish while he was employed there. If he saw a mistake he would not mention it until it had been printed. If you have a copy of

⁷⁴ Although this is only an example, his choice of words is interesting. Albānī insisted that people ask for a *dalīl* and not the opinion of scholars. Additionally, he insisted that scholars give evidence for their statements. However, in this example his brother is essentially engaging in *taqlīd*. Naturally, Albānī’s brother would relay the answer as coming from Albānī, and not provide the evidence himself because he would not know it.

The Explanation of Ṭaḥāwī's Creed (Sharḥ al-Aqīda al-Ṭaḥāwīya), which I performed evaluated its ḥadīth while I was in Syria, you will see that it has a warning at the end of the book about the ḥadīth: “Whoever interprets the Qur’ān with his opinion, then let him find his seat in hell.” I stated that I could not find an origin for it. When he edited this draft, he found this mistake but did not inform Zuhayr until after the book was printed and I had gone to Saudi Arabia to teach ḥadīth at the Islamic University. Zuhayr wrote to me about it, so I wrote a clarification about how this was due to Shaykh Shu‘ayb’s plotting, enmity, and envy. So this was a mistake I made while I was in a hurry because I was getting ready to travel.

Ḥuwaynī: So you are saying that Shu‘ayb was one of the editors?

Albānī: Yes. We ask God to guide us and him to the straight path.⁷⁵

Dismissal from the University of Medina⁷⁶

Ḥuwaynī: How did you manage to teach at the Islamic University of Medina, since such a position usually requires a doctorate and formal training?

Albānī: Actually, this is the first time someone has asked me about this. If I remember correctly, there were two factors here: the university had just opened and started classes in that country, which had only recently started to modernize.⁷⁷ Additionally, the popularity of some of my published writings contributed to me being invited.⁷⁸ A group of scholars at the university were pleased with my writings and apparently appreciated and valued them. Therefore they invited

⁷⁵ The partial translation of Audi file B003 ends here 00:06:30.

⁷⁶ Beginning of Audio File B007. Start Time: 00:10:34.

⁷⁷ Albānī was appointed as a professor of ḥadīth in the University of Medina in 1961.

⁷⁸ I interviewed Suhaib Hasan, one of eighteen Pakistani students who joined the university in 1962, who studied with Albānī for two years. He notes that Albānī’s Salafi movement became very popular in the Arab lands and that there was always a conflict between it and *madhhab* Traditionalists, who were usually very strict Ḥanafīs or Shāfi‘īs and therefore spoke ill of Albānī. They were unhappy to hear his name not only because of his skill in ḥadīth, but also because he propagated his brand of Salafism. Moreover, he became famous due to his sharp criticism of those who performed *taqlīd* of one imam or *madhhab*, which was the case of most scholars in Medina and Saudi Arabia at the time, who followed the Ḥanbalī *madhhab*. It was not an issue of creed, since they were all Salafi, but an issue of his approach toward *fiqh*. This is an indication that Salfism at the time of Albānī was limited to a creed, which he then reformulated into an entire system or movement. Suhaib Hasan, *Interview by author*, August 26, 2013.

me; I did not ask them to invite me. This is how I lived, all praise to God. I have never asked for a job. Since my youth I have met my needs from the toil and work of my own hands. While I was working in this respect, the invitation arrived from Shaikh Muḥammad Āl Ibrāhīm, the mufti of the kingdom and the president of the university. He asked me to teach ḥadīth at the Islamic University that was about to open its doors. I sought advice from our brothers over there whose understanding and knowledge I trust. One of them said: “Try it and see. If you find that you benefit the students, then stay.” I was hesitant to go because I do not have any degrees and, generally speaking, teaching at universities does not suit my way of teaching. One brother convinced me by saying: “Try it for a year. If you find good outcome from your teaching, you will continue teaching for as long as it is decreed for you. Otherwise the year will end and you will return to your profession.”

I actually found that the environment was very good. First, it was open to accepting the Salafi call and second, the academic methodology of teaching was natural to me and the one that I usually followed. In my view, my position there was unusual for a professor because I was with the students as if I were one of them. When it was time for a break between classes the other professors usually went straight to their offices and spent the entire break – whether it was ten minutes or quarter of an hour I do not remember exactly – there drinking tea, coffee, and discussing various things. I used to leave the class and go out to the yard where I would sit on the sandy floor with the students I had been teaching a few minutes earlier. Students from other levels would also come and meet in that open-air gathering. I would give them guidance, advice, and answer their questions. This is how I spent my breaks between classes at the university. I clearly remember that one day a lecturer at the university walked by and said: “Peace be upon you.” I replied: “And peace be upon you.” He said: “Do you know, oh shaykh, that this is the

true class?”⁷⁹ Even though the students in this class would get hot, they would freely ask their questions. In the classroom, while it is true that I was open with them, there still there needed to be limits and restrictions.” In this manner, Albānī was unique among the teachers.⁸⁰

This approach had other good effects. For example, if he entered the university a few minutes before the class the students would circle around the car until it was lost among them. “Every student was competing with other students to ask a question. When I would leave the University to go home they would race to ride with me to Medina so they are not late when leaving and so that they could make use the opportunity, as our friend [Ḥuwaynī] has done [Albānī and Ḥuwaynī laugh]. This is how it was when I was going and returning from the university. My car was full of students both times. On the way there you would find students stranded on the road even though they had a special bus. The bus would stop by the Prophet’s mosque and leave at a certain time. Certainly some students were late so they would walk from Medina to the university. I would pick them up, my car often held more weight than it could handle, so they could get to the class on time. At the same time you would see the other professors, acting as though they were kings, not letting anybody ride with them.” This certainly instilled a connection and special love for Albānī within them.

On top of that he came with knowledge that they had never heard before. The professors of Qur’ānic exegesis, jurisprudence, and Islamic legal theory would narrate ḥadīths that were suitable for their lessons. The students then began to ask questions: “Oh professor, who narrated this ḥadīth?” “So and so.” “Okay, is its chain (*isnād*) authentic?” The professors were surprised

⁷⁹ Albānī states “As though he was informing me...”; the last part of the sentence is inaudible 16:13.

⁸⁰ According to Suhaib Hasan, Albānī differed from the other professors by being so accessible. He notes that Albānī was not very famous at the time; however, when he returned around 1976-78 he taught private classes and hundreds of students flocked to him. He relates that this fame was due to Albānī’s ḥadīth scholarship and propagation of his brand of Salafism wherever he went.

by this kind of inquiry.⁸¹ I clearly remember an incident that happened. A professor of Islamic legal theory mentioned a ḥadīth [pause] related to the legal principle [pause, Albānī trying to remember] yes: “The differences of my nation are a mercy.” I think it is this or like it. Do you remember a ḥadīth that is similar to it that is not authentic? [unclear statement of student 19:34]. This is authentic. [Albānī remembers] No, it is Mu‘ādh b. Jabal’s ḥadīth where the Prophet asked him: “With what will you judge?” He answered “With the book of God.” So the professor of Islamic legal theory mentioned this ḥadīth to his students, of course using it as an evidence for deductive analogy (*qiyās*). Our brother ‘Abd al-Rahmān ‘Abd al-Qādir, who is now in Kuwait and at the time was in his third year was present in the class. He asked: “Oh professor, is this ḥadīth authentic?” [The professor] replied: “Yes.” [‘Abd al-Rahmān] said: “We heard Shaykh Albānī say that this ḥadīth is *munkar*.”⁸² I do not remember what his response was but he was obviously not pleased with the student’s position. After a few days the professor came to my house and told me: “It reached me and that you said this ḥadīth is *munkar*.” I answered: “Yes.”

⁸¹ Prior to Albānī there was little interest in authenticating ḥadīths. When discussing this with Suhaib Hasan, he said: “They used to say the knowledge of ḥadīth was cooked, eaten, and digested. There was no room, and no one would think that a man would come and give rulings on ḥadīths.” Albānī arrived at the university and started “cooking” all over again. This not only surprised the professors, but also offended and outraged them. The fact that he instigated students to question and challenge their professors, sometimes in a rude manner, caused other professors to dislike him. Nevertheless, Albānī is to be credited for sparking a renewed study of ḥadīth texts, even if his opponents did so to refute him.

⁸² Although Albānī spent only a short time at the university, he left a strong impact on the Saudi religious scene. His ideas revived great interest in reexamining the ḥadīth, which in turn influenced all other fields of religious knowledge. Yūsuf al-Daynī, a former student of his, explains: “It had become a quasi-dictatorship of hadith. When a sheikh quoted a hadith in a sermon or a lecture, he could be interrupted any time by one of his students asking him: ‘Has this hadith been authenticated? Has al-Albani verified it?’ That could not help but strengthen the ulema’s antipathy toward him.” See S. Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 85. Moreover, the students’ is also attributed to him. Albānī and his students, who identified themselves as Salafis and *Ahl al-Ḥadīth*, engaged in particular practices that distinguished them in the social arena. Most of these practices were based on his fatwas, which contradicted the Wahhābī-Ḥanbalī consensus. For example they followed the rulings in a Albānī’s *Ṣīfat ṣalāt al-nabī* (*The Characteristics of the Prophet’s Prayer*), which he wrote to provide Muslims with a “pure” understanding of prayer. In it, he authorized the wearing of shoes while praying inside mosques and that the position of the hands in prayer differed from that recommended by centuries of Ḥanbalī jurisprudence. Albānī’s followers also considered the *mihṛāb* an evil innovation and thus eventually built their own mosques. Because of these conspicuous ritual differences, the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* provoked controversy and disputes not just in Medina’s mosques but nationwide. See S. Lacroix, *Awakening*, 88-89.

He said: “Have you written anything on this?” I replied: “Yes, in the *Series of Weak Ḥadīth (Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ḍa‘īfa)*.” This is in the second volume and, as you all know, it was printed at the time. He asked: “May I look at it?” I said: “Yes.” I showed him the piece in which I mentioned all of the paths of this ḥadīth and showed their weaknesses. During another one of his lessons he informed the students that the ḥadīth is authentic and that I had mentioned narrations that strengthened it, but you really only find that it contains weakness on top of weakness.”

Some of the professors were angered by my method of teaching, rare manifestation in the university, and the gathering of students around me. They wrote to the mufti, God knows best, directly and/or to the king and gave the impression that I was forming a party and doing something. I went back to Damascus for my summer vacation at the end of my third year. At the time Shaykh Bin Bāz, may God reward him with good, who was either the university’s vice president or actual president, wrote to me a week or two before my scheduled return. I clearly remember that one of my children, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, had to finish one of his lessons, so I sent him home before me so he could take the test. He was surprised to receive a letter from the mufti Shaykh Ibn Bāz saying that there was no need to renew the contract with me for the upcoming year. That was the end of my relationship with the university.⁸³ Ibn Bāz wrote me a nice letter, may God reward him with good, saying: “The likes of you performs his duty no matter where he is.”⁸⁴ In summary, it appears that I was invited to teach because they were not adhering to the

⁸³ Concerning Albānī’s dismissal, Suhaib Hasan said: “I am not sure what the main reason was, but some of the teachers in Medina went to Muhammad b. Ibrāhīm. This is how the order came to remove him.” The exact details surrounding his dismissal are not clear and perhaps may never be known. However, he clearly clashed with a number of scholars there. Hasan also noted that Albānī moved the university away from *fiqh*, causing it to be more ḥadīth orientated, and that his unconventional *fiqh* opinions certainly played a role in his dismissal. Although Albānī’s close friend Ibn Bāz also had some unconventional opinions, he was not dismissed because he was a Saudi, a mufti, and a highly respected individual. Thus his unconventional opinions were not a threat to his position. Hasan remarked that Ibn Bāz was famous and loved because of his good manners, hospitality to all, and generosity. On the other hand, Albānī became famous for always advancing his controversial brand of Salafism.

⁸⁴ Suhaib Hasan noted that Ibn Bāz was loved more for his character than his knowledge, which demonstrates his good will. Even though Albānī was removed from teaching, he still sent him a letter to boost his morale.

university's rules and because they needed someone whose knowledge and creed they could trust. This is what motivated them to appoint me to teach.”⁸⁵

Conclusion

Albānī's entire scholarly career was marked with controversy. His contentious views caused him to be kicked out of his home by his Ḥanafī father. Albānī's sour relationship with his father certainly played a role in his crusade against the *madhhabs*, and the Ḥanafī *madhhab* in particular. For Albānī, the application of the apparent meaning of the ḥadīth was uncompromisable and took precedence over all things. Moreover, he applied the ḥadīths in a confrontational “in your face” manner which furthered his iconoclastic reputation. His unconventional views and character brought him much confrontation, not only with his father and the Albanian community in Syria, but in Saudi Arabia and Jordan as well. Scholars from throughout the Muslim world felt the need to enter into debate with him. These debates may appear to revolve around trivial issues compared to the larger problems facing the Muslim world at the time. However, what consumed both sides in the debate was an attempt to defend their particular method of interpreting scripture and “authentic” Islam.

Albānī's iconoclastic opinions and personality caused his critics to respond to him with numerous book-length rebuttals and decades of debates between him and his *madhhab* Traditionalist critics. Ultimately, such disputes made him one of the most controversial figures, and the criticisms launched at him were really meant to attack his epistemological approach to scripture. But despite his many critics, he continues to enjoy great respect in Salafi circles due to his charismatic and confident proselytising of the textualist Salafi *da'wa*. His works and lectures

⁸⁵ End time 00:23:44.

continue to attract millions of young Muslims throughout the world, but some scholars consider his views so dangerous that they still feel the need to refute this now-deceased scholar.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ For instance, Maḥmūd Mamdūḥ has added another volume to his six-volume refutation of Albānī's dividing of the Sunan, which is currently under print.