

Al-Azhar had not been a source of editions of classical texts before 'Abduh, and it did not become one after him. As a religious seminary, al-Azhar saw itself primarily as the upholder of a timeless religious tradition that could be mastered by studying the texts of its curriculum. From this perspective, the drive to discover and resurrect forgotten texts was inherently suspicious: if a text had fallen out of circulation, it had likely done so for a good reason, being inferior or deviant; and even if it was neither, the fact that it was no longer encased in a living interpretive tradition in the form of detailed commentaries meant that both the form and the content of the text were dangerously underdetermined. Reformist scholars who sought to expand the scope of the curriculum were implicitly denying the comprehensiveness of the tradition and trying to reinject into it ideas that it had already discarded.

Therefore, the task of editing classical works continued to be carried out mostly by intellectuals educated in nonseminary institutions—"men of the pen"—or by scholars with religious training who, for one reason or another, stood apart from the mainstream seminary system—individuals such as al-Shinqīṭī, the perennial outsider; Riḍā, who channeled his education and skills into the publishing industry; and the energetic reformer who was called "the Muḥammad 'Abduh of Syria,"⁴⁵ Ṭāhir al-Jazā'irī.

THE MULTIFACETED ACTIVISM OF ṬĀHIR AL-JAZĀ'IRĪ

We have already encountered Ṭāhir al-Jazā'irī as the driving force behind the establishment of manuscript libraries in Damascus and other Levantine cities in chapter 1 and as Aḥmad Zakī's friend and helper in chapter 5. But al-Jazā'irī's influence on modern Arabic book culture was far more extensive. His private manuscript collection, his notes on the holdings of the Ṣāhīriyya Library, and his role in the publication of several important classical works have left an enduring imprint on the landscape of classical Arabo-Islamic literature. Like 'Abduh, al-Jazā'irī believed in the potential of literature and ethical writings to contribute to communal improvement, but he was less a public intellectual than he was a scholar, possessing a deep familiarity with manuscript literature and steering the rediscovery of classical texts both openly and from behind the scenes.⁴⁶

Al-Jazā'irī was born in Damascus in 1852. His family had been part of a wave of Algerian immigrants that had arrived in Damascus in the wake of Amir 'Abd al-Qādir's defeat by the French in 1847. His father became a prominent personality in Damascus and served as a judge. Ṭāhir al-Jazā'irī's formal

⁴⁵Escovitz, "He Was the Muḥammad 'Abduh of Syria."

⁴⁶On al-Jazā'irī's activism, see Weismann, *Taste of Modernity*, 283–91.

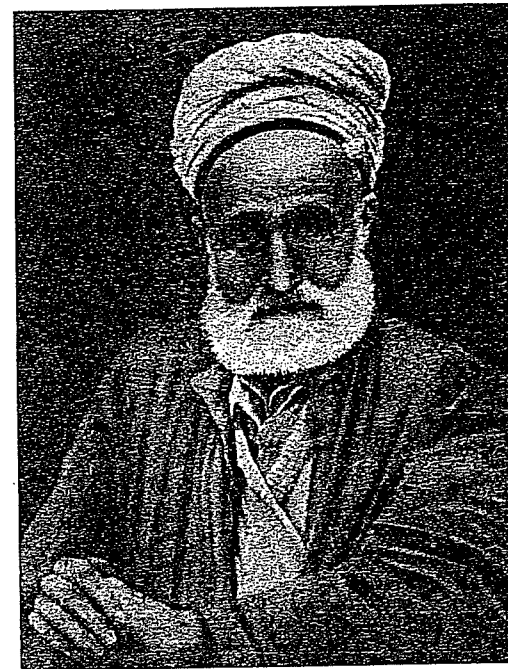


FIGURE 6.3. Ṭāhir al-Jazā'irī. From al-Ziriklī, *al-A'ṭām*, plate 523.

education covered the Islamic disciplines, Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, as well as the natural sciences. After the completion of his schooling, the central figure in his further studies was 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Ghunaymī al-Maydānī (1807–81), an early Syrian reformist scholar also known for sheltering Christian refugees during the 1860 massacres.⁴⁷ Al-Maydānī's reformism consisted of a staunch opposition to what he saw as superstition in popular religion.⁴⁸ Later, recalling his lessons in legal theory with al-Maydānī, al-Jazā'irī marveled at his teacher's critical treatment of the various positions discussed.⁴⁹ Al-Maydānī had studied with the nineteenth century's greatest author of legal commentaries, Ibn 'Ābidīn (d. 1836), and his writings show him engrossed in and limited to the postclassical literary horizon.⁵⁰ Nevertheless,

⁴⁷Commins, *Islamic Reform*, 40–41.

⁴⁸Kurd 'Alī, *Kunūz al-ajdād*, 5–6.

⁴⁹Al-Bānī, *Tanwīr al-baṣā'ir*, 74.

⁵⁰See, e.g., al-Maydānī, *Sharḥ al-'aqīda al-Ṭahawiyya*, 74–75. For a list of the books he studied, see al-Maydānī, *al-Lubāb*, 1:39–44.