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Binding with a Perfect Sufi Master: Naqshbandi Defenses of *Rābiṭa* from the Late Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic

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Debates about ritual practice in Sufi orders are often related to the nature of interpersonal relationships, the structures of power, and the modes of succession within a given lineage. As such, changes in ritual can be entangled in internal debates in ways that unite concerns about piety, community, and leadership. A case in point is the controversial practice of *rābiṭa* - the binding of the heart of the disciple with a Sufi master by envisioning the shaykh and mediating upon this image in different parts of the body.¹ This spiritual exercise has long been denounced as a non-Islamic practice and a ritual innovation by reformist critics but, within the Naqshbandi order, it has been central practice and focal point of the master-disciple relation. However, due to interventions by Shaykh Khālīd al-Baghdādī (1776-1827) that altered the practice, *rābiṭa* has fueled an internal debate within the Khālīdī-Naqshbandī suborder going back to the early nineteenth century.

This article examines defenses of binding following a major reordering of the Naqshbandiyya-Khālidiyya Sufi order in late Ottoman Damascus and traces the legacy of such defenses into the Turkish Republic. The following pages explore selected Arabic, Ottoman-Turkish and Turkish treatises on this contentious ritual. I focus on the Sufi *ādāb* manual *al-Bahja al-Saniyya* composed by Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Khānī (1798—1862),

¹ On the general concept of *rābiṭa*, see: Fritz Meier, *Zwei Abhandlungen über die Naqshbandiyya* (Istanbul: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1994); B. Abu Manneh, “Khalwa and Rābiṭa in the Khalidi suborder,” in *Naqshbandis*. ed. Alexandre Popovic, Marc Gaborieau, Thierry Zarcone (Istanbul-Paris: Editions Isis, 1990), 289-302.

closely examining its defense of the practice and its relationship with Abdülhakim Arvasi's (1865–1943) Turkish-language treatise *Râbîta-i Şerife*. I argue that al-Khānī's arguments form the main textual basis for debates over *rābîta* in the Turkish Republic. Despite political and legal transformations affecting the operation of the Sufi lodges, one can observe a remarkable continuity of argumentation from empire to republic surrounding this contentious spiritual exercise.

The Khālidī-Naqshbandī Order and Shaykh Khālid

The Khālidī branch of the Naqshbandī order became influential in the early nineteenth century and continues to hold an important position in modern Turkey and Syria with branches fanning out around the globe.² Well-known for its role in anti-colonial jihad and its influence on the formation of political Islam in modern Turkey, the Khālidīyya has roots in late Ottoman Damascus where the Sufi teacher Shaykh Khālid al-Baghdādī had his most enduring base of operations. In his lifetime, Shaykh Khālid amassed a large number of disciples, made strategic contacts with members of the Ottoman ruling class, and propagated a particular political vision of the Naqshbandī path—one that prized active opposition to European imperialism, pledged allegiance to the Ottoman Caliphate, and endorsed vehemently anti-Shi'ī views. Khālid also continued, with gusto, the Mujaddidī trope that demanded the dominance of Islamic leadership and norms in the political sphere.³

² Thierry Zarcone, "Les Nakşibendi et la république turque," *Turcica* 24 (1992), 133-51.

³ On Khalid and the Khālidī Branch of the Naqshbandi Order, see: Albert Hourani, "Shaikh Khalid and the Naqshbandi Order" in *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition*, eds. Vivian Brown, Samuel Miklos Stern,

Shaykh Khālid viewed the Muslim world as being under siege by European imperialism, and militant opposition to Western encroachment became a defining characteristic of the Khālidiyya. He constructed a large network of deputies that spanned from Indonesia to Istanbul, making his suborder one of the most significant Sufi communities in the past two centuries. Its members played important roles in anti-colonial struggles in the Caucasus, and Khālid and his successors came to regard the Ottoman Empire and its sultan/caliph as the preeminent protector of Islam and guarantor of the *sharī'a*.⁴ Importantly for what follows, Khālid made ritual changes that placed himself, to the exclusion of previous Naqshbandī leaders, at the center of spiritual practice and reflection.

Scholarship has accumulated on the deputies and successors of Khālid, and post-Khālid shaykhs left a sizeable body of treatises, biographical works, and spiritual handbooks that continue to be published and read by contemporary Naqshbandī communities.⁵ One of his deputies – Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. al-Khānī – composed *al-Bahja al-Saniyya (The Sublime Splendor)*, a book that explains the proper relationships

Albert Habib Hourani (Oxford: 1972), 89-103; Butrus Abu-Manneh, “The Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya in the Ottoman Lands in the Early 19th Century,” *WI*22, 1 (1982), 1-36; Sean E. Foley, *Shaykh Khalid and the Naqshbandiyya-Khālidiyya, 1776-2005* (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, 2005); Sean Foley, “The Naqshbandiyya-Khālidiyya, Islamic Sainthood, and Religion in Modern Times,” *Journal of World History* 19, 4 (2008), 521-45; Itzhak Weismann, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafīyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Itzhak Weismann, *Naqshbandiyya: Orthodoxy and Activism in a Worldwide Sufi Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2007); Butrus Abu Manneh, ed., *The Naqshbandiyya-Khālidiyya Sufi Order - L'Ordre soufi Naqshbandiyya-Khālidiyya* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 2008).

⁴ See: Michael Kemper, “Khālidiyya Networks in Daghestan and the Question of Jihād,” *WI*42, 1, (2002), 41-71.

⁵ The literature is voluminous. See for example: Itzhak Weismann, “The Forgotten Shaykh: ‘Isa al-Kurdī and the Transformation of the Naqshbandī-Khalidī Brotherhood in Twentieth-Century Syria,” *WI*43, 3 (2003), 373-93; Butrus Abu Manneh, “Shaykh Ahmed Ziyā’uddīn el-Gümüṣhanevi and the Ziyā’ī-Khālidī Sub-order,” in Frederick de Jong (ed.), *Shia Islam, Sects and Sufism: Historical Dimensions, Religious Practice and Methodological Considerations* (Utrecht, 1992), 105-17; İrfan Gündüz, *Gümüṣhanevi Ahmed Ziyaüddin: Hayatı-Eserleri-Tarikat Anlayışı ve Halidiyye Tarikatı* (Istanbul: Seha Neşriyat, 1984); Abdurrahman Memis, *Hālidī Bağdādī ve Anadolu Hālidîlik* (Istanbul: Kitabevi, 2000); Hamid Algar, “A Brief History of the Naqshbandi Order,” in *Naqshbandis*, 9-49.

between members of the order, describes its spiritual practices, and provides biographies of the great Naqshbandī masters.⁶ Al-Khānī completed it in 1837, just before the proclamation of the Hatt-i Şerif-i Gülhane in 1839, which marked the beginning of a period of reform and modernization in the Ottoman Empire. The book became a central text for the Khālidiyya, and Itzchak Weismann describes it as one of the two foundational texts of the order.⁷ In particular, it has maintained its importance in modern Turkey, where the suborder has thrived up into the present day. Before delving into the book itself, a brief account of its author is in order.

A Life of Sufi Leadership

Al-Khānī was an important figure in the Damascene Naqshbandī milieu, who left behind a considerable line of deputies and disciples. The main source for his life is the biography written by his grandson ‘Abd al-Majīd (1847-1901) within the larger history of the order *al-Ḥadā’iq al-Wardiyya (The Rosy Gardens)*.⁸ Al-Khānī was born in 1798 in the small Syrian town of Khān Shaykhūn some 50km north of the city of Ḥamā. After his father’s death, his mother took him to Ḥamā where he began his legal studies, took initiation in the Qādirī order, and resided for a time in the lodge of a local Sufi saint.⁹

⁶ The most extensive coverage of him and his descendants appears in David Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria*, New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 1990 and in Itzchak Weismann’s *Taste of Modernity*.

⁷ Weismann, *Naqshbandiyya*, 86.

⁸ ‘Abd al-Majīd b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Khānī, *Al-Kawākib al-Durriyya ‘alā al-Ḥadā’iq al-Wardiyya fī Ḥaqā’iq Ajillā’ al-Naqshbandiyya*. ed. Muḥammad Khālīd al-Kharsah (Damascus: Dar al-Beyrut, 1997).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 731.

Khālid and Muḥammad al-Khānī first met when the former passed through Hamā on his way to Damascus.¹⁰ Reportedly, he had a reputation for avoiding heretical innovations and “coercing people to attend mosque prayers” that impressed Khālid.¹¹ On his first visits to Damascus, he began a series of spiritual exercises with Khālid in the Adās mosque. After three days, Khālid bestowed on him the Naqshbandī *nisba* and, in 1825/26, he moved with his family to Damascus on Khālid’s orders. Khālid eventually made him a deputy shaykh in the Murād Pasha Mosque which would become the hub of al-Khānī’s teaching, leadership, and asceticism for the next three decades. Due to his writing ability, he also worked as a scribe for Khālid, writing letters to deputies in different regions for him in a style that pleased his master.¹²

After Khālid died of the bubonic plague in 1827, a trusted disciple named Ismā‘īl Anārānī became the head of the order, but died just seventeen days after Khālid. Before passing away, he appointed ‘Abdallāh al-Harawī, one of his earliest disciples, as the leader of the order.¹³ Harawī moved to Damascus from Sulaymāniyya to take control of the order, but his timing was inauspicious. In 1828, Sultan Maḥmūd II, suspicious of Naqshbandī proselytizing and activities, ordered the governor of Damascus to expel Harawī from the province along with all other Naqshbandīs who were not locals. This expulsion coincided with the banishment of Naqshbandī leaders from Istanbul in 1828.¹⁴ Harawī attempted to maintain control from Sulaymāniyya and then returned to Damascus. However, he fell ill

¹⁰ Weismann, *Taste*, 85.

¹¹ Al-Khānī, *al-Ḥadā’iq*, 735.

¹² *Ibid.*, 734.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 738.

¹⁴ Gündüz, *Osmanlılarda*, 151.

and was close to death when he arrived in the city, whereupon he appointed al-Khānī as his successor.¹⁵

Most of Khālid's deputies and family members opposed him as a successor because of his young age and due to the fact that he was one of the last deputies to be appointed by the master. Additionally, al-Khānī – from a rural background – had difficulty establishing himself among the elites in Damascus.¹⁶ Commins has referred to Khānī and his descendants as “middle *ulama*,” who had modest wealth compared to the elite ‘*ulamā*’ and could not compete with them for official posts.¹⁷ Sultan Mahmud II's exile of non-Syrian deputies from the province cleared the way for his rise in Damascus, where he was the only deputy able to remain during the exile years (1828-32). Thereafter, the Egyptian occupation in 1832 kept the Ottomans from meddling in his affairs and, for a time, prevented other deputies from settling in the province.¹⁸ Benefitting from the absence of competitors, al-Khānī enjoyed paramount status in the local Khālidī community until the end of Egyptian rule.

When the Ottomans regained control of the province, Shaykh Khālid's younger brother, Maḥmūd al-Ṣāḥib, secured an appointment from Sultan Abdūlmecid as leader of the Sulaymāniyya lodge in 1843.¹⁹ Additionally, the sultan funded the establishment of another Khālidī lodge at the renovated tomb of Shaykh Khālid, which was completed in 1846. Al-Khānī claimed leadership over the entire order, but these rival branches indicate that the Khālidīs splintered into numerous factions without a clear locus of power after

¹⁵ Weismann, *Taste*, 80; Butrus Abu Manneh, “The Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya in the Ottoman lands in the early 19th century,” *WI22*, 1 (1982), 32.

¹⁶ Weismann, *Naqshbandiyya*, p. 96.

¹⁷ Commins, *Islamic Reform*, p. 47.

¹⁸ Weismann, *Taste*, p. 82.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94. Abu Manneh, “The Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya,” p. 35; see *al-Ḥadā'iq al-Wardiyya*, p. 260.

Khālid's death. These new imperially funded lodges detracted from al-Khānī's prestige and would continue to diminish the wealth and authority of his descendants as well.

Despite the fact that Sultan Abdūlmecid preferred other Khālidī masters, al-Khānī maintained good relations with influential statesmen and received Ottoman patronage. He received a 1500 piasters a month stipend from the state coffers, probably obtained through his relationship with Musa Safveti Pasha (1805-65) a career Ottoman statesman and his disciple. Safveti became governor of Damascus in 1845, and as such, had the privilege of leading the Hajj caravan to the holy cities. Muḥammad al-Khānī accompanied him on the journey as his spiritual guide and led him through the Hajj rituals.²⁰

In 1854, al-Khānī went to Istanbul where he stayed for four months as the guest of Safveti, accompanied by his son and a group of his followers. He socialized with elites and *'ulamā'* and analyzed the spiritual states of aspirants, "advised the preachers and preached to the advisors" -- all in Musa Safveti's house. He only left the residence to pray in the local mosque and to visit the tomb of Ayyūb al-Anṣārī.²¹ While in Istanbul, on the way to the mosque one day, he saw Sultan Abdūlmecid. According to the hagiographic account by his grandson, this encounter caused al-Khānī to enter a great spiritual state and weep intensely. He diagnosed the Sultan's spiritual state as possessing "zeal for esoteric spirituality, high spiritual enthusiasm, and penetrating vision."²² Benefitting from the introductions provided by Musa Safveti, al-Khānī won disciples from the upper echelons of society in Istanbul before returning to Damascus in the same year.²³

²⁰ Abd al-Majīd, *al-Ḥadā'iq*, p. 742.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 743.

²³ Ibid.

Among his activities as shaykh, al-Khānī led aspirants on spiritual seclusions, conducted *dhikr* sessions, provided spiritual counsel, and read texts to the Naqshbandī brothers in the Murād Pasha mosque, his base in Damascus. He also taught his community Shafi‘ī law, *ḥadīth*, and other “sciences of the *sharī‘a*.” In the afternoons, he retired to read Qur’anic commentary in his cell at the mosque.²⁴ Outside his duties as spiritual guide and religious scholar, al-Khānī engaged in the business of agriculture – a major source of his income – and took particular pleasure in riding and jumping fine horses.²⁵

Al-Khānī maintained his public center at the Murād Pasha mosque until 1860.²⁶ It is unclear whether the riots in Damascus during that year pressed him to cease his public activities or if his health deteriorated. The shaykh died of typhoid fever in 1862 and was buried close by the tomb of Khālid.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., p. 736.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 749.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 744.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 735.

A Sufi Manual for an Expanding Sufi Order: al-Bahja al-Saniyya

Composed in the 1830s during the Egyptian occupation of Syria, *al-Bahja al-Saniyya* was first published in Cairo in 1886.²⁸ In terms of genre, it is a Sufi manual that lays out the rules of comportment, practices, and history of the Khālīdī-Mujaddidī suborder, which was – at the time of its composition – a recently formed and, still somewhat un-institutionalized community. By the early 1830s, the order was geographically widespread and the book responded to the need of the new order to set down its core practices and beliefs in an authoritative text.

In the introduction, al-Khānī explains his rationale for writing it, citing the request of some disciples for a clear exposition of the rules and practices of the order. He writes that there are many works on the Khālīdī order and that the best is *al-Ḥadīqa al-Nadiyya* by Aḥmad b. Sulaymān al-Baghdādī.²⁹ Despite his endorsement, al-Khānī recounts a conversation with Shaykh Khālīd that explains why he undertook the writing of a new text on the rules and etiquette of the Khālīdiyya. When Khālīd asked him if *al-Ḥadīqa* was an eloquent book, he replied, “There is nothing more eloquent than it in the world.” However because it was written in a florid style and with the goal of showing the virtues of Naqshbandī order and defending it against its enemies, he writes, novices had difficulty learning about the rules of comportment from it.³⁰ As such, *al-Bahja* was composed to be a clear and accessible account of the Khālīdiyya’s rules, etiquette, and ritual.

²⁸ Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Khānī, *al-Bahja al-Saniyya fī Adāb al-Ṭarīqa al-‘Aliyya al-Khālīdiyya al-Naqshbandiyya* (Cairo, 1303/1886). ‘Abd al-Majīd, *al-Ḥadā’iq*, p. 738.

²⁹ Aḥmad b. Sulaymān al-Baghdādī, *al-Ḥadīqa al-Nadiyya fī Adāb al-Ṭarīqa al-Naqshbandiyya wa’l-Bahja al-Khālīdiyya* (Cairo, 1313/1895).

³⁰ Al-Khānī, *al-Bahja al-Saniyya fī Adāb al-Ṭarīqa al-‘Aliyya al-Khālīdiyya al-Naqshbandiyya* (Istanbul: Hakikat Kitābevi, 2002), pp. 3-4. All subsequent references come from this version.

The opening sections identify the order unambiguously as a *Sharīʿa*-based Sufi order. “Know, oh seekers of knowledge,” writes al-Khānī, “that the belief of our masters [...] is the belief of the People of the Sunna and the Community (*ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa*) and their path is built upon the preservation of the laws of the Sharīʿa.”³¹ Additionally, al-Khānī notes the importance of spending time with the *ʿulamāʾ* and benefiting from their knowledge.³² Time and time again, he underlines the importance of *Sharīʿa*-based Sufism, a position that undergirded the order and would remain an axiomatic tenet that became increasingly important as Muslim reformists attacked Sufism and its attendant practices as lacking firm grounding in Islam.

The book is comprised of two main sections, one on comportment and etiquette titled *Kitāb al-Ādāb* and another on ritual practices – *Kitāb al-Dhikr*. The section on comportment describes what is required of a Sufi disciple, how he should behave with the shaykh and other members of the order as well as the expectations and rules for shaykhs. Many elements could be drawn from any similar Sufi manual and are non-specific to the Khālidiyya. It is replete with popular maxims and quotes famous Sufis from different historical periods and orders, including al-Ḥallāj, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn ʿArabī. The behaviors demanded of the leaders and disciples – humility, obedience, loyalty, purity of intention, etc. – also draw on a general reservoir of Sufi moral exhortation literature.

The *Kitāb al-Dhikr* is far more specific to the Khālidiyya and discusses all major elements of ritual, with a focus upon those that were controversial and required defense. In particular, it provides an extended explanation and defense of *rābiʿa*, which involved the most contentious ritual innovations made by Shaykh Khālid. However, it describes other

³¹ Al-Khānī, *al-Bahja*, p. 5.

³² Al-Khānī, *al-Bahja*, p. 25.

changes made by Khālid and, before moving on to the subject of binding, it is worth briefly examining another example as well, that of the forty-day seclusion (*khalwa*), which also played an important role in structuring and expanding the Khāliidiyya network.

The *khalwa* involving fasting, prayer and other rituals is not unique to the Khāliidiyya. It has a long history in Muslim ascetic practices and is often presented as being based on the model of the prophetic seclusions of Mūsā and Muḥammad. Among Sufi orders, the Kubrāwiyya, the Shādhiliyya, the Qādiriyya and the Khalwatiyya place special emphasis on the practice, among others, and use it for purposes of initiation or periodic spiritual purification and renewal.³³ In most orders, a shaykh is required to guide the retreats, given the intense nature and potential risks of such concentrated asceticism.

Shaykh Khālid innovated in this domain by allowing his deputies to undertake the initial instruction of disciples, which would then be concluded with a 40-day seclusion either under his supervision or that of his deputies. The seclusion became the only part of the instruction in which he sometimes participated. In contrast, the traditional mode of training had required that disciples spend a significant amount of time in the presence of the master according the tradition of companionship with the shaykh (*ṣuḥba*), but Khālid's policy allowed the order to expand more rapidly because his personal involvement in training and ordaining disciples was minimized.³⁴ In this way, the cultivation of new adepts was expedited and their ranks could be increased more rapidly.

In the passage below from *al-Bahja*, he discusses the two types of seclusion favored by the Naqshbandīs:

³³ H. Landolt, "Khalwa," in: Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4178 . [Accessed 05 July 2017]

³⁴ Weismann, *Taste*, p. 39.

There are two modes of *khalwa*. The first – external seclusion – is when the follower retires to an empty house and resides there, [...] because if the function of the external senses is arrested, the internal senses are set free [...].

The second mode, the internal seclusion, is when a man's interior is in a state of beholding the secrets of the Truth (*mushāhadat asrār al-ḥaqq*), while his exterior is associating with people (*mu'āmalat al-khalq*), in such a manner that the external association does not distract attention from the internal vision, *so that he is in a state of absent presence*. This is genuine seclusion, as God most exalted indicates by saying “men whom neither commerce nor trafficking diverts from the remembrance of God.” This mode of seclusion is peculiar to the Naqshbandī path.³⁵

The second mode of seclusion, being present physically but absent spiritually, here specified as peculiar to the Naqshbandī, is based on the principle of *seclusion within the crowd*.³⁶ This concept encourages the practitioner to remain active in worldly affairs while maintaining intense, constant spiritual activity.

While *al-Bahja* posits *seclusion within the crowd* as the true Naqshbandī mode of seclusion, in fact, the forty-day retreat of physical seclusion constituted an important rite of passage. Muḥammad al-Khānī maintained the same approach as Khālid toward the practice, and no significant opposition to this ritual change emerged within the order, quite in contrast to the case with the new form of binding.³⁷

In Defense of Binding (*rābiṭa*)

³⁵ Al-Khānī, *al-Bahja*, p. 94. Translation by Weismann, *Taste*, pp. 55-56. I have modified the portion in italics. The text in quotations is Qur'an 24:37.

³⁶ Weismann, *Taste*, 45.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

Al-Khānī devotes a long section to the binding of the disciple to the shaykh via meditation on his image, which is among the most controversial practices of the Naqshbandiyya in general and of the Khālidiyya in particular.³⁸ Shaykh Khālid sparked a new debate *within* the order because he demanded that all disciples perform the binding exercise only with his image, not with that of the shaykh with whom they trained, studied, and accompanied. He insisted that this must be the case even for those aspirants who had never seen or met him. Some of his deputies refused to accept this innovation.³⁹ Weismann has argued convincingly that this change had profound implications for the structure of power in the order, effectively centralizing not only spiritual concentration but also institutional authority. He sees this change as countermeasure that complements the decentralized and expedited training routine capped off with a forty-day seclusion. Given that many deputies had not developed strong ties to him personally, it was hoped – argues Weismann – that *rābiṭa* toward him would deepen loyalty and obedience.⁴⁰

Many Naqshbandīs objected to the practice as it seemed to elevate Khālid to the status of an idol and envisioning the shaykh, in general, fell under greater scrutiny in the context of attacks that mounted during the second half of the nineteenth century against non-Qur’anic Sufi exercises. As Weismann notes, al-Khānī lays out a more extensive defense of the practice than his predecessors. Here I would like to look in detail at this defense, which is both general, i.e. to show that the practice has origins in the Qur’an and Sunna, and in particular, to persuade Khālidi-Naqshbandīs that a certain method of *rābiṭa* – exclusively

³⁸ Polemics over *rābiṭa* extended across South and South East Asia: e.g. Martin Van Bruinessen, “The origins and development of the Naqshbandi order in Indonesia,” *Der Islam* 67 (1990), 173-74.

³⁹ Weismann, *Taste*, 37.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

linking with Khālid – is correct. After examining this defense, I will explore how Turkish Naqshbandis continued and/or adapted these arguments for and methods of *rābiṭa*. Of all the ritual innovations introduced by Khālid and defended by Khānī, *rābiṭa* sparked the most controversy, and notably, it has continued to fuel debate among Turcophone Naqshbandis well into the 21st century.

In *al-Bahja al-Saniyya*, the argument for *rābiṭa* refers to a number of Qur’anic verses and prophetic reports which support the ritual in the mode demanded by Shaykh Khālid.⁴¹ Some of these same Qur’anic verses had been cited by previous Naqshbandī masters to explain the practice, but perhaps what distinguishes his defense is that it marshals a wide array of other sources to provide a specific defense of the Khālidī interpretation that *rābiṭa* was a practice distinct from companionship (*ṣuḥba*), that a dead master could be the object of *rābiṭa*, and that Khālid was the only correct target of *rābiṭa* after his death.

The opening line of his description underlines the premise of *rābiṭa* as a separate and superior method to that of *ṣuḥba*. “The second method is binding and it is an independent path for reaching God,” Khānī writes.⁴² Based on this premise, the treatise argues that binding is the most effective and most important means of spiritual advancement. The idea of *rābiṭa* as an “independent path” was distinctive and would become an important theme in later Turkish language treatises.

He presents a definition of *rābiṭa* as “consisting of binding the heart with a shaykh[...] and preserving his image in the mind *even if he is absent* as it has been

⁴¹ Al-Khānī, *Al-Bahja*, 78-81; Weismann, *Taste*, 87.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

transmitted in the *ḥadīth* “Those who, when seen, remind one of God’.”⁴³ This *ḥadīth* would seem to be a general statement, yet al-Khānī cites it as support for this specific form of accompanying a Sufi shaykh. He also uses prophetic reports to support specific elements of the technique, for instance, “If the bond [with the shaykh] subsides, then the disciple preserves the image of his shaykh in his mind, on the basis of the *ḥadīth*: *A man will be with the one he loves.*”⁴⁴ In each of these cases, prophet traditions are interpreted with a meaning suited for al-Khānī’s apologia. After this *ḥadīth*-laced opening, al-Khānī describes the process and stages of binding:

First, the disciple envisions the image of the Perfect Master between his eyes. Then he directs himself toward his spiritual presence (*rūḥāniyya*) on this image and he continues doing so until he obtains unconsciousness or the sign of rapture.

Secondly, he envisions his image within his heart and then directs himself toward his spiritual presence in that image, and, in this way, he will obtain either unconsciousness or the sign of rapture⁴⁵

This process of meditation on the image of the shaykh advances until the disciple experiences the “annihilation” of essence and attributes, then witnesses the spiritual perfection of the shaykh in its entirety, and finally, by way of the shaykh, “reaches” God.⁴⁶

After this description, al-Khānī presents a crucial element of his argument, namely that *rābiṭa* must be performed with a perfect human, who also has the saintly power of *taṣarruf*, which includes the ability to perform miracles and intervene in the physical world.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 71. Two different prophetic traditions contain this phrase – no. 1783 and no. 1784, in ‘Alī ibn ‘Abd al-Malik Muttaqī, *Kanz al-‘Umāl fī Sunan al-Aqwāl wa’-Af‘āl*, v. I (Beirut: Mu’assasa al-Risala), 418-419.

⁴⁴ al-Khānī, *Al-Bahja*, 71.

⁴⁵ Al-Khānī, *Al-Bahja*, 72.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 73.

Even after death the master retains this power and remains a source of spiritual benefit, he writes, and the aspirant who binds with such a master is certain to be blessed.⁴⁷ This establishes the foundation for the argument that Khālid was the last perfect human and that, though deceased, he is the only suitable target of binding. To this end, the manual provides practical details for how to perform *rābiṭa* with a deceased saint, which was a novel practice, and the source provided to support it is again a *ḥadīth* - *If you are confused, seek the aid of the people of the graves.*⁴⁸

The argument comes full circle in the following section which rejects the practice of binding with shaykhs other than Khālid. Since *rābiṭa* can only be performed with a ‘perfect guide’,⁴⁹ writes al-Khānī, one must be careful not to misjudge the state of one’s soul because some who experience spiritual states may suppose falsely that they have reached perfection and ask their disciples to perform *rābiṭa*, but in doing so such a shaykh “goes astray.”⁵⁰ The attainment of the same level of spiritual perfection as those of the greatest saints and masters is the requirement for becoming a target of *rābiṭa*. However, “in these times” he writes “many of our masters have abandoned this requirement”; such masters had received permission from Khālid only to direct *dhikr* ceremonies, but they disobeyed and ordered their disciples to perform *rābiṭa* with their own images.⁵¹

Al-Bahja al-Saniyya is concerned primarily with defending Shaykh Khālid as the only legitimate target for *rābiṭa*. Despite the fact that al-Khānī claimed leadership over the entire order, he did not ask disciples to perform *rābiṭa* on his own image. And in making this

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 75.

argument, Al-Khānī was introducing an innovation, namely, to allow a deceased saint to be the focal point of this activity, something that even Khālid had not contemplated.⁵² Also, the organizational logic of this position appears to have been aimed at maintaining unity of the order around the person of Khālid given that al-Khānī lacked the power, charisma, and authority to demand his deputies and disciples to bind with himself.⁵³

Defenses of *rābiṭa* toward the deceased shaykh threw into question a basic premise of the practice, namely the importance of companionship (*ṣuḥba*) with one's master. Traditionally, the practice of binding one's heart to the shaykh was understood to be a process in which one spent extended periods of time in the physical presence of a Sufi master. This included praying together, listening to sermons, and participating in *dhikr* ceremonies as well as informal occasions like meals which were opportunities to come to know what a perfect human being is and to emulate the model. Therefore, *rābiṭa* with a distant and/or deceased shaykh (whom one had never known and never could) posited a sundering of the practice with that of everyday companionship.

After establishing Khālid as the proper target of binding, al-Khānī takes up the general question of whether the practice has solid foundations in the Islamic tradition. He answers unambiguously, "Yes, it has its foundation in the Book [i.e. Qur'an], the Sunna, and the sayings of the Masters."⁵⁴ He begins by citing the phrase *seek a way of approach unto him* from Q. 5:35. Despite its vagueness, the verse had long been cited by Naqshbandis as a textual basis for *rābiṭa*. Al-Khānī addresses the skeptics, "it is said that this verse refers to

⁵² Weismann, *Taste*, p. 86.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

something other than *rābiṭa*, but we say that the concept [of *wasīla*] is general and that if the command to seek a way of approach is established, then *rābiṭa* is the best of ways.”⁵⁵

The second verse cited as support is: *Say: If you love God, follow me; God will love you* (Q. 3.31).⁵⁶ In his interpretation, this verse refers to *rābiṭa* because “following necessitates seeing what is followed specifically or imagining it” and this is the purpose of binding with a shaykh.⁵⁷ Then, he quotes a *ḥadīth*, allegedly from the collection of al-Bukhārī, in which Abū Bakr ‘complained to the prophet (p.b.u.h.) about the lack of separation from him (p.b.u.h.) even when he was alone’ and ‘Abu Bakr, may God bless him, was overwhelmed with shame.’⁵⁸ Here again the relationship between this prophetic report and *rābiṭa* is less than evident, but is presented as solid evidence by al-Khānī.

After these interpretations of Qur’an and *ḥadīth*, Khānī turns to the sayings of respected Naqshbandī masters. The most important quote comes from ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (1641–1731), who refers to three additional Qur’anic sources. The first is the verse: *Oh you who believe! Be careful of your duty to God, and keep company with the truthful* (Q. 9.119). The latter part of the verse - *kūnū ma‘a al-ṣādiqīn* - was discussed by the earlier Naqshbandī writer ‘Ubaydallāh Aḥrār (d. 1490) as an explanation for *rābiṭa*. In his view, the verse means a disciple should spend time in the physical presence of the shaykh as *ṣuḥba* and, in his absence, should be with him via *rābiṭa*. For Aḥrār, *ṣuḥba* and *rābiṭa* formed two aspects of one practice, with *rābiṭa* essentially being a type of accompanying the shaykh.⁵⁹ And Khālid himself had based one of his arguments in *Risāla fī*

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 78-79. I was unable to find this *ḥadīth* in al-Bukhārī or any other collection.

⁵⁹ B. Abu Manneh, “Khalwa and Rābiṭa in the Khalidi suborder,” in *Naqshbandis* (1990), p. 286.

Ithbāt al- Rābiṭa (*Treatise on the Proofs of Binding*) on Aḥrār’s interpretation of the same verse, albeit to argue for *rābiṭa* as a separate practice from *ṣuḥba*.⁶⁰

Al-Nābulusī focuses his commentary on Q 5:35:

O ye who believe! Be mindful of your duty to Allah, and seek the way of approach (wasīla) unto Him, and strive in His way in order that ye may succeed.

He places emphasis on the term *way of approach (wasīla)*, arguing that the shaykh is the vehicle for the aspirant to arrive to God and he states that “it is obligatory that he witness his shaykh and envision his image” until receives assistance from God in achieving spiritual states.⁶¹ Finally, with reference to Q. 43:36-37, he warns that Satan will become the master of the unwary seeker, if he doesn’t have a true Shaykh.⁶²

It has been suggested that al-Khānī’s attempts to ground the practice in Qur’an and Sunna appears to respond to criticism of the practice as a non-Islamic accretion.⁶³ However, it is difficult to imagine that skeptics of *rābiṭa* from outside the Naqshbandi order would be persuaded by the debatable links that al-Khānī draws between Qur’anic verses, *ḥadīth* and the practice of binding. It seems, therefore, unlikely that Khānī envisioned an audience broader than the members of the Khālidī suborder.

Al-Bahja al-Saniyya mentions the importance of companionship with a master.⁶⁴ However, given that it makes an argument for performing *rābiṭa* exclusively with Khālid, it assumes (and implicitly argues for) a complete separation between the practices of companionship and binding, *ṣuḥba* and *rābiṭa*. This separation signified a fundamental

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 290-291.

⁶¹ Al-Khānī, *al-Bahja*, p. 79.

⁶² Al-Khānī, *al-Bahja*, p. 80.

⁶³ Weismann, *Taste*, p. 87.

⁶⁴ Al-Khānī, *al-Bahja*, pp. 70-71.

alteration of the master-disciple relationship, and, a promotion of *rābiṭa* to the ritual of precedence in the Khālīdī suborder.⁶⁵

Continuity and Contention: The Legacy of Rābiṭa in the Late Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic

The ritual of *rābiṭa* remained a focal point of polemics in the late Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. Publications on *rābiṭa* in the late Ottoman Empire such as the Ottoman Turkish language treatise *‘Ayn al-Ḥaḳīqa fī Rābiṭat al-Ṭarīqa*⁶⁶ (*The Essence of Truth about Sufi Binding*) reflected the fact that debates that circulated in Syria, Iraq and India were also vibrant in the Ottoman domains among Turcophone Muslims. Penned by Mehmet Fevzi Efendi (d. 1900) who served as the Mufti of Edirne and took initiation with a Khālīdī shaykh in the city of Filibe (current day Plovdiv, Bulgaria), the text defends *rābiṭa* against the attacks of Hāfız Seyyid Hoca who, in a work titled *Risāla fī Ibtāl al-Rābiṭa* (*Treatise on the Invalidity of Binding*), condemned it as a form of idolatry and accused those who

⁶⁵ Despite this distinction and elevation, it is clear in *al-Bahja al-Saniyya* that *rābiṭa* is often used in combination with other practices in order to deal with maladies of the mind and soul, for instance: “If during *dhikr* or work, spiritual dissipation or satanic whispering or possession occurs, then he [i.e. the disciple] must bathe in cold water, and if he cannot do so because of his health, then in warm water. After that, he should dress in a clean shirt and go into seclusion (*khalwa*) and perform two rounds of prayer with supplication and submission and seek forgiveness from God the exalted for all his sins, those he knows of and those he does not know of and he must strive not to repeat any of them. In this way, he will regain his healthy spiritual state by the cessation of the whisperings or possession and the return to his proper condition. If he does not succeed, and the spiritual dissipation and possession persist, then he must envision in his mind the image of his Perfect Shaykh who sustains him, and in this way, he will bring an end to this by way of his spiritual power.” Al-Khānī, *Al-Bahja*, p. 96.

⁶⁶ Mehmet Fevzi Kureysizade, *‘Ayn al-Ḥaḳīqa fī Rābiṭat al-Ṭarīqa/Aynü'l-Hakika fi Rabitatu't-Tarika* (Istanbul: n.p., n.d.).

practice it of associating others with God.⁶⁷ Mehmet Fevzi quotes him throughout: “Hey Brother, it is a duty to state that this condition of noble idolatry, which is called noble *rābiṭa* and considered to be this order’s source of blessing, is Satanic, contrary to sacred law, and a form of blasphemy.”⁶⁸ Additionally, Hâfiz Seyyid argues that the practice numbers among the matters of blasphemous innovation in religion.⁶⁹

The main defense provided by Mehmet Fevzi is that Qur’anic verses, Qur’anic commentaries, and *ḥadīth* support the practice and that “a consensus of the people of God prove that it is not *bid‘a*.”⁷⁰ He invokes verses used by Khānī (e.g. 9:119, 5:35), but also adds additional ones (e.g. Q. 2:43, Q. 4:69); he cites the same story from Zamakhsharī’s Qur’anic commentary about Yūsuf and Zulaykhā used in *al-Bahja al-Saniyya*, but additionally he musters support from the commentaries of al-Bayḍāwī, al-Suyūṭī, and Ibn ‘Abbās.⁷¹ In response to the critique that the verses referenced do not explicitly mention *rābiṭa*, he argues - citing Ibn ‘Abbās - that every Qur’anic verse has an esoteric meaning that can be assessed through *ta’wīl*.⁷² While this reasoning underlies much of Sufi Qur’anic interpretation, al-Khānī never raises this principle when providing Qur’anic sources to support the practice of *rābiṭa*. The final Qur’anic source quoted (Q. 43:36-37) suggests that Mehmet Fevzi mined Khānī’s treatise because Khānī also cites it at the end of his section on *rābiṭa*. Like Khālid and al-Khānī, he also references Sha‘ranī’s discussion on the practice of imagining the shaykh.⁷³

⁶⁷ Kureysîzade, *Aynü’l*, p. 3; Hâfiz Seyyid Hoca, *Risāla fî Ibtāl al-Rābiṭa/Risāle fî ibtālî’r-râbiṭa*, MÜİF Ktp., Genel, nr. 6941, ek-8, vr. 1b-8a. Unfortunately, this treatise was unavailable to me.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

While it is clear that Mehmet Fevzi drew upon earlier Khālīdī texts, he does not venture into most of the internal debates about the practice, such as whether Khālīd should be the exclusive target of binding. His treatise is directed toward a broader audience of naysayers and skeptics, not an internal polemic intended for Khālīdī followers. However, it is clear that the debate on *rābiṭa* continued as related publications appeared in subsequent years. In 1906, for example, a seventy-page work defending *rābiṭa* was published in Istanbul,⁷⁴ and, in 1911, an Ottoman Turkish translation of Khālīd's *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Rābiṭa* came out in the journal *Tasavvuf* by Haydarizade İbrahim Efendi (1864-1933), who later became the Ottoman Şeyhülislām on two occasions.⁷⁵

One of the most influential Naqshbandi shaykhs of the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic, Abdülhakim Arvasi, composed an important work on *rābiṭa*, which was published in Istanbul circa 1923/24.⁷⁶ The role of Arvasi is important in several respects. Firstly, his spiritual disciples were responsible for the publication of *al-Bahja al-Saniyya* in various forms. Secondly, his own treatise on *rābiṭa* transmits much of the content of *al-Bahja*, revealing a remarkable continuity in argumentation and thinking about practice from al-Khānī into the Turkish Republican-era Khālīdīs. In fact, Arvasi's work is based almost exclusively on *al-Bahja*, a fact that has not been acknowledged by scholarship on his work.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Mustafa Fevzi, *Kitab-ı isbatü'l-mesalik fi rabitati's-salik* (İstanbul: n.p., 1324/1906).

⁷⁵ It was published in two parts. Part I: Khālīd-i Shahrazūrī, "Rabita-i Sufiye," *Tasavvuf*, trans. Haydarizade İbrahim Efendi, İstanbul: Şeyh Saffet, 21 Nisan 1327 [4 May 1911], vol: I, no: 7, pp. 4-7. [1329 Hijrī]; Part II: "Rābiṭa-i Sufiye," *Tasavvuf*, İstanbul: Şeyh Saffet, 28 Nisan 1327 [11 May 1911], vol: I, no: 8, 4-5.

⁷⁶ *Rābiṭa-i Şerife; Mübtediler için tarikat-ı aliyye-i Nakşibendiyye'nin adabına mübeyyin bir mektub sureti*, Abdülhakim Arvasi, (İstanbul: Necm-i İstikbal Matbaası, 1342/1923-4).

⁷⁷ This article, for instance, treats Arvasi's treatise as a landmark text without acknowledging its complete dependence on *al-Bahja al-Saniyya*: İrfan Gündüz, "Tasavvufi bir terim olarak Rābiṭa," *Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, no. 7-10 (1989), 251.

Arvasi insisted that *rābiṭa* was the most important path to God, elevating it above other methods and separating it from *ṣuḥba*. The opening lines repeat, verbatim (albeit in Turkish), the opening lines in Khānī's apologia for the practice. He writes, "Binding is an independent path for arriving to God" (*Rābiṭa, Allah'a ermeye müstakil bir yoldur.*). Then, he asserts the superiority of *rābiṭa* over *dhikr*, citing Muḥammad Ma'sūm, 'Binding can lead one to God by itself; *dhikr* cannot.'⁷⁸ After pronouncing the superiority of *rābiṭa*, he claims that the practice is "required in every Sufi order. Those who deny this requirement," he writes, "either don't know what binding is or don't understand the meaning and concept of the Sufi orders."⁷⁹

It is important to note that Arvasi argued not only for the superiority but also for the necessity of *rābiṭa*. This is notable because some shaykhs, like As'ad Ṣāḥib in Damascus, had diminished the importance of the practice in the late nineteenth century, suggesting that it was recommended but not obligatory.⁸⁰ This stance softened the position of Khālid and al-Khānī. Arvasi, however, revived their insistence on the indispensable nature of the practice as well as their view on how it should be performed.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Arvasi's treatise is its insistence that *rābiṭa* could only be directed toward Shaykh Khālid, nearly a century after the latter's death. The main line of his argument appears to come directly from *al-Bahja*. He asserts the perfection of Khālid, mentions his orders to his disciples not to conduct *rābiṭa* with others, and defends the saintly power of deceased masters in the world as well as binding with the

⁷⁸ Abdülhakim Arvasi, *Rābiṭa-i Şerife*, ed. Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (Istanbul: Büyük Doğu, 1974), 15.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Butrus Abu-Manneh, "Khalwa and Rābiṭa in the Khalidi Suborder," *Naqshbandis: Cheminements et situation actuelle d'un ordre mystique musulman/Historical Developments and Present Situation of a Muslim Mystical Order* (Istanbul: ISIS, 1990), p. 294. See also Weismann's insight that As'ad Ṣāḥib replaced *rābiṭa* with the power of the state to obtain control over the Khālidiyya in Damascus. Weismann, *Taste*, 117.

deceased. The reason that others cannot be target of *rābiṭa* in Arvasi's Turkey is precisely that claimed by al-Khānī: there are no longer any living perfect spiritual guides. Arvasi writes:

Such people (spiritual greats) are scarce in our times. In this situation, the damage of those, who without license, order others to perform *rābiṭa* on themselves is greater than that of those who perform binding... This proves that only Mevlana [Khālid] has the '*taṣarruf*' after his death, to continue the practice, and that the disciple should benefit from this '[spiritual] state.'⁸¹

On the issue of dead saints and in the spirit of *al-Bahja*, he writes, "Those who think that Khālid and those like him do not maintain their connection with the world and think it's necessary to perform *rābiṭa* with a living teacher make a grave error because this view denies the power of the saints after death."⁸²

However, in some respects, Arvasi ventures into new subjects. He writes, for instance, that Khālid never commanded his disciples to perform *rābiṭa* exclusively on his person and that none of his deputies ever asked their own disciples to direct *rābiṭa* toward themselves.⁸³ This claim contradicts the historical record as it is well known that Khālid harshly enforced this rule and punished deputies who did not keep it. In spite of this, Arvasi presents an obedient and harmonious account of the order in maintaining this rule. In similar fashion, he explains that there was legal unanimity on the matter, first stating that the practice is approved by Hanafī scholars and, second, claiming that there was a legal

⁸¹ Arvasi, *Rābiṭa-i Ṣerife*, 27.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

consensus (Tr. *icma*) between Shāfi‘ī, Ḥanafī, and Ḥanbalī schools.⁸⁴ Additionally, Arvasi discusses some forms of binding not mentioned by al-Khānī such as imagining oneself in the clothing the shaykh, which he calls sartorial binding (*telebbüsî*).⁸⁵

According to Arvasi, the Qur’an provides even better evidence than the legal consensus. “Look at the [legal] books if you wish,” he writes, but the clearest proof is the phrase in Q. 5:35 “seek a way of approach” (*vesileye yapışınız*). He quotes the verse periodically as a refrain throughout the text. His interpretation of the verse appears to come directly from the *al-Bahja al-Saniyya* as he argues that “a way of approach” is used in the general sense of which binding is the highest form. As mentioned above, al-Khānī’s opening discussion on *wasīla* (Tr. *vesile*) is identical.⁸⁶ Additionally, he interprets another verse used by Khānī - Q. 3:31 - in precisely the same manner, claiming that “follow me” (Ar. *fa-ttabi’ni* /Tr. *tâbi olunuz*) contains a reference for binding, because “following” requires seeing the one who is followed, either with the senses or the imagination.⁸⁷

The mere fact that Arvasi used the same arguments as al-Khānī is not surprising. Adapting and reusing earlier texts is commonplace in apologetic works. However, what is particularly interesting is that Arvasi reproduced al-Khānī’s arguments in the context of the twilight period of the Ottoman Empire and early years of the Turkish republic, when Sufi orders came, first, under the scrutiny and criticism of intellectuals in the Young Turk period who recommended abolishing the orders, and, from 1925 onward, official legal suppression by the Turkish Republican state. Arvasi was among the Sufi shaykhs who echoed criticisms of Sufi orders, stating that the orders had become corrupt and that there

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 28.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

⁸⁶ Al-Khānī, *Al-Bahja al-Saniyya*, p. 78.

⁸⁷ Arvasi, *Râbita-i Şerife*, p. 29.

was little, if anything, remaining of the spiritual and moral ethos of true Sufism.⁸⁸ The respected shaykh trained many students, but, in the end, he decided not to appoint any deputies or successors, effectively ending his lineage. In this context, the firm position on conducting binding exclusively with Shaykh Khālid may take on something of a new meaning and raises questions about the viability and use of the exercise outside the framework of master-disciple relationships in formal Sufi orders.

Since Arvasi was not attempting to consolidate authority over a Sufi order – as Khānī and others did by defending Khālid-centric binding – how is his defense of *rābiṭa* to be understood? Was he simply reproducing previous arguments or was he attempting to make a declaration about the current state of the Khālidī order in the early years of the Turkish republic, criticizing the use of *rābiṭa* by other shaykhs or proposing a return to unity around the image of Khālid? Clear answers to these questions are difficult to provide and would require an in-depth study of the organizational and ritual practices of twentieth century Turkish orders. What is certain is that the publishing activities of his devotees transported his and al-Khānī’s arguments about *rābiṭa* into the even more distant context of the late twentieth century.

Long after its initial publication in the 1920s, Arvasi’s treatise was simplified, edited, and published in modern Turkish by the country’s most important mid-century Islamist writer – Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904-1983), who was a devotee of Arvasi. Kısakürek’s popularity was vast and his publishing house Büyük Doğu was a powerful platform for disseminating texts to pious Sunni audiences. The publication of *Râbiṭa-i Şerife* in modern Turkish and with Kısakürek’s imprimatur made Arvasi and al-Khānī’s ideas on the practice

⁸⁸ İsmail Kara, *Cumhuriyet Türkiyesi’nde bir Mesele Olarak İslam* (Istanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 2009), p. 257.

widely available in a popular and accessible form. The language of Kısakürek's edition uses simple sentence structure and the format of a letter from the master to convey his ideas. The first edition of this work in modern Turkish appeared in 1974 and has been republished in at least fifteen editions. It is by far the most popular and widely read work on binding in modern Turkey. The popularity of the book from its initial publication to the present is indicative of the important yet controversial status that binding continues to have in contemporary Islamic circles in Turkey.

Another devotee of Arvasi, Hüseyin Hilmi Işık (1911-2001) established his own publishing house in 1966 as well as the İhlas Vakfı in 1976 and has disseminated Khālidi texts, including Işık's own writings and translations. Around Işık, a community of disciples formed, which was not a formal Sufi order but functioned in much the same way, and the group - known to outsiders as Işıkçılar - established a holding firm and television station. Beginning in the late 1970s, its press has published at least three editions of *al-Bahja al-Saniyya* in its original Arabic form.⁸⁹ These editions place it together in a single volume with another Arabic language treatise – *Irghām al-Murīd* – by Muhammed Zâhid Kevserî (d. 1951) a late Ottoman religious scholar and Khālidi shaykh who fled Istanbul at the collapse of the empire and settled in Cairo.⁹⁰ The reason for grouping these treatises together in one volume appears to be thematic, as the editors note, they both “explain Sufism and the lives of the great Sufis.”⁹¹ Additionally there is a polemic affinity in that both texts are defenses of Sufi practices against their detractors. According to the editor, the title of the *Compulsion*

⁸⁹ Muhammed b. Abdullâh el-Hânî, *al-Bajha al-Saniyya* (İstanbul: Işık Kitabevi 1977); Muhammed b. Abdullâh el-Hânî, *al-Bajha al-Saniyya* (İstanbul: İhlâs Vakfı, 1989; 2002).

⁹⁰ Yusuf Şevki Yavuz, “Zâhid Kevserî” *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* 44 (2013) pp, 77-80.

⁹¹ Al-Khânî, *al-Bajha*, Back Cover.

of the Disciple “means ‘a refutation of those who deny Sufism’.”⁹² Işık maintained that Arvasi was a Perfect Guide (*murşid-i kâmil*) in the same mold as Khâlid before, which suggests that he and his circle may have considered binding with his image permissible.

Translations of *al-Bahja al-Saniyya* are also used by contemporary Khâlidî-Naqshbandî circles, and there are at least four full-length Turkish language editions.⁹³ The translation by Mehmet Talha Odabaşı, for instance, replaces the original title with a more general one – *The Etiquette of Sufism (Sûfiyye Âdâbi)* – without any reference to the Naqshbandiyya order in the title. One interesting element of this translation appears in the latter section that provides the biographies of the great Naqshbandi masters. In the original Arabic text, the final section presents the lives of three masters: Muḥammad al-Uwaysī al-Bukhārī (718-91/1318-1389), Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624), and Khâlid-i Baghdādī. The translation adds an extensive section of biographies that is not included in Khānī’s text. It begins with a poem in praise of the branch of Khâlidî shaykhs that traces its lineage from Khâlid through Ṭaha al-Hakkâri (d. 1852), to Ṭaha al-Ḥarîrî (d. 1875), to M. Esad Erbili (1847 - 1931), to Mahmud Sami Ramazanoğlu (1892-1984), and, finally, to Yahyalılı Hacı Hasan Efendi (1914-1987). The section provides an additional biography of Khâlid, which adds nothing of interest, and then proceeds to focus on the Mosul-born Khâlidî lineage.

Important among these figures is M. Esad Erbili, who ascended to the Council of Sufi Shaykhs in Istanbul.

⁹² Ibid., Back Cover.

⁹³ Muhammed bin Abdullâh el-Hânî el-Halidî, *Büyük sûrûr: Adab*, trans. Abdülkadir Akçiçek (Fatih Gençlik Vakfı Matbaası, 1976); Muhammed b. Abdullâh Hânî, *Âdâb*, trans. Ali Hüsrevoğlu (İstanbul: Erkam Yayınları, 1985); Muhammed b. Abdullâh el-Hânî, *Sufiyye adabi*, trans. Mehmet Talha Odabaşı (İstanbul: Mavi Yayıncılık 2004); Muhammed b. Abdullâh el-Hânî, Behcetü’s Seniyye - Nakşibendî Âdabi, trans. Siraceddin Önlüer (İstanbul: Semerkand Yayınları, 2013). Additionally, his grandson’s much longer tome, *al-Hadâ’iq al-Wardiyya*, has been translated *en toto* into modern Turkish in a 2011 edition that comprises no less than one thousand pages, Abdülmecid Hânî, *Hadaiku’l-Verdiyye*, trans. Mehmet Emin Fidan (İstanbul: Semerkand Yayınları, 2011).

The popularity of these works among Khālidi circles and ongoing debates over *rābiṭa* in the Turkish public sphere. For instance, an author named Ferit Aydın (1945-), who is the son of a Khālidi shaykh, penned a critical history of *rābiṭa* that claims the practice was adopted from Buddhist meditation techniques and Islamized by the Sufi brotherhoods. He places the adoption of binding within the context of the historical corruption and decline of pure Islam.⁹⁴ The book evoked responses from the most important Naqshbandi communities in Turkey, including Ali Kara of the İsmail Ağa Community and Osman Nuri Topbaş (1942-) head of the Erenköy Community.⁹⁵ The leader of the Hizmet movement, Fethullah Gülen (1941-) has also described his own practice of binding and has defended it against the claim that it places an intermediary between the worshipper and God, writing “it definitely casts no shadow upon Divine Unity.”⁹⁶ The number, length and detailed nature of these responses underline the fact that *rābiṭa* continues to hold a central position in the practice of Turkish Naqshbandīs and remains a subject of regular contestation in and between piety-minded circles.

Conclusion

⁹⁴ Ferit Aydın, *Tarikatta Râbita Ve Nakşibendilik* (İstanbul: Elah, 1996); *Tarikatta Râbita Ve Nakşibendilik* (İstanbul, Süleymaniye Vakfı 2000).

⁹⁵ Ali Kara’s refutation “Rabitayı İnkâr Eden Ferit Aydın’a Reddiye,” (August 14, 2008). is available at <http://www.alikarahoca.net/sapm%C4%B1%C5%9F-f%C4%B1rkalara/222-rabkar-eden-ferit-ayd-reddiye.html> [Accessed 27 June 2018]; Osman Nuri Topbaş, *Genç Dergisi Yıl: 2012 Ay: Ocak Sayı: 64*: Answering a question from a disciple, Topbaş defends *rābiṭa*. He explains that there are three types: natural, base, and superior. The first (natural) is the connection between all things, interconnection. The second (base) is negative forms such as addiction to gambling, alcohol, and, especially in our age “unethical media broadcasts and internet sites.” Third (superior) is the binding between the seeker and God via God’s friends. <http://www.osmannuritopbas.com/rabita-muhabbeti-canli-tutmaktir.html> [Accessed 27 June 2018]

⁹⁶ M. Fethullah Gülen, “Râbita” (27 September 2001) <https://fgulen.com/tr/fethullah-gulenin-butun-eserleri/prizma-serisi/fethullah-gulen-prizma/11626-fethullah-gulen-râbiṭa> [Accessed 27 June 2018].

Al-Bahja al-Saniyya serves, in various forms and formats, as a textual cornerstone for the Khālidiyya suborder in Turkey, and, plays a key role in the elaboration of polemics surrounding the practice of *rābiṭa*. For a number of central figures in twentieth century Turkish Sufism, including Abdülhakim Arvasi, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, Süleyman Hilmi Tünahan (1888-1959) as well as the Iskenderpaşa Mosque community leaders Mehmed Zahid Kotku (1897-1980) and Esad Coşan (1938-2001), the practice formed an indispensable aspect of spiritual life. Arvasi's book on *rābiṭa*, the mostly widely read text on the subject in modern Turkey, was based almost entirely on *al-Bahja*. Kısakürek, the influential mid-twentieth century writer, not only published Arvasi's treatise on *rābiṭa* but also extolled the importance of the practice in his other works and accused its critics of committing blasphemy. Süleyman Tunahan – the eponym of the large Süleymancılar community - is known to have instructed his followers to perform binding exclusively with his own image, but he appointed no successor.⁹⁷ The most powerful Naqshbandi figure of the twentieth century and leader of the İskenderpaşa Community, Mehmed Zahid Kotku, maintained the practice in a manner that kept Shaykh Khālīd as a focal point but also included himself. He instructed disciples to imagine Khālīd and himself 'sitting next to each other' and to benefit from the spiritual blessing of both during *rābiṭa*.⁹⁸ His disciple Korkut Özal (1929-2016), a politician and brother of former Prime Minister Turgut Özal, described performing *rābiṭa* with Kotku during a turbulent flight from New York to Frankfurt.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 147.

⁹⁸ Korkut Özal, "Twenty Years with Mehmed Zahid Kotku: A Personal Story," in *Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia: Change and Continuity - Papers Read at a Conference Held at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, June 9-11, 1997* ed. Elisabeth Özdalga (Istanbul: Swedish Research Center, 1999), p. 178.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 172; Fatma Aksu, "Uçakta Rabita," *Hürriyet*, 11 November 2002

(<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/ucakta-rabita-3581443>) [Accessed 10 October 2018]

Kotku's successor, Esad Coşan also defended the practice, advising his disciples to read Kısakürek's adaptation of Arvasi's treatise based on *al-Bahja al-Saniyya*.¹⁰⁰

Rābiṭa has remained an integral and controversial practice from the days of Shaykh Khālid up until the present, and, despite significant even revolutionary political and legal changes that have directly affected Sufi orders, including the abolition of the Sufi lodges and the criminalization of Sufi titles and ceremonies in 1925, Turkish Naqshbandi communities have maintained and defended the practice largely based upon the arguments contained within al-Khānī's book. As seen above, there is not a perfect adherence to all of its tenets as adaptations and additions are made, but, by and large, the book's position as a cornerstone of defense and argumentation remains solid.

Since Khālid's innovation in *rābiṭa* sought to restructure master-disciple relationships, it stands to reason that further research about how *rābiṭa* has been used by underground Sufi orders and post-ṭarīqa communities (*cemaat*) could provide insight into the organizational logic and schemes of succession in modern Turkey. Whereas this article has focused upon textual legacies, a finer-grained and perhaps even an anthropological approach to the subject may be required to understand the recent implementation and importance of *rābiṭa* in the Turkish context for shaping the relationships between masters and disciples and defining hierarchies of devotion and obedience. Regardless of how such questions are to be answered, they will be confronted in a context encompassed by the long shadow cast by a Sufi etiquette manual composed in Damascus nearly two centuries earlier.

¹⁰⁰ Esad Coşan, *Güncel Meseleleri* (<http://www.dervisan.com/kitap/gm1/rabita.html>) [Accessed 10 October 2018]