

AḤMAD ZAYNĪ DAḤLĀN'S
AL-FUTUHĀT AL-ISLĀMIYYA: A CONTEMPORARY VIEW
OF THE SUDANESE MAHDI

HEATHER J. SHARKEY¹

Sayyid Aḥmad b. Zaynī Daḥlān (1817-1886) was a prominent Meccan who became the leading *muftī* of the Shāfi'ī *madhhab* and head of the corporation of *'ulamā'* in his native city.² He was also a prolific writer. Joseph Schacht describes him as 'the solitary representative of historical writing in Mecca in the nineteenth century', unusual for addressing the 'controversial topical questions' of his time.³ Shortly before his death in 1886, Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān finished *al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya*, a lengthy survey of the Islamic conquests from the wars of apostasy (*riḍḍa*, 632-33) to his own day.⁴ One of its last sections discusses the fledgling Mahdist movement of a man named Muḥammad Aḥmad from the Sudan.⁵ Although this section has until now escaped the

- 1 The author would like to thank the following sources for supporting her three-month research visit to the University of Bergen: the American-Scandinavian Foundation (Crown Princess Martha Friendship Fund); Center of International Studies, Princeton University (Boesky Family Fund); Council on Regional Studies, Princeton University; and Program in Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University. The author would also like to thank Professor R.S. O'Fahey for bringing Daḥlān's treatise to her attention.
- 2 As Shāfi'ī *muftī* he had many students from Southeast Asia, where he was well known. See C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century* (trans. J.H. Monahan), Leiden: E.J. Brill 1931, 237-8 and *passim*.
- 3 Daḥlān wrote extensively on the Wahhābī movement, for example, J. Schacht, 'Sayyid Aḥmad b. Zaynī Daḥlān', *EI* (2), II, 91; *GAL*, II, 499-500, S II, 810-11; *ALA*, I, 333.
- 4 *Al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya* was first published as a lithograph in Mecca in 1884-85. This essay relies upon the Cairo edition of 1968.
- 5 The term *mahdī* means 'rightly guided [leader]' (implying guidance from God) and has Muslim millenarian overtones. Mahdist movements of the

attention of Sudan specialists, it represents an important contemporary source on the Sudanese Mahdist movement, and is of interest for two reasons. First, Daḥlān provides a Muslim, but non-Sudanese, perspective on Muḥammad Aḥmad's mission and its legitimacy. Second, Daḥlān uses his discussion on the Sudanese Mahdī to present his own opinions on the Muslim world's weakness *vis-à-vis* the European powers, on the nature of a proper Islamic state, and on the urgent need for Muslims to regain the spiritual and political vigour which characterized the age of the first four caliphs (632-661).

Al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya chronicles Muslim military history after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in 632. Volume 1 of the 1968 edition charts Muslim territorial expansion into the Fertile Crescent and beyond, chronologically leading to the era of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and the Crusades. Volume 2 concentrates primarily on the Mongol conquests and the Ottoman Empire. Daḥlān's discussion of the Sudanese Mahdī appears in the section devoted to the Ottoman sultan, ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd II (r. 1876-1909), who was reigning while he wrote. He surveys events in ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd II's reign from 1876 until the early 1880s.⁶ He notes the progressive shrinkage of the Ottoman domains, caused by the crushing loss of the Empire's Balkan territories (notably Bosnia-Hercegovina and Bulgaria) after defeat by the Russians in the wars of 1877-78;⁷ the leasing of Cyprus to the British in 1878;⁸

past have appealed to the discontented and have called for radical political change and religious reform. On the notion of the *mahdī* in Muslim thought, see W. Madelung, 'al-Mahdī', *EI* (2), v, 1230-8. The classic text on the Sudanese movement is: P.M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881-1898*, 2nd edn, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1970. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm has published the complete works of the Sudanese Mahdī in seven volumes: *al-Athār al-kāmila*, Khartoum: Khartoum University Press 1990-94.

- 6 Al-Sayyid Aḥmad b. Zaynī Daḥlān, *al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya, baʿda mudī al-futuḥāt al-nabawiyya*, Cairo 1968, II, 290-3.
- 7 Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988, II, 182-4, 186-7.
- 8 Disraeli's government in Britain proposed the occupation of Cyprus as a means of guarding against Russian expansion into Ottoman Anatolia and, by extension, into the Mediterranean. The Cyprus

the French occupation of Tunisia in 1881;⁹ and the °Urābī Revolt and the British occupation of Egypt in 1882.¹⁰

It is no accident that his discussion of the Sudanese Mahdi follows this dismal chronicle of territorial loss in the Islamic world. Implicit in Daḥlān's attitude towards Muḥammad Aḥmad of the Sudan is the tentative hope that he could be on a God-inspired mission, sent to restore the position of Islam and to fortify Muslims both spiritually and politically. Hence Daḥlān's attitude towards the Sudanese movement is simultaneously cautious and open-minded.

Much news reached Daḥlān about the events occurring in the Sudan. He wrote that in 1297/1879-80¹¹ there emerged a man

Convention of 4 June 1878, turned the region into a British protectorate operating in the name of the Ottoman sultan. The Ottomans continued to control the island's religious, judicial, and educational affairs; Shaw and Shaw, *Ottoman Empire*, 190.

- 9 Daḥlān's dating for the French conquest of Tunisia appears to be too early by at least a few months. He suggests that the occupation occurred in 1297/1879-80, when in fact France invaded Tunisia in late April 1881 (Jumādā I 1298). Similarly, he attributes an early date to the beginning of the Sudanese Mahdist movement; see below. On the role of France in Tunisia, see Lisa Anderson, *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1986.
- 10 A large literature exists on the °Urābī Revolt and on the British occupation of Egypt. One of the most recent works is Juan R.I. Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's °Urabi Movement*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993.
- 11 Daḥlān's chronology raises an interesting point. The standard date for Muḥammad Aḥmad's declaration of *mahdī*-ship to his disciples is Rabī' II 1298/March 1881; see Holt, *Mahdist State*, 53. It would first appear that Daḥlān's dating for the emergence of Muḥammad Aḥmad as *mahdī* would be at least a few months too early to be accurate. But Yoshiko Kurita has informed this writer that oral traditions from the Sudan's Ḥalāwīn district of the Gezira region suggest that Muḥammad Aḥmad had been confiding his *mahdī*-ship to close friends for some time before March 1881 (Yoshiko Kurita, interviews in Ḥalāwīn district, February 1994). Theoretically it is possible that early news of Muḥammad Aḥmad's immanent declaration travelled along the network of religious scholars and reached Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān in Mecca.

named Muḥammad Aḥmad, reputedly a Ḥasanī *sharīf* (a descendant of the Prophet through his grandson Ḥasan) and a *shaykh* of the Sammāniyya Sufi *ṭarīqa* who was famous for his piety. In clashes with the troops of Khedive Tawfīq and later of the British—at Kordofan, Kassala, Khartoum, Berber, and Dongola—Muḥammad Aḥmad won, although remarkably, his supporters wielded mere spears and knives in contrast to the sophisticated weaponry of the other side. Near Suakin, an associate of Muḥammad Aḥmad named °Uthmān Dīqna¹² defeated British and Egyptian troops in spectacular victories. Reports suggested that Muḥammad Aḥmad's forces numbered 300,000 men or more.¹³

Was Muḥammad Aḥmad the *mahdī*? The reports that reached Daḥlān differed. Some said that he called himself the *mahdī*; others claimed that he had not done so, but that his goal was simply to restore the *sharī'ca* and to expel the British from Egypt. Whereas most said that he was truly a pious man, others condemned him on the grounds that his troops engaged eagerly in plundering and in the killing of innocent people, including °*ulamā'*, pious men, women, and children. Still others insisted that Muḥammad Aḥmad frowned upon the killing and looting that his followers carried out.¹⁴

Following this survey of events in the Sudan, the treatise resorts to the historical technique of citing the works of past scholars at length. Discussion revolves around *ḥadīth* on the *mahdī* as analyzed in relevant works by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 1565), al-Qurṭūbī (d. 1272), and others. The author also surveys the historical theories of Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1382) on mahdist movements. It is difficult to isolate Daḥlān's position towards the Sudanese movement, since he deftly weaves his own ideas on the subject into what is largely a narrative of historical paraphrase. Nevertheless, by carefully

12 A brief summary of the life of the Mahdist *amīr* °Uthmān Dīqna (c. 1840-1926) appears in Richard Hill, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, 2nd edn, London: Frank Cass & Co. 1967, 367-8. See also H.C. Jackson, *Osman Digna*, London 1926.

13 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt*, II, 293-4.

14 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt*, II, 294.

following the threads of the author's argumentation, it becomes apparent that Daḥlān's opinions on the subject were firm and clear.

In short, Daḥlān is willing to accept the idea that Muḥammad Aḥmad of the Sudan may be a *mahdī*—a rightly guided leader sent to restore the faith—since he possesses some of the qualities which various *hadīth* specify, and since he may be on a pious mission to re-establish justice and the *sharī'a*.¹⁵ However, Daḥlān indicates that Muḥammad Aḥmad cannot be *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*—the true herald of the end of time, the forerunner of Christ (°Isā) and the Anti-Christ (al-Dajjāl). To be *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*, one must fulfil certain crucial prerequisites: one must be a descendant of Fāṭima, one must emerge in Mecca, and one must appear at a time of chaos (*fitna*) when Muslims are lacking a caliph (*khalīfa*).¹⁶ Muḥammad Aḥmad of the Sudan cannot be *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*, says Daḥlān, because the Muslim world does have a caliph and a commander of the faithful—namely, the Ottoman Sultan, °Abd al-Ḥamīd II.¹⁷

Daḥlān's wording suggests that he accepted the premise of °Abd al-Ḥamīd's caliphate, and by extension the cause of Pan-Islamism,¹⁸ insofar as the Ottoman sultan could serve as a unifying force for Muslims in the troubled times when Daḥlān was writing. Hence Daḥlān declares that if Muḥammad Aḥmad is not a *mahdī*, but rather a tyrant rebelling against the sultan, then he should be killed. If he is not a *mahdī*, his mission may nevertheless serve the good purpose of expelling the British from Egypt and helping the Ottoman state (*al-dawla al-°Uthmāniyya*). In case

15 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt*, II, 295.

16 See 'Ignaz Goldziher on al-Suyūṭī', edited and annotated by John O. Hunwick in *The Muslim World*, xlviii, 1979, 77-99 where his ideas on *tajdīd* and the *mahdī* are discussed in detail.

17 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt*, II, 297. Sultan °Abd al-Ḥamīd staked his claim to be the universal caliph for Muslims in Articles 3 and 4 of the 1876 Ottoman Constitution; Shaw and Shaw, *Ottoman Empire*, 175.

18 Shaw and Shaw call Pan-Islamism 'the most widespread ideological force in the Ottoman Empire during Abdulhamit's years'. They see it as a reaction against Western influence and European penetration which largely succeeded in deterring the Great Powers from further expansionism after 1882; Shaw and Shaw, *Ottoman Empire*, 259-60.

of the latter, Daḥlān speculates that Muḥammad Aḥmad may fulfil a *ḥadīth* cited by al-Suyūṭī, according to which an African *amīr* will act as precursor to *al-mahdī* [*al-muntaẓar*].¹⁹

In endorsing a theory of multiple *mahdīs* but of one *mahdī muntaẓar*, Daḥlān points to Ibn Ḥajar for precedent. He also implies that some of the other men who were acclaimed as *mahdī* figures in the past—Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya (d. 700), °Umar b. °Abd al-°Azīz (d. 720), Ibn Tūmart (d. 1130), and Muḥammad b. °Abd Allāh ‘the Pure Soul’ (d. 762), for example²⁰—may have been *mahdīs* but were likewise not *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*.²¹ Trying to predict the advent of *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar* is futile, Daḥlān argues, because his arrival depends upon the will of God—and even the Prophet Muḥammad himself did not realize the immanence of his mission until after the angel Gabriel appeared to him. Also, *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar* cannot declare himself; his presence will be made clear through the acclamation of the people who pay him homage (*bay°a*).²²

The battles of the Sudanese Mahdist movement are the last battles to which *al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya* refers. This discussion of Muḥammad Aḥmad’s movement and of mahdist movements across history provides Daḥlān with an opportunity to present his own opinions on the nature and legitimacy of Muslim activism and reform during troubled times. ‘I have seen from many treatises written on the *mahdī* issue that [the *mahdī*] cannot succeed in his cause unless he implements the *sharī°a* and follows the example of the Prophet (may God bless and protect him) and of the rightly-guided caliphs...’²³

For Daḥlān, the key to emulating the Prophet and the first four caliphs, and therefore the key to restoring the religious and political vitality of the Muslim world, rests in *zuhd*—that is, in self-restraint or asceticism in this-worldly affairs, accompanied by hard work and simple living. ‘They say that people follow the religion of their kings’, writes Daḥlān, ‘thus the greatest caliph is

19 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt*, II, 296-7.

20 See Madelung, ‘al-Mahdī’.

21 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt*, II, 298.

22 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt*, II, 300.

23 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt*, II, 305.

the one who serves as a model for all Muslims'.²⁴ He resorts to historical example to prove his point. The Umayyad caliph al-Walīd b. ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 705-15) was obsessed with architectural projects; hence in his time the people were mainly interested in the construction of monuments and castles.²⁵ Walīd's brother and successor, Sulaymān b. ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 715-17), was a glutton, obsessed with food; hence Muslims in his time took pride in grand cuisine.²⁶ (In Daḥlān's eyes, both reigns symbolized the sorry state of the Umayyad caliphate.) It was only when ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (r. 717-20) became caliph that a link was forged to the rightly-guided caliphs. ʿUmar II occupied himself with pious deeds, the implementation of justice, and so forth, and the result was that the people became similarly interested in matters of the faith and in good works.²⁷ The moral of the story is that only when the leaders of society—kings, sultans, *amīrs*, judges, and ʿulamāʾ—display this quality of *zuhd*, will the people follow.

He who demands *zuhd* in this world, writes Daḥlān, is the greatest caliph, paving the way for religious reform (*islāḥ*), the implementation of the *sharīʿa*, the killing of unbelievers, and so on. For a ruler to show *zuhd* he must put himself on parity with other Muslims and show self-restraint in regard to the treasury (*bayt al-māl*).²⁸ Commoners and elites alike must take for them-

24 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt*, II, 305.

25 Among Walīd's building projects were the Umayyad mosque of Damascus (transforming the Basilica of St. John the Baptist on the same site) and the great mosques of Mecca and Medina. H. Lammens, 'al-Walīd b. ʿAbd al-Malik', *EI* (1), VIII, 1111. Walīd's father, the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik, had embarked on large public works projects, notably by expanding the Iraqī irrigation system. Shaban writes, 'But Walīd I's projects, mainly in Syria and Hijaz, were altogether more elaborate and it is rather more difficult to see the rationale behind them'. M.A. Shaban, *Islamic History, A.D. 600-750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1971, 117-18.

26 See Shaban, *Islamic History*, 127-30.

27 See Shaban, *Islamic History*, 131-7.

28 In his article on the *mahdī* concept, Madelung writes, 'In the late Umayyad age, Maṭar b. Ṭahmān al-Warrāk (d. 125/743?), a Khurāsānian resident in Baṣra and the senior disciple of Ḳatāda, rejected the view that ʿUmar II was the Mahdī, stating that the Mahdī

selves only what they need to subsist, and must practice charity towards the poor. The long-term effect will be for poverty to disappear over time, and for harmony to prevail. Unbelievers are conquering Muslims today, warns the author, because Muslims are succumbing to this-worldly desires, and because Muslim rulers are dipping into the treasuries to bestow favours upon their friends. Simple living and social equity—patterned on the example of the rightly-guided caliphs—are the keys to Muslim unity and to Muslim victory over the unbelievers.²⁹

Al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya begins in Volume 1 by charting the spectacular military victories of the early Muslim community. By contrast, the last section devoted to military history in Volume 2 chronicles the Ottoman Empire's territorial losses in the face of European encroachment. Prompted by this bleak record, the author urges Muslims to reverse the negative trends of the present by patterning themselves on the rightly-guided caliphs. Thus the very last pages of the treatise present for emulation the biographies of the Prophet, of the first four caliphs, and strikingly, of the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz.³⁰

Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān, like many Muslims before and after him,³¹ hailed ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz as the one caliph who approximated the example of the rightly-guided caliphs long after the age of the rightly-guided had passed. In his treatise he suggests that the Muslim world of his day needed another man like ʿUmar II to restore the pristine faith and power of the early

would do something ʿUmar II had not done: he would refuse to accept money returned to the treasury by someone who, after requesting it, found that he had no need of it'; Madelung, 'al-Mahdī', 1232. Daḥlān's thoughts on treasury policy echo this idea, so it seems plausible to suggest that he was familiar with the work of Maṭar (or another source who quoted him).

29 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt*, II, 306.

30 Cf. *Bayān wujūb al-ḥijra* of ʿUthmān b. Fūdī which follows a similar pattern. Of course, the Sudanese Mahdi himself appointed three of his followers to positions named after the rightly-guided caliphs.

31 For example, on the exemplary stature of ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz in the political thought of Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1930), see Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, Austin: University of Texas Press 1982, 71.

years of Islam, to conquer as Europe was now conquering them. Or rather, the Muslim world needed *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*. In his treatise he explains that when the *mahdī* comes:

He will follow the path of the rightly-guided caliphs; he will renounce this world,³² he will only take from the treasury according to need. The people in his time will follow his manner, doing as he does. Then it will appear from this that ... all the people will become an army for the triumph of Islam.³³

Daḥlān doubted whether Muḥammad Aḥmad of the Sudan was such a man. Nevertheless, as *al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya* makes clear, he was ready to welcome any efforts which could help to reverse the current tide of events.

32 That is, he will show *zuhd* in this world: '*yazhadu fi 'l-dunyā*'.

33 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt*, II, 306-7.