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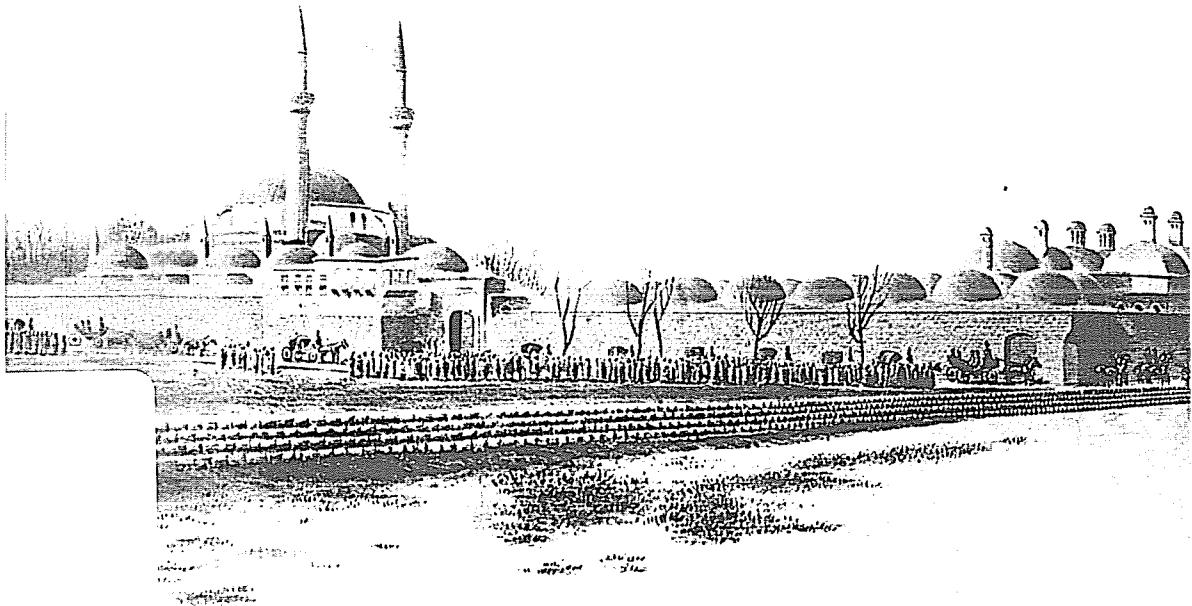
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**The Mufti, the *Muhaddith* and the Sufi:
Three Endowed Teaching Positions and the Institutionalisation
of Imperial and Local Loyalties within Ottoman Damascus**

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The convening of this conference of historians is a historic event in itself. Although Turkish and Arab historians have met and collaborated on scholarly projects for years, the magnitude of this gathering must mark a landmark in bringing Turkish and Arab, particularly Syrian, scholars together to explore their shared history. Not long ago, the study of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire was dominated by ethnocentric discourses, whether Turkish, Arab, or Western. From the Turkish nationalist perspective, the Ottoman period itself was problematic as the Republic of Turkey was predicated on dissociating modern Turkey from the Arab-Islamic heritage it inherited from the Ottomans. On the other hand, for those who saw themselves first and foremost as members of the Arab nation, the Ottoman period was the period of Turkish occupation (*al-ihtilal al-Turki*). Finally, Western scholars have denied the validity of national categories to Middle Eastern societies altogether, preferring to see pre-Tanzimat Ottoman history as essentially Islamic, traditional and, above all, “pre-modern”, in other words, “pre-Western”.

The most damaging result of these ethnocentric approaches is that they imposed divisions between people with different mother tongues - specifically, between speakers of Arabic and Turkish - where such divisions did not necessarily apply. My paper will use the teaching profession as it worked in 18th-century Damascus as a vehicle for specifying the ways the Ottoman system as it functioned in 18th-century Damascus.

Specifically, this paper focuses on three endowed teaching positions and the legal-cum-intellectual orientations that accompanied them. Together, they

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define a professional and intellectual division of labor that incorporated pre-Ottoman and localist sensibilities within a decidedly Ottoman institutional and political framework.

The first of these is the teaching post at al-Sulaymaniyya al-Baraniyya, a position which came with the appointment to the office of chief Hanafi mufti of the Province of Damascus.¹

By the end of the 17th century, this position was invariably in the hands of a member of either the Imadi or the Muradi families. This post and the individuals and families who occupied it had the strongest ties and commitments to movers and shakers in Istanbul, the imperial capital. The second, the teaching post of Qubbat al-Nasr under the central dome of the Umayyad Mosque, was almost always in the hands of a Shafi'i *hadith* scholar. The Shafi'i *madhhab* was the dominant *madhhab* in Syria prior to the Ottoman conquest. The persistence of Shafi'ism into 18th century represents the vigor of pre-Ottoman Syrian attachments despite concerted efforts by Ottoman central authorities to privilege the Hanafi School of law. The final teaching post is that of al-Salimiyya in the northern suburb of al-Salihyya, some distance from the center of the provincial capital. Situated on the site of the tomb of the Sufi master Muhi al-Din ibn Arabi (d. 1240 CE), this post became the gradual preserve of the Nabalusi family and most notably Shaykh Abd al-Ghani al-Nabalusi (d. 1731 CE), a local hero even though he never became part and parcel of Ottoman officialdom in the way his counterparts among the Imadis and Muradis did.

These three positions, their respective occupants, and the different intellectual orientations associated with each illustrate how both Ottoman imperial interests and local Damascene attachments fit within a distinctly Ottoman system which depended, in turn, on respect for pre-Ottoman affiliations and for intellectual concerns that were not necessarily parallel to those at the imperial center. On the one hand, these conclusions confirm the existence of strong local, regional, and, even, ethnic loci of identity. But, in contrast to the ethnocentrism of

¹ This imperial complex, or *külliyeye*, built by the Ottoman sultan Suleyman in the 16th century. "outside" the city walls should not be confused with al-Sulaymaniyya al-Juwaniyya ("inside" the city walls"), a *madrasa* built in the 18th century by the Sulayman Pasha al-Azm.

nationalist historiographies, the Ottoman Syrian experience suggests that the Ottoman system incorporated the divergent orientations of its subjects, including those who were loyal to pre-Ottoman, Syrian and Damascene traditions.

To put these conclusions into perspective, one has to be aware of two long-term processes: 1) Damascus' long, pre-Ottoman history as a center for Islamic education and 2) the innovations wrought by Ottoman bureaucratisation of the Syrian religio-legal system. The significance of Damascus' pre-Ottoman history helps explain the survival and maintenance of local traditions. Ottoman bureaucratisation of the religio-legal system, particularly the elevation of the Hanafi *madhhab* to the status of official *madhhab* of the state, underscores the degree to which Ottoman policies had shaped the Damascene experience by the 18th century.

Eighteenth-century Damascus' relative cultural, religious, and social independence from Istanbul derived from a long pre-Ottoman history as a center of Islamic learning.² Because many of the Prophet Muhammad's companions had settled in Damascus and because it was the seat of the first Muslim dynasty, Damascus exerted a pull for Muslim scholars coming from the entire world of Islam beginning as early as the first decades of Islamic history. Between the 11th century CE and the advent of educational institutions like the *dar al-Quran*, *dar al-hadith* and the *madrasa*, on the other hand, and the beginning of Ottoman rule in the early 16th century CE, on the other, the *ulama* of the city gradually made the transition from self-employed, free-lance scholars to an institutionalised and professionalised elite. The process of professionalisation reached a critical stage under the rule of Nur al-Din Zangi (r. 1154-1174 CE). By making Damascus the center of his empire, Nur al-Din restored to Damascus the premier position it had held under the Umayyads. Institutionalisation took place through the proliferation of *awqaf* (s. *waqf*), religious and charitable endowments, to support and maintain a growing army of scholars and scholar-judges. Between the time of Nur al-Din through the

² The history of *madrasa*-building in Damascus with particular reference to developments during the Ottoman period is the subject of Steve Tamari, "Ottoman *Madrasas*: the Multiple Lives of Educational Institutions in Eighteenth-Century Syria", *Journal of Early Modern History* 5:2, 2001, pp. 99-127.

period of Ayyubid rule to the advent of the Mamluk sultanate in 1260 CE, more than 120 new educational institutions were built. Nur al-Din created new positions for the *ulama*, such as *qadi* deputies and *wakils*, or agents, for the treasury.³ During the Mamluk period, about 50 more educational institutions were built.

The gradual process of institutionalisation and professionalisation that structured the life of the *ulama* in Damascus from at least the time of Nur al-Din reached a new degree of organisation under Ottoman rule. The Ottomans added another level of centralised organisation to the *ulama* and their institutions by fully bureaucratising the empire's religious and legal establishment. Upon conquering Syria, Ottoman officials took an inventory of the *awqaf*. They took responsibility for appointing the *qadis* who supervised the court system, a system which monitored *waqf* accounts as well as the staffing of the institutions created by these endowments. While there were a few cases of native Damascenes being appointed to the position of *qadi al-qada'*, or chief judge - the second most powerful resident official of the state after the governor of the Province of Damascus, this position was eventually given exclusively to non-Syrians, usually Rumis (native speakers of Turkish), who served for short periods and for no more than a year at a time. With the elevation of the Hanafi *madhhab* to the status of official *madhhab* of the state, the head of the religious and judicial hierarchy of the empire became the Hanafi mufti of Istanbul, the Şeyhülislam. Likewise, the chief judge of Damascus was always a Hanafi. Judges of the remaining *madhhabs* continued to function, but as deputies in a Hanafi-dominated system.

Whereas *qadi* positions had long been regularised through a system of appointments, virtually anyone with the proper education and popular acclaim could be a mufti. The Ottomans, however, created a system in which only one mufti was to be appointed - generally by his local colleagues - for each *madhhab*. This reform and the new status of the Hanafi legal rite enhanced the power of the Hanafi mufti.

³ Tamari, "Ottoman Madrasas" p. 108.

By the 18th century, Damascenes had inherited a scholarly, religious, and judicial system that had deep local roots but was also part and parcel of an empire-wide system centered in Istanbul.⁴

While the Ottomans imposed an unprecedented level of centralisation on some aspects of the religio-legal system as it operated in Damascus, the central authorities also made accommodations for localist sentiments and attachments. The structure of employment among the teachers of Damascus illustrates the coexistence of the forces of centralisation, on the one hand, with those of localism, on the other. Some teachers left their city permanently to pursue careers within the Ottoman bureaucracy and became fully “Ottoman”. They adopted the culture of the most elite elements of the Ottoman ruling class. They might serve in the Balkans, in Rumelia and Anatolia, or in the Arab provinces and receive all the rights and privileges that came with being part of a class whose loyalty was first and foremost to the imperial state regardless of their place of origin or their native tongue.

There are several examples of Damascenes who rose through the ranks of the *madrāsas* of Istanbul as students and then as teachers to be appointed *qadis* throughout the empire. However, by the 18th century, advancement to the highest levels of the Ottoman bureaucracy was increasingly limited to members of the elite *ilmiye* families of Istanbul and fewer Damascenes were making it to the top through the usual channels. There are, however, several examples of 17th-century Damascenes who left home to settle in Istanbul and study, teach and pursue the career of a judge. Abu Bakr Ibn Bahram (d. 1690 CE) ascended the *madrāsa* hierarchy as both student and teacher until he was appointed to the judgeship in Aleppo. He was a teacher to two grand viziers, Ahmed Kōprülü (d. 1676 CE) and Kara Mustafa Pasha (d. 1683 CE) who led the second siege of Vienna in 1683. Abu Bakr's career indicates that, given talent and motivation, Damascenes could become completely integrated into the most elite *ilmiye* circles in Istanbul, at least until the late 17th century.

⁴ The Ottoman reorganisation of the educational and legal system in Syria with specific reference to the changed status of the chief muftis of the four *madhhabs* is described by the 18th-century biographer and Hanafi mufti Muhammad Khalil al-Muradi (d. 1791 CE) in a biographical dictionary of the Hanafi muftis of Damascus appointed from the time of the Ottoman conquest to his own time. Muhammad Khalil al-Muradi, *Arf al-basham fi man wala fatwa Dimashq al-Sham*, Muhammad Muti' al-Hafiz and Riyad Abd al-Hamid Murad, eds., Damascus, 1979, pp. 2-3.

By the 18th century, however, the possibilities for advancement in Istanbul receded. Madeline Zilfi has shown that between the 17th and 18th centuries, the Ottoman *ilmiye* developed into a kind of blood nobility where advancement depended more on family connections than on merit.⁵⁵ This is one factor that might have made it more difficult for outsiders, like those from Damascus, to make it to the highest echelons during the 18th century.

By this time, most Damascene *alims* and teachers who spent time in Istanbul went there to seek positions in Damascus. They entered the *silk al-mudarrisin*, the career path for aspiring teachers and members of the judicial system, and followed this path until they achieved a rank that would facilitate acquiring a position in Damascus.

Those who required appointments made in Istanbul included the Hanafi mufti, deputies in the courts, and the multitude of teachers at institutions such as al-Sulaymaniyya al-Baraniyya, al-Siyya, and the endowed post under Qubbat al-Nasr at the Umayyad Mosque. These teachers—particularly those that occupy the three teaching posts that are the focus of this paper—represent the mix of imperial and localist sentiments that made some members of the Damascene educational establishment bulwarks of imperial rule while others remained stalwart defenders of local traditions and sensibilities. Finally, there were those who taught in minor mosques, *madrāsas*, and within Sufi circles, positions which did not require an appointment made in Istanbul. In this paper, I will focus on the members of the group which required official appointments but remained in Damascus. There is abundant information in the biographical sources about these men, their positions, and the institutions that employed them.

The political and economic position of the Hanafi mufti exemplified the peculiar compromise or tension - depending on whether a necessary balance was met - between the priorities of the central state and the demands of localism that shaped politics in Damascus. Muftis received no salaries and were not part of the graded, hierarchical system as were the *qadis*, but they could charge a fee for their opinions. In addition, the Ottoman state bestowed a host of *wazifas*,

⁵ Madeline Zilfi, "Elite Circulation in the Ottoman Empire: Great Mollas of the 18th Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient (JESHO)* XXVI: 3, 1983, pp. 318-364.

appointments that carried a stipend, and other sources of income to financially buttress the holder of this important post. The teaching position at al-Sulaymaniyya al-Baraniyya was often occupied by the Hanafi mufti and was clearly an important symbol of Ottoman ties to the *ulama* of Damascus. Muhammad Khalil al-Muradi (d. 1791 CE), in a biographical collection devoted entirely to Hanafi muftis of Damascus, indicates that more than half of those who were mufti - from the time the Sulaymaniyya complex was built in the late 16th century to his own appointment at the close of the 18th - held this teaching post. From the mid-17th century through the end of the 18th century, Damascenes came to dominate the position of Hanafi muftis and, among Damascenes, the Imadi family and then the Muradis usually filled this post as well as the teaching position at al-Sulaymaniyya.

The Muradis and the Imadis represent a kind of aristocracy among the local *ulama*, the Damascene equivalent to the increasing importance of blood lines in the transmission of religious offices that took place in 17th and 18th century Istanbul. The history of the Muradi family in Damascus reveals how the Ottomans could create a provincial elite that would serve its interests over the course of several generations. Murad al-Muradi (d. 1720 CE), the historian Muhammad Khalil's great-grandfather, was born and raised in Samarkand in Bukhara but left his native land to travel and to spread the revived Naqshbandi order throughout the Arab East. Murad settled in Damascus in the 1670s and established himself there as the prime exponent of the Naqshbandiyya al-Mujaddidiyya. In Istanbul, where Murad resided in the mid-1680s, Sultan Mehmed IV (r. 1648-1687 CE) granted him several villages as *malikanes*, lifetime tax farms, in the region of Damascus. On these religious, political and economic foundations, he started a dynasty of *alims* that played a signal role in the political and religious life of the city throughout the 18th century. Until the 1820s, the Muradi family led the Naqshbandiyya in Damascus, and they dominated the post of Hanafi mufti from the second half of the 18th century well into the 19th. Both associations indicate the ability of the family to function as a linchpin between the authorities in Istanbul and native Damascenes.

The convergence of the muftiship and the teaching post at al-Sulaymaniyya signified the gradual domination of Ottoman forms of patronage - once the exclusive preserve of Rumis and non-Damascenes - by key elements of a

Damascene elite, even if, as in the case of the Muradis, this elite was of relatively recent provenance.

The Sulaymaniyya position was not, however, the most prestigious teaching post in the city. That honor went to the *hadith* position under the central dome of the Umayyad Mosque. The Umayyad Mosque, also known as the Great Mosque, has been the center of the religious and political life of Damascus since the first Islamic century. The central dome, known as Qubbat al-Nasr, “Dome of the Eagle”, dominates the area where the two lengthy wings that encompass the mosque’s interior meet. The area under the dome has been the site of a *halqa*, or teaching circle, devoted to *hadith* studies since before Ottoman times.⁶ But the Ottomans provided the financial backing to institutionalize the position. The Qubbat al-Nasr teaching post (*wazifa*) was endowed by Bahram Agha, *ketkhuda*, or steward, of the mother of Sultan Ibrahim (r. 1640-48) sometime after 1640-41. This *waqf* was financed by the building of al-Suq al-Jadid and a khan near Bab al-Jabiya. The teacher was to be paid 60 *qurush* (s. *qirsh*) and an assistant (*mu’id*) 30 *qurush*. The *waqfiyya*, the document specifying the conditions for establishment of the *waqf*, specified that the teacher read from the *hadith* collection of Buhkari after evening prayers during the three holy months of Rajab, Sha’ban, and Ramadan.

The appointment to this position was made in Istanbul by the Şeyhülislam. There are several stories among Muradi’s biographies and in Muhammad Ibn Kannan’s chronicle of the first half of the 18th century which indicate that this was a much coveted position and that a high degree of anticipation surrounded the announcement of a new appointment.⁷ It was almost obligatory that aspirants to the position either travel to Istanbul to present their credentials

⁶ For a summary history of the *halqas* that operated under Qubbat al-Nasr, see Muhammad Bahjat al-Baytar, “Mudarrisun taht Qubbat al-Nasr,” *Majallat Majma’ al-Ilmi al-Arabi*, 24, Jan. 1949, pp. 59-72.

⁷ In 1709, Yunis al-Masri died leaving the position vacant. Rumors circulated in Damascus that the position would go to an aspirant who had the support of the *qadi* of Damascus. Isma’il al-Ajluni (d. 1748 CE), however, was in Istanbul at the time, and seems to have had the ear of the Şeyhülislam who was ultimately responsible for the appointment. News of al-Ajluni’s appointment actually reached Damascus before the official announcement. Muhammad Ibn Kannan, *Yawmiyat Shamiyya: 1111/ 1699- 1153/1740*, Akram Ulabi, ed., Damascus, n.d., pp. 139-42.

personally or have someone do so on their behalf. In this appointment and many others for which we have information, Ottoman officials, particularly the Şeyhülislam as head of the *ilmiye* hierarchy, made the final decision.

According to the biographical sources, it was known that this appointment was reserved for the foremost *âlim* among the *ulemâ* of al-Sham. Between the early 17th century when the endowed position here was created until the late 19th century when these appointments were still being made, 17 *hadith* scholars held this post. Of these, eleven or 65%, were Shafiis and 13, more than three-fourths, were native-born Damascenes. Though financed by an Ottoman endowment, this position more clearly reflected the local origins and affiliations of this position's occupants than the Sulaymaniyya post.

During the 17th century, the Qubbat al-Nasr position was frequently granted to holders of other important legal and religious posts such as a Shafi'i or a Hanafi mufti or a *khatib*, the main preacher at the mosque. In the 18th century, it came closer to fulfilling its stated purpose as the seat of the top *hadith* scholar in the city, regardless of place of origin or family ties. During the late 18th and through the 19th century, the power of *ulama* lineages took over and the Qubbat al-Nasr position was the domain of a single Shafi'i family, the Kuzbaris.

In the tug-of-war between the centralising tendencies of Istanbul and the localism of some of the *ulama* of Damascus, the fact that this position was more often than not in the hands of a local Shafi'i scholar suggests an imperial concession to localist sentiment. Shafi'ism had been the dominant *madhhab* before the coming of the Ottomans and the establishment of Hanafism as the official *madhhab* of the state. The peculiar status of the Qubbat al-Nasr position may also have been a measure of localist efforts to resist "Hanifisation". The fact that this position was reserved for the city's top *hadith* scholar suggests that whereas the Sulaymaniyya al-Baraniyya was reserved for the city's premier legal scholar who had to be a Hanafi, *hadith* studies was a realm in which Shafi'is could reach the peak of their specialisation.

The third important teaching post - after al-Sulaymaniyya al-Baraniyya and Qubbat al-Nasr - was that at al-Siyya in al-Salihiyya. Salihiyya was originally established by Hanbali refugees from Palestine fleeing the chaos that came in the wake of the Crusades during the 12th century. Over the course of succeeding

generations it became an educational center filled with *madrasas*. Today it is one of Damascus' northern suburbs though the main street is still known as *bayn al-madaris*, "among the *madrasas*". Sultan Selim I (r. 1512-1520 CE), the conqueror of the Arab territories, put his imprimatur on Damascus by founding a mosque and *takiyya*, a building designed for hosting Sufis and Sufi gatherings, over the tomb of Muhi al-Din Ibn Arabi, the Andalusian Sufi mystic who settled and died in Damascus. During the 17th century, al-Salimiyya was attached to holders of important positions such as the Hanafi muftiship, the *khitaba* at the Umayyad mosque, and the *niqaba*, the position of the *naqib* of the *ashraf*, the titular head of those who claimed descent from the family of the Prophet. By the mid-18th century, it became the preserve of the Nabulusi family, a prominent family of the walled city of Damascus and, later, of the Salimiyya neighborhood. From the time of Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (d. 1731) this family was firmly associated with Sufism particularly Akbari Sufism, that brand of contemplative and intellectually oriented mysticism identified with Ibn Arabi, "al-Shaykh *al-Akbar*". Of the ten teachers who taught at the Salimiyya between the early 17th century and the mid-18th century, all but one were native Damascenes. Six were Hanafis, three were Shafi'is and one switched from the Shafi'i to the Hanafi *madhhab* before being appointed to the post.

From the mid-17th century to the mid-18th, about half of the incumbents – three of seven – were from the Nabulusi family. The Nabulusi tenure at al-Salimiyya illustrates key aspects of the development of the Damascene *ulama* between the early 17th and latter half of the 18th centuries. The Nabulusis were relative newcomers to Damascus (though much more deeply rooted in the city than the Muradis) but had become a prominent Shafi'i family until the mid-17th century. Isma'il b. Ahmad al-Nabulusi (d. 1585 CE) was a Shafi'i mufti.⁸ Isma'il's grandson, Isma'il b. Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (d. 1652), changed from the Shafi'i to the Hanafi *madhhab*, a common practice for those who sought advancement within the Ottoman hierarchy. He was the first of the Nabulusis to be appointed to al-Salimiyya. His son, the Sufi scholar and Damascus' most famous intellect during this period, Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi, briefly served as Hanafi mufti at the initiative of the Damascene *ulama* before being maneuvered

⁸ Najm al-Din al-Ghazzi, *al-Kawakib al-sa'ira bi-a'yan al-mi'a al-ashira*, Jibra'il Sulayman Jabbur, ed., Beirut, 1979, III: pp. 130-35.

out of this position by a local rival who had the consent of the Şeyhülislam.⁹ The third of the Nabulusis to continue the family tradition was Abd al-Ghani's son Isma'il (d. 1750 CE).

Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi was the most celebrated citizen of 18th-century Damascus. The fact that he was denied the position of chief Hanafi mufti despite widespread acclaim among the *ulama* and the populace at large, is one indication that he was often at odds with the imperial authorities. He was also at the center of a late 17th-century and early 18th-century CE "culture war" that pitted a reformist anti-Sufi brand of Sunni Islam against practices identified with Sufism. The Kadizadelis, as the reformists are generally known, were most active in Istanbul but, by the time Nabulusi responded to their attacks, the movement had become widespread in Damascus.¹⁰ Nabulusi defended tomb visitation, listening to music, tobacco smoking and, in a particularly vitriolic treatise on the spiritual status of Christians and Jews, launched into an ethnocentric diatribe against Turkish ("Rumi") corruptions of Arab Islam. His tireless defense of Sufism, his mastery of the thought of Ibn Arabi (the subject of his courses at al-Salimiyya), and a series of journeys into the Syrian hinterland brought him fame throughout Bilad al-Sham among the scholarly elite as well as among followers of more modest backgrounds. When he died at the age of 90, he left behind a strong core of disciples and a host of devotees who carried on his intellectual and spiritual legacy, one that remains influential to this day.

That Nabulusi was finally awarded the teaching position over the tomb of Ibn Arabi indicates some degree of appreciation on the part of the central authorities for Nabulusi's local stature as well as the local and regional importance of Sufism and of Akbari Sufism in particular. The teaching post at al-Salimiyya (especially with Abd al-Ghani Nabulusi and his descendents occupying the "chair") completes a three-way intellectual and professional division of labor with the other two prominent teaching posts. Al Sulaymaniyya was the seat of the highest figure in the local legal establishment, an apt symbol

⁹ Rafeq, Abdul-Karim, *The Province of Damascus: 1723-1783*, Beirut, 1966, p. 83.

¹⁰ See Madeline C. Zilfi, "The Kadizadelis: Discordant Revivalism in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul", *Near Eastern Studies* 45:4, October 1986, pp. 251-269. Barbara von Schlegell has studied the impact of the movement on Damascus: "Sufism in the Ottoman Arab World: Shaykh Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi", Ph. D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1997, pp. 80-95.

of the empire's maintenance of law and order along fairly narrowly prescribed Hanafi lines. The post under Qubbat al-Nasr was reserved for the city's most prominent *hadith* scholar with a significant nod to Shafi'i localism. *Hadith* studies itself is a fitting acknowledgement of the vertical ties created by the oral transmission of knowledge that bind teachers and their students through the generations. In the case of Qubbat al-Nasr, these ties passed through Damascus' most sacred locale. That as controversial a figure as Nabulusi would find himself near the end of a long career defending Sufism ensconced above the tomb the "Greatest Master" far from the center of town, also serves to illustrate the adjustments that were needed to accommodate local and regional sentiments.

Hanafi law, Shafi'i *hadith* scholarship, and Akbari Sufism mark the most elite fields of learning, figures like Muhammad Khalil al-Muradi and Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi their most prominent practitioners, and endowed teaching positions such as those at al-Sulaymaniyya al-Baraniyya, under Qubbat al-Nasr, and at al-Salimiyya the delicate balance between the push-and-pull of Damascene localism and the prerogatives of the central state.