Sufi or Salafi? Alusi’s Struggle For His Reputation Against Ottoman Bureaucracy With His Tafsir, *Ruh al-Maani*

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**Abstract**: Abu al-Thana Shihab al-Din al-Alusi (1802-1854) was one of the most prominent scholars of 19th century Ottoman Empire. Alusi was dismissed from the position of Mufti of Baghdad based on the accusation that he was a Wahhabi. However, he insisted that he was loyal to Ottoman authorities and had finally proved this. This article discusses al-Alusi’s theological identity and whether he was a Wahhabi or sufi. It is found that the Ottoman government had a sensitivity against the British-supported Wahhabism at the time and has misjudged his salafi character. The article secondly shows his struggle for clearing the label from his name. In order to regain his reputation, al-Alusi finished his Tafsir, *Ruh al-Maani* and sent it to Istanbul to prove that he has not any intellectual links with this destructive group, namely wahhabis, on the contrary he respects Islamic tradition and is loyal to Ottomans. The study is based on the original appeal letter he gave to the government and the official response that was provided to him. Aside from the other official reports, these two official documents provided in this article are published academically for first time.

**Keywords**: Alusi, Ruh al-Maani, Wahhabism, Salafi, Ottoman bureaucracy.

Sufi mi Selefi mi? Alusi’nin Ruhu’l-Meani Tefsiri ile Osmanlı Bürokrasisine Karşı Mücadelesi


* This work was supported by the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) under the project number 113K241.
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The purpose of this article is to discuss this diverse identity of Alusi and to present some official documents indicating his struggle to prove his loyalty to the Ottoman state and the outcome of this effort returned to Alusi’s life. By doing so, the political background of Alusi’s time and its relations with Tafsir studies will be arisen in the broader framework. Intellectual works at the times of being produced have some motivations and underpinnings behind, not only in education or training but also in personal conflict of interest, political and ideological adherence. Writing a history about a work just depending on author-text formulation sometimes misguides and makes areader blind. However, the political and intellectual information helps to fill some gaps.

The article focuses on the identity of Alusi on the one hand. Who was Alusi? A sufi or a wahlhabi? As he tried to clear his name from the wahlhabi accusation, he did not seem to accept the wahlhabi identity. Why then he was accused of wahha-
bism which caused some political problems in his life? What kind of effort did he perform to clear up this accusation from his resume? In order to answer these questions the article will look at his life, his family, education he received and then will continue on his discussion about the accusation. On the other hand, some official efforts to clear up the accusation of being "wahhabi" from his name will be given with official Ottoman documents. Alusi’s appeal letter will be presented in this article for the first time.

The Identity of Alusi: Sufi or Salafi?

Abu al-Thana Shihab al-Din al-Alusi was born in 1217 hijra (1802). Alusi started his classical education in the Madrasa of Shahid Ali Pasha with his father Abdullah b. Mahmud al-Alusi who served as the head of teachers/lecturers (ra’is al-muderrisin) in Abu Hanifah Mosque in Baghdad. He was Alusi’s first teacher of the Qur’an, Arabic grammar, hadith, fiqh and logic. Alusi later attended the circle of Musullu Alaaddin Efendi, Molla Husain al-Juburi, his cousin Sayyid Ali b. Sayyid Ahmad, Sayyid Muhammad Amin b. Sayyid Ali, Abdulaziz Sawwaf, Ziyauddin Khalid Naqshibandi, Shaikh Ali Suwaydi, and Yahya al-İmadi.

Among his teachers Ziyauddin Khalid Naqshibandi was a naqshi Sufi of his time and his mystic influence continued in Ottoman territory for long periods of time. Some argued that Ottomans willingly supported sufi orders particularly Naqshbandi school in Iraq against Wahhabi-salafi movement. Alusi attended Khalidi Baghdadi’s sufi circle and became one of his followers.

In his early life, Alusi had an Ijaza (literaraly means permission) and started to teach and to deliver lectures in the madrasa and mosques. Alusi was posted as a lecturer at Saltanat-ı Dar-ı Aliyye (i.e. Royal Higher Education) that was the highest title in the Ottoman education system. Despite being Shafii in denomination, he became Qadi of Hanafi in Baghdad. However, he was dismissed from the duty in 1263/1847 due to some rumors about him being Wahhabi. For this accu-

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sation he was fired from all of his posts in Baghdad. Then Alusi decided to visit Istanbul to find a change to clear his name. He spent almost two years in Istanbul for this purpose. Ottoman Shaikh al-Islam Arif Hikmet Bey assisted him to meet Sadrazam Reşit Paşa. Having convinced Rashid Pasha and other ottoman authorities, Alusi was accepted by Ottoman government and returned to, not all, but some of his posts. During his journey back to Baghdad he became ill and later died from this illness.

Despite his sufi identity, Alusi was accused of wahhabism. Were there any bases for this accusation? Looking at his sufi identity, it does not seem to be likely that he adapted wahhabi idea ideologically against Ottoman sovereignty.\(^4\) He was, however, definitely a salafi in broader sense of the word.\(^5\) Salafism that derives from the term *al-salaf al-salih* (i.e. the pious forefathers) claims to return to the purity of Islam, the Qur’an and the *hadith*, and rejects *taqlid*, or the “blind” following of the canonical law and therefore accepts *ijtihad*, or individual interpretation as exactly like the pious forefathers, *al-salaf al-salih* the first generation of Muslims in the seventh century. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, one of the thinkers of salafi movement believed that Muslims had become ignorant of their religion and the only way to achieve salvation and retrieve past glory was the re-assertion of absolute monotheism and the belief in the Oneness of God (*tawhid*) as the basis of the Islamic creed (*’aqida*) and a return to the Qur’an and the Sunna. Following classic Salafism, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab regarded some practices, such as veneration of the tombs of saints, holy trees etc., as giving associates to God (*shirk*), or idolatry and polytheism, the form of religion that prevailed in Mecca before Islam. In this regard, main question is to what extent Alusi follow the salafi pattern as in Wahhabi salafism. In his *Anba’ al-Abna bi Atyab al-Anba*, Alusi did advise to his children to keep the salafi aqidah and to be away from bid’a (i.e. religious innovations). He, time to time, mentions and refers in his works, to salafi scholars such as Ibn Taymiyye, Ibn Qudame and Ibn Qayyim al Javziyyah with respect. All these


clues might give an opportunity to his rivals to accuse him as wahhabi. The second question has been arisen here: What is the meaning of "wahhabism" for Ottomans? Salafism, indeed, turned face towards to rebellion against Ottoman sovereignty. Moreover the fight (jihad) against the non-believers (kafir) was understood as and referred to the ottoman regime. Moreover, the title of Wahhabism was a label to use for anyone readily at hand to diminish one in the eyes of Ottoman authority, since "Wahhabi" was used against the Ottoman authorities by the British government in Arabian Peninsula. That is to say that Alusi might have had a rebel idea and also action against Ottoman regime meanwhile he was continuing his duty as the Mufti of Baghdad.

As a matter of fact, Alusi has a sufi background at the same time. To be a salafi and a sufi seems not to be possible to combine for a person at first glance. Since the most Salafis consider the sufi orders and their rituals contrary to Islamic theology and Islamic law so they declare them non-believers. How is possible now for Alusi to bring two different and opposite characters together in his personality? Considering his educational background, the loyalty of his family and the Naqshi sufi order he is in, to the Ottoman State and authorities against British and British-motivated Wahhabis were quite clear. He is in Naqshi order as sufi and he is salafi in idea as well. For Alusi it can be possible because of Naqshibandiyya. The order of naqshibandiyya has showed a kind of salafi character especially since Imam Rabbani of India. In Rabbani’s teaching, shariat (Islamic Law) comes first and one’s karamats (miracles of a sufi) are nothing unless he follows the strict commands of the Qur’an and the prophet. So there are some bases to attribute salafi identity to Alusi in its broader sense. But there is not any ground to accuse him of wahhabism at all, at least with these weak evidence. He even wrote an explanatory notes to Abdulwahhab Yasincizade’s El-Burhan fi Itaati’-Sultan (Evidence in obedience to Sultan) and introduce to Ottoman Wazir Ali Riza Pasha. In this book, Alusi brings the evidences in favor of the legitimacy of Ottoman khilafah and that all the Muslims should obey Sultan Mahmud the Second. Furthermore, in order to support the Ottoman authorities and army, he declares (in his Sefredu al-Zad li Sefred al-Jihad) that jihad is rather fardh ayn (cumpolsary) for each individual Muslim in his time against the enemies.

He also wrote his polemical work al-Nafakhat al-Qudsiyye fi Raddi ala al-Imamiyye, against Shia, another political rival of the Ottoman Government like
Wahhabis. We must add here that Alusi does not seem to be that much enthusiastic to criticize Wahhabis in a similar manner neither in his tafsir or any other separate work. There seem to be two main reasons for this one political and the other theological. Politically Wahhabis were strong in Arabian Peninsula and he did not want to disturb them and involve in a political matter. Theologically he might agree with most of their theological criticism that *bid'ats* (innovation in religion) influenced all over the Muslim world. Further, Alusi seems to disagree with the ‘visiting graves’ practices which was a strong Wahhabi argument in Arabian Peninsula too against Ottomans and Turks who allegedly accused of shirk by visiting the graves of religious leaders and wali’s. Here however we should notice that his theological agreement does not mean that he politically agreed with them as they were utilised by the British colonial powers against the Muslim Khilafah. His *Shehiyyun Neğam fi tercemeti Sheykh al-Islam Arif al-Hikem*, biography of Ottoman Sheikh al-Islam Arif Hikmet Bey, also prove that he was quite friendly with Ottoman authorities. We observe also that he attributed his master piece Tafsir *Ruh al-Maani* to the Ottoman Khalifa Sultan Abdulmajid.

**Struggle for the Reputation: Journey to Istanbul**

Alusi’s Salafi-Sufi character echoes in his Tafsir work *Ruh al-Maani*. As his exegetical methodologies applied in his tafsir, he interprets the Qur’an with Qur’an itself which is quite salafi approach influenced by Ibn Taymiyya. He applies to prophetic tradition, uses Arabic language and poems, and employs Arabic grammar and rhetoric, looks into *sabab al-nuzul* (occasion of revelation) cited classical sources like, Fakhr al-Razi, al-Qadi al-Baydawi, Abu Hayyan al-Andalusi, Ebussuud Efendi etc. *Ruh al-Maani* however is rather known as Sufi or mystic tafsir. The reasons his tafsir is classified as mystic are twofold: one is his sufi identity as follower of naqshibandiyya, the second is that he places mystical interpretation of the relevant *ayah* (verse) at the end of the interpretation. Alusi was an exegete who had a practicing sufi background and salafi tendency. He seems to want to follow a very moderate line in 19th century Ottoman Iraq where the

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6 See: David D. Commins, Islamic Reform : Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria, p. 24-25.

religious extremism both in salafism and Sufism were very strong and had political support.

Although Alusi is an exegete of the Qur’an and has been mostly known among the classical and traditional exegetes he was dismissed from the position of Mufti of Baghdad as the conclusion of accusation in 1847. Some argues that the new governor of Baghdad Najib Pasha misused his salafi perspective against his status. Basheer Nafi discusses as like:

This symbolic relationship between the mufti and the wali came to end in 1842, when Ali Pasha was dismissed from the governorship of Baghdad and replaced with Muhammed Najib Pasha. The new wali was not an admirer of the mufti; nor did he welcome his self-confidence or the aura of social influence and power that surrounded his position. A son of prominent family from Istanbul and a bureaucrat from the old guard who saw in the Tanzimat (Ottoman state-sponsored modernization) a mere project of authoritarianism and the imposition of conformity. Najib Pasha sought to undermine al-Alusi’s position and diminish his status. The proud mufti, now with an established scholarly reputation and a long record of loyalty to the state, was not easy prey. As relation between the two deteriorated, Najib Pasha made sure that al-Alusi’s credentials in Istanbul were wiped out and that he was dismissed at the most convenient and opportune time.

Alusi consequently lost his financial situation and income sources. Eventually, he needed to visit to Istanbul in order to express and defend himself and to explain the truth of the rumors raised about him by completing his commentary after being dismissed from the duty. Alusi decided to complete his Tafsir and send it to Istanbul. According to a document, Alusi accomplished it in 1267/1851, twelve years after the time when he was discharged.

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8 Ömer Nasuhi Bilmen, Büyük Tefsir Tarihi, v. 2, p. 744
10 Bilmen, Ibid p. 743
In a letter (see: illustration-1), Mehmet Vehbi, the governor of Baghdad reports that the Tafsir, *Ruh al-Maani* has completed in nine volumes and the writer, Alusi wants to visit to Istanbul to present it in order to be promoted. The document naturally does not mention anything about the rumors and the accusation; on the contrary it uses very respectful language about him and calls Alusi as "The former Hanafi Mufti of Baghdad, The great Sufi, very Important Scholar" (*Mevâlî-i kirâm ve ulemâ-yı a'lâmd an sâbık-ı Bağdad Hanefî Müftüsü*). During his Journey both Military General of Hijaz-Iraq and the governor of Sivas sent the same report to Istanbul with these respectful language.\(^{11}\)

**Loyalty to Ottoman Sovereignty: Writing an Appeal Letter**

When he arrived in Istanbul\(^{12}\), Alusi immediately went to Sheikh al-Islam Ahmed Arif Hikmet and presented his Tafsir, *Ruh al-Maani* to him.\(^{13}\) These nine

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\(^{11}\) For further documents about the journey see: Ottoman Archives no: A.MKT.UM.66/57

\(^{12}\) See for further information about Alusi’s Journey: İbrahim Shaban, "Ebu’s-Sena el-Alusi’nin İstanbul Seyehati ve İzlenimleri" *İstanbul Üniversitesi Şarkiyat Mecmuası*, 19 (2011) pp. 75-90

\(^{13}\) For further information about the journey see: İbrahim Şaban, "Ebu’s-Sena’ el-Alusi’nin İstanbul Seyahati ve İzlenimleri" *İstanbul Üniversitesi Şarkiyat Mecmuası*, 19 (2011-2) pp. 75-90.
volumes of the Tafsir which were given to Sheikh al-Islam are now in Raghip Pasha Library within the numbers of 185-193. Sheikh al-Islam Arif Hikmet admired his depth of knowledge in Tafsir and advised him to meet wazir Sultan Rashid Pasha in order to appeal his situation. Alusi wrote this letter in 13 November 1851:

14 The first volume with the number of 185 was written up in 1254/1839 by Alusi himself and calligrapher Musullu Muhammed Emin. The second volume with the number of 186 in 1255/1840; the third volume with the number of 187 in 1257/1842; the fourth volume with the number of 188 in 1259/1844; the fifth volume with the number of 189 in 1260/1845 and the sixth volume with the number of 190 in 1262/1846 were all inscribed by a calligrapher, Musullu Muhammed Emin. The seventh volume with the number of 191 was inscribed by the calligrapher Abdurranman Efendi in 1264/1848 when he was already dismissed from the duty of Mufti. The eight volume with the number of 192 was inscribed by the calligrapher Ali b. Muhammed Sharef in 1266/1850. Finally the last volume with the number of 193 has no any information about the calligrapher but in 1267/1851 at the year of travel to Istanbul.
Having been influenced by his knowledge and scholarly humble behavior Sultan Rashid Pasha acquitted him from all complaints. Moreover, he was assigned as a member again to the trust of Mercaniyye Medresesi, was decided to be rewarded with fifty thousand qurush, and also was awarded ith the position of Mufti of Erzurum. (See: Illustration-3)

Illustration-3: Reponse to Alusi from the Palace: Ottoman Archives İ. DH, 243-14791-3

Alusi’s Tafsir *Ruh al-Maani* was firstly published in 1301/1883 as nine volumes in Bulaq, Egypt. During this journey Alusi wrote also four important works namely *Garaib al-Ightirab wa Nuzha al-Albab fi al-Zahabi wa al-Ikami wa al-Iyabi; Nashwa al-Shumul fi Safari ila Islambou; Nashwa al-Mudam fi awdi ila madina al-Salam; Shahiy a-Nagam fi Tarjama Sheikh al-Islam Arif al-Hikam*.\(^{15}\) He has spent the last days of his life fighting against malaria, which he had caught on his

way back from Istanbul. Finally, Alusi past away in 1270/1854 and was buried in Baghdad.  

**Conclusion**

Abu al-Thana Shihab al-Din al-Alusi (1802-54) was one of the most prominent scholars of 19th century Ottoman. Alusi was dismissed from the position of Mufti of Baghdad for being Wahhabi supporter. However he insisted on that he was loyal to Ottoman authority and finally proved this with his masterwork, Ruh al-Maani. For this, he traveled to Ottoman capital city, Istanbul and met first with Skheih al-Islam Arif Hikmet Efendi and then with sultan Rashid Pasha. Alusi, by doing so, wanted to maintain his personal image infront of the Ottoman bu-reucracy.

This article has discussed this story focusing on two main po ints. The first point is to clarify his theological identity, whether he was a supporter of Wahhabism who was politically against to Ottoman sovereignty or was just a sufi-salafi which was the common character of a Naqshibandı order. This article found that the government based on the bias about the British-organised wahhabism at that time has been misjudged Alusi’s sufi- salafi character by new governor of Bagh- dad, Najib Pasha. Alusi was falsely accused with being a Wahhabi who was under-stood as very threatening for regime. Secondly, the article shows his struggle to remove this label from his name. In favour of his reputation, Alusi finished his Tafsir, Ruh al-Maani and sent it to Istanbul to prove that he has no any intellectual link with this destructive group, on the contrary he has a traditional point of view and is loyal to Ottomans. The study found his appeal letter to the govern-ment and the official response to him. Besides the other official reports, these two documents are published first time in an academic article. The documents show that Alusi has finally taken back his duty, not of Baghdad, but of Erzurum, in addition to some other promotions, like fifty thousand qurush grand. To sum up, it is obviously observed that since the time of Tanzimat, the bureaucracy has gained a power over ulema.

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