Abu I-Huda was born in a small village on the margins of the northern Syrian desert in 1850 into a family of humble origins. In his early childhood, he was initiated into the Rifa‘iyya order, which is spread today in the rural areas of Syria and Iraq. He was quick to develop substantial contacts with Rifa‘i sheikhs in Aleppo, whose accession to the throne marked the end of the tanzimat, a period of wide-ranging administrative reforms in Ottoman history.

Abu I-Huda was allegedly one of the most powerful men in the Ottoman Empire for several years. From 1881 onwards, he committed to publishing activities. It is claimed that he wrote up to 200 books, of which approximately 60 can still be found today. He died in Istanbul on a Bosphorus island of Prinkipo where he had been exiled by the Young Turks after their coup d’état. Apart from this, little is known with certainty about Abu I-Huda.

In existing literature, he has been characterized as a reactionary and obscurantist, who tried to oppose the reforms of his time. He is usually juxtaposed with one of the two fore-thinkers of Arab nationalism: Abd al-Rahman al-Kawaltuli or Butrus al-Bustani. By this, he is interpreted as a mere tool in the hands of Abd al-Hamid II for spreading his pan-Islamic propaganda. Unfortunately, this interpretation rests on only one small booklet of Abu I-Huda which, even at a short glance over his publication list, is clearly an exception. No thorough attempts have been made to question how this astonishing career was possible, what happened after Abu I-Huda had permanently settled in Istanbul and what comprised the contents of his writings. It might even be said that, over time, analyst gave way to the development of an ‘Abu I-Huda tropé’, which is generally applied when something negative has to be said or explained away about the political and intellectual developments of the Ottoman Empire and especially its Arab provinces under Abd al-Hamid II.

The sources

When endeavouring to investigate Abu I-Huda, the reason for these fascinating facets in our knowledge of the important period in Middle Eastern history soon comes to light: the sources. To begin with, there is no autobiography and the biographies of some of his followers – once they are discovered – offer little information due to their laudatory genre. Paining research is necessary to find a substantial number of his books, and acquiring trustworthy and dated information through interviews poses difficulties. The archive of Butrus al-Bustani in Istanbul consulted thus far contain only material about two or three isolated episodes. Even classic strategies employed by historians of the Middle East, such as consulting waqf documents in Aleppo, provide scant results. Investigating Abu I-Huda is indeed a quest for a phantom.

What can be secured from these sources is information about people who had contact with Abu I-Huda. A certain pattern of recurring names reveals itself and many of these men can easily be identified. By such means, the common depictions of Abu I-Huda as an obstinate and reactionary are severely contested: he obviously had early contacts with outstanding scholars in Damascus who were later to gain fame as the forefathers of the Syrian Salafi movement. After his rise to influence in Istanbul, he supported such famous reform-minded theologians as Muhhd Shukri al-‘Alisi in Baghdad by providing him with a teaching post at the Sultan al-Mu‘tamed, which had been founded by the Khedive. Usually recognized and re-established due to Abu I-Huda’s intervention. This being said, the similarities between the contents of especially Abu I-Huda’s later writings to reformers such as Muhammad Abduh come as no surprise.

The common interpretation of the intellectual history of the Middle East in the late 19th century rests on an assumed rupture between reform-minded ulema advocating their vision of an Islam purified of popular practices and superstitious beliefs, on the one hand, and reactionary traditionalists resisting any change, on the other. Abu I-Huda is usually interpreted within this frame as the outstanding representative of the latter. This picture is erroneous.

Since Abu I-Huda was the leader of the Rifa‘iya order in his time, which was popular especially among the lower strata of society, he undoubtedly represented the more traditionalist camp in this dichotomy. But analysis of his social networks as well as of the development of his writings over time shows that the so-called ‘traditionalists’ had a permanent exchange of ideas with the reformers, thus developing a new interpreta-

Note

In earlier literature, Abd al-Hamid’s reign was totally juxtaposed to the tanzimat period, while in more recent studies critical emphasis is placed on the continuities between the two periods.

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Quest for a Phantom

Investigating Abu I-Huda al-Sayyadi

The shrine of Ahmad al-Sayyadi, ancestor of Abu I-Huda, near the city of Huma, the spiritu- al centre of the Ri fa‘iya in Syria.