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At first glance, the arrival of the year 2000 AD seems unlikely to provoke any great reaction – much less spiritual anxiety – among most Muslims. Any Western ‘centurial mysticism’ surrounding the date 1 January 2000 AD vanishes, after all, in the Hijri calendar equivalent of Ramadan 24, 1420. But despite the outward irrelevance of the Gregorian 2000 to most of the *ummah*, one Islamic mystical brotherhood – the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order – finds the advent of the year 2000 one of several powerful symbolic events in which traditional Sunni ideas of the ‘Last Day’ intersect with the millennial expectations of a new generation of European and American converts to Islam.

A Sufi Apocalypse

northwestern China, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia. Linking the Naqshbandis across these diverse ethnic, social and historic settings are a set of defining features: an uncompromising Sunni orientation, emphasis on *shari‘ah* and *sunnah*, and a tradition of full social and political participation in the world.

Shaykh Nazim Haqqani (b. 1922) is the ‘grand-shaykh’ and namesake of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani lineage. The son of a junior Egyptian colonial administrator in British Cyprus, Shaykh Nazim’s spiritual education began in Istanbul; later, in Damascus, he joined the order under Shaykh ‘Abd Allah Daghestani (d. 1973). Deputed to Cyprus, Shaykh Nazim ‘spread spiritual guidance and Islamic teachings’ for seven years before eventually returning to Syria.

Naqshbandi-Haqqani hagiographies portray the period from the early 1950s until 1974 as one of intense spiritual activity for Shaykh Nazim, marked by lengthy retreats and extensive preaching tours in Syria and Cyprus. He encouraged people ‘to leave atheism, secularism and materialism and to come back to God,’ but his criticisms of the Cypriot coalition government led to his expulsion in 1965 and his eventual return to Damascus.

The Haqqani branch, based around Shaykh Nazim’s distinctive practice, emerged in 1973. Empowered by the spirit of the Prophet Muhammad, Shaykh Nazim began his mission ‘to spread the light of Islam into the European countries.’ He travelled first to London and, encouraged by the followers of Gurdjieff protégé John G. Bennett (d. 1974), established a centre. Each year since then, Shaykh Nazim has made it his custom to spend Ramadan in London before returning overland across Europe to the Middle East, halting en route to teach about Islam and the Naqshbandi order. His efforts expanded to include South and Southeast Asia, and by the late 1980s the Haqqani branch claimed to have followers all over Asia, including thousands in Pakistan and over 20,000 disciples in Sri Lanka.

Shaykh Nazim’s first trips to the United States and Canada were in 1991, with the result (according to Haqqani literature) of over 10,000 people becoming Muslims and Naqshbandis. That same year, Shaykh Hisham Kabbani (Shaykh Nazim’s son-in-law and spiritual deputy) was named shaykh of the order in the Western Hemisphere and ordered to reside in the United States. Today Shaykh Hisham oversees a network of twenty-three mosques, centres and retreats, anchored by a ‘convention and retreat centre’ on farmland in Michigan and by his own residence in northern California.

The ‘signs of the Hour’ and the Mahdi

The Naqshbandi-Haqqani order is virtually alone among contemporary Sunni groups in its accent on the Mahdi, the ‘signs of the Hour’ and the end of this world. By virtue of their mystical visions, status and insights, the Haqqani shaykhs claim deep insight into the unfolding events of the imminent ‘last days’. Traditional Sunni eschatology is built around the Qur’an’s urgent, vivid images of cosmic anarchy (the ‘signs of the Hour’) and from a wealth of related Prophetic traditions. The decline of society and cataclysmic events in the natural world announce the ‘Last Day’, which climaxes in the physical resurrection and ultimate judgement of all human beings. For Sunnis, belief in this final day is part of *iman* (‘faith’), just as knowledge of precisely when these events will occur is Allah’s alone. But if the certainty of these eschatological events is agreed upon, the complex details of the apocalyptic script are not. The events, their order and the precise roles of such figures as ‘Isa (Jesus) and the Mahdi (‘the rightly-guided one’) and Dajjal (the ‘Deceiver’) are shadowy and contested in a rich and unwieldy literature of Muslim chiliastic traditions.

For the Naqshbandi-Haqqani shaykhs, however, mystical illumination allows no confusion about the proper understanding of the traditional Sunni sources – the Dajjal and the Mahdi are presently alive, Armageddon is imminent, and vast, profound changes loom in the world. In 1992, Shaykh Hisham assured his listeners:

‘We are the only group expecting Mahdi and Jesus’ coming very soon. We are on the right track. We have met them.’

Moreover, the shaykhs maintain a visionary spiritual connection with the two figures.

‘What I am telling you is according to true vision, not vague or imagined. Mahdi (s) and Jesus (s) are among you.’¹

The Naqshbandi-Haqqani shaykhs present an idiosyncratic and complicated agenda for the last days, all anchored with references to historic Muslim thinkers as diverse as Ibn Kathir and Ibn Al-‘Arabi. At one point England will peaceably convert to Islam, and hidden saints will operate in Germany and China. Global Pax Americana will ensue before World War III erupts around Turkey. Billions will die before Mahdi and ‘Isa appear to slay Dajjal and inaugurate their miraculous reign of love, justice, peace and happiness. Afterwards, the world and time will conclude with the final judgement.

Shaykh Nazim has been tapped for a special role in these last days. The Mahdi, presently occulted in a cave in the ‘Empty Quarter’ in

the Arabian Peninsula, has charged Shaykh Nazim with the spiritual preparation of his ‘helpers’ – the Muslims and non-Muslims who will rally behind the ‘rightly-guided one’ when he declares his redemptive mission.² Ignoring occasional Muslim criticism of their prophecies and ‘fortune-telling’, both Shaykh Nazim and Shaykh Hisham selectively share their mystical foreknowledge of coming events. On some ‘secrets’, however, they are silent, maintaining they have not yet received the Mahdi’s permission to speak.

Ecumenical Apocalypticism

The Haqqani shaykhs mix traditional eschatological motifs with their own mystical interpretations of current times: the result is a shifting, event-driven script of the ‘last days’ that is at once timely and timeless. Shaykh Nazim’s specific (and elastic) end-time predictions have ranged to explain new figures (such as the Russian ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy) as well as dramatic developments including the Gulf War and the fall of Communism. This ability to relate even the most unexpected events to a larger explanatory framework – that is, to draw eternal meaning from the ‘chaos’ of the ephemeral world – may be the most powerful lure of almost all contemporary apocalyptic movements world-wide.

There is much room within the evolving Naqshbandi-Haqqani mystical exegesis of world events for sharing apocalyptic themes and imagery. Striking examples of this borrowing abound. Shaykhs Nazim and Hisham speak easily of ‘Armageddon’ and ‘World War III’, the ‘Anti-Christ’ and the ‘Saviour’, in their discussions with Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe and North America. Both shaykhs also offer (and revise) their predicted beginnings for the last days (which have included 1987, 1989, 1991, 1993 and 2000) in the Gregorian and not the Hijri calendar. Though all the symbols noted above can have an Islamic provenance, they are also instantly and unmistakably familiar to many Western audiences in an entirely different context. The Haqqanis employ this shared apocalyptic vocabulary to poignantly emphasize how Islam and Islamic spirituality are vital to the lives of even their non-Muslim listeners.

Despite the frequent and spectacular failures of Naqshbandi-Haqqani apocalyptic prophecy, the order’s popularity continues to rise. This is a salient clue to a deeper function of ‘Mahdism’ in Naqshbandi-Haqqani rhetoric. For, while it may be curiosity or concern over the ‘last days’ that might draw some initiates to the order, these initiates are able to find satisfying reasons to stay

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The Naqshbandi-Haqqani order, with roots in Turkey, Cyprus, Lebanon and Syria, has emerged since the mid-1970s as one of the most visible and fastest-growing Sufi orders in Western Europe and North America. The success of this conservative, *shari‘ah*-minded spiritual movement in attracting Europeans and Americans to both Islam and Sufism stems from a number of sources. The order’s teachings promote time-honoured and appealing mystical themes that include spiritual growth, love, respect for the natural environment and religious toleration, all of which, the order insists, are epitomized in the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad. The message is effectively distributed to a wide following on the internet, in books and pamphlets, and through a well-organized network of national Sufi centres and local circles that gather for weekly *zikr* (a communal ritual that ‘remembers’ Allah). The two main leaders of the order, Shaykh Nazim Haqqani and his deputy Shaykh Hisham Kabbani, reinforce these teachings and cement powerful personal ties with their followers through almost constant touring and travel.

Also included within the order’s teachings – but by no means its major focus – are sporadic references to an eclectic and complex apocalyptic scenario that is grounded firmly in Sunni eschatology but driven by mystically inspired visionary insight into current events, politics, and the future. The result is a vision of troubled times ahead that resonates powerfully with certain modern Western audiences, whether Christian, Muslim or avowedly non-religious.

Rise of the Order

The Naqshbandi-Haqqani order is a modern branch of the larger well-known Naqshbandi order, a Sufi brotherhood that took its name and inspiration from the 14th century Central Asian mystic Khwaja Baha’ al-din Naqshband. Historically, the Naqshbandis have enjoyed enduring popularity and are active today especially in Turkey, Afghanistan, the Balkans, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, India,

Sharafuddin ad-Daghestani
Khalid al-Baghdadi
Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi
Yaqub al-Charkhi
Khwaja Mahmud al-Anjiri al-Faghawi
Abul Hassan Ali al-Kharqani
The Prophet Muhammad
Ismail Muhammad ash-Shirwani
Muhammad Sayfuddin al-Faraj al-Mujaddidi
Muhammad al-Ma’sumi
‘Ubaydulloh al-Ahmar
‘Ali al-Ramitani
Abu ‘Ali al-Farmani
Abu Bakr as-Siddiq
Jamiluddin al-Ghumiqi
Khas Muhammad Shirwani
Soyid Nur Muhammad al-Bada’uni
Muhammad az-Zahid
Muhammad Baba as-Samsi
Abu Ya’qub Yusuf al-Hamadani
Salman al-Farsi
‘Abdullah al-Fa’iz ad-Daghestani
Muhammad Effendi al-Yaraghi
Shamsuddin Habib Allah
Darwish Muhammad
Soyid Amir Kulal
Abul ‘Abbas al-Khidr
Qassim ibn Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr
Shaykh Muhammad Nazim Adil al-Haqqani
Abu Ahmad as-Sughuri
Muhammad Baha’uddin Shah Naqshband
‘Abdul Khaliq al-Ghujarwani
Jafar as-Sadiq
Abu Muhammad al-Madani
‘Abdullah ad-Dahlawi
Muhammad al-Baqi billah
Ala’uddin al-Bukhari al-‘Akkar
‘Arif al-Riwakri
Tayfur Abu Yazid al-Bistami
Transmission

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even when the predictions are discredited. Explaining the year 2000 – and not the year 1420 – becomes the point of entry to a larger project of inviting a generation of Europeans and North Americans to discover Islam. ‘Last day’ imagery serves as a timely and effective teaching tool with which the shaykhs drive home to their followers more subtle spiritual teachings about the afterlife, mystical praxis and Islam. The Haqqanis speak to modern millennial anxieties, religious disenchantment, interest in prophesy, and the search for spiritual truth – familiar themes informing some of the most diverse and dynamic expressions of spirituality in the modern West – and change the conversation from one about the end of this world to an Islamic dialogue concerned with life in the next. ◆

Notes

1. Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, (1993), *Mercy Oceans Secrets of the Heart*, Haqqani Islamic Trust, Fenton, Michigan, p. 10. I am grateful for Mr Mateen Siddiqui’s help in clarifying the meaning of this passage.
2. Shaykh Muhammad Nazim Adil al-Haqqani an-Naqshbandi, (1994), *Mystical Secrets of the Last Days*, Haqqani Islamic Trust for New Muslims, Los Altos, California, pp. 125-129.

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