

In Search of the True Political Position of the 'Ulama

An Analysis of the Aims and
Perspectives of the Chronicles of
Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (1753-1825)

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7 Al-Jabarti and his chronicles

Al-Jabarti was born into the milieu of the Egyptian 'ulama.¹ His family came to Cairo some time around 1500 from the region of al-Jabart (present-day Djibouti) on the Horn of Africa. Arriving in Cairo, 'Abd al-Rahman's 'seventh grandfather' became shaykh of the Jabarti *riwaq* (college) at al-Azhar, a position which from that time passed from father to son in the family. Al-Jabarti describes all the holders of this office as very religious, ascetic and upright people. Like many people from the Jabart region, the family seems to have belonged to the Hanafi rite. The author's father, Hasan al-Jabarti, died in 1774 at the age of seventy-seven, when 'Abd al-Rahman was twenty-one. Al-Jabarti describes his father as a man of the world as well as a great 'alim, with intimate connections to many of the great 'ulama of his time. As a Hanafi scholar, he enjoyed the friendship and patronage of both the great emirs in Egypt and the Ottoman government, including the sultan Mustafa III (1757-74), who sent him books on Hanafite jurisprudence.² Hasan's knowledge of Persian and Turkish was excellent, and in addition to his religious studies he taught mathematics, geometry, algebra, astronomy and other sciences. He was initiated into the Naqshbandi sufi order, a natural move considering his Ottoman connections. Hasan married into apparently wealthy military families, had relatives among merchants and ship-owners and spent no little time in business. His grandmother was a woman of wealth, who owned property and real estate. She placed a number of buildings into a *waqf* for him.³

As the only surviving son, 'Abd al-Rahman is supposed to have inherited his father's wealth. In this way he must have been fairly well-off, but we are only poorly informed of his studies and career. Like his father he must have been a Hanafi scholar and inherited the position of shaykh of the Jabarti *riwaq*. Among his teachers was the Hanafi scholar Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman al-'Arishi, *mufti* of the Hanafi rite at al-Azhar (who failed to become shaykh al-Azhar in 1774), and he counted Sayyid Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Hanafi, with whom he had studied under his father and who later became shaykh of the Hanafi *madhhab* at al-Azhar, among his more intimate friends. Al-Murtada al-Zabidi, a shaykh of great renown at the time whom al-Jabarti assisted in writing biographies of famous 'ulama, should also be mentioned here. But al-Jabarti also studied with the Shafi'i scholars Shaykh Ahmad al-Damanhuri (shaykh al-Azhar until 1774), Shaykh Ahmad al-'Arusi (who succeeded Damanhuri as shaykh al-Azhar in 1774), Muhammad al-Janaji, and the Maliki scholar Muhammad al-Maliki. He further mentions Shaykh Mahmud al-Kurdi, Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman