AḤMAD ZAYNĪ DAḤLĀN'S
AL-FUTUḤĀT AL-ISLĀMIYYA: A CONTEMPORARY VIEW OF THE SUDANESE MAHDI

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Sayyid Aḥmad b. Zaynī Daḥlān (1817-1886) was a prominent Meccan who became the leading *muftī* of the Shāfiᶜī *madhhab* and head of the corporation of ᶜ*ulamā*ᵓ in his native city.[2] He was also a prolific writer. Joseph Schacht describes him as 'the solitary representative of historical writing in Mecca in the nineteenth century', unusual for addressing the 'controversial topical questions' of his time.[3] Shortly before his death in 1886, Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān finished *al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya*, a lengthy survey of the Islamic conquests from the wars of apostasy (*ridda*, 632-33) to his own day.[4] One of its last sections discusses the fledgling Mahdist movement of a man named Muḥammad Aḥmad from the Sudan.[5] Although this section has until now escaped the

2   As Shāfiᶜī *muftī* he had many students from Southeast Asia, where he was well known. See C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century* (trans. J.H. Monahan), Leiden: E.J. Brill 1931, 237-8 and *passim*.
3   Daḥlān wrote extensively on the Wahhābī movement, for example, J. Schacht, 'Sayyid Aḥmad b. Zaynī Daḥlān', *EI* (2), II, 91; *GAL,* II, 499-500, S II, 810-11; *ALA*, I, 333.
4   *Al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya* was first published as a lithograph in Mecca in 1884-85. This essay relies upon the Cairo edition of 1968.
5   The term *mahdī* means 'rightly guided [leader]' (implying guidance from God) and has Muslim millenarian overtones. Mahdist movements of the

attention of Sudan specialists, it represents an important con-
temporary source on the Sudanese Mahdist movement, and is of
interest for two reasons. First, Daḥlān provides a Muslim, but
non-Sudanese, perspective on Muḥammad Aḥmad's mission and
its legitimacy. Second, Daḥlān uses his discussion on the
Sudanese Mahdi to present his own opinions on the Muslim
world's weakness *vis-à-vis* the European powers, on the nature of
a proper Islamic state, and on the urgent need for Muslims to
regain the spiritual and political vigour which characterized the
age of the first four caliphs (632-661).

Al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya chronicles Muslim military history
after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in 632. Volume 1 of
the 1968 edition charts Muslim territorial expansion into the
Fertile Crescent and beyond, chronologically leading to the era of
Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and the Crusades. Volume 2 concentrates primarily
on the Mongol conquests and the Ottoman Empire. Daḥlān's
discussion of the Sudanese Mahdi appears in the section devoted
to the Ottoman sultan, ᶜAbd al-Ḥamīd II (r. 1876-1909), who was
reigning while he wrote. He surveys events in ᶜAbd al-
Ḥamīd II's reign from 1876 until the early 1880s.[6] He notes the
progressive shrinkage of the Ottoman domains, caused by the
crushing loss of the Empire's Balkan territories (notably Bosnia-
Hercegovina and Bulgaria) after defeat by the Russians in the
wars of 1877-78;[7] the leasing of Cyprus to the British in 1878;[8]

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past have appealed to the discontented and have called for radical political
change and religious reform. On the notion of the *mahdī* in Muslim
thought, see W. Madelung, 'al-Mahdī', *EI* (2), V, 1230-8. The classic text
on the Sudanese movement is: P.M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan,
1881-1898*, 2nd edn, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1970. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm
Abū Salīm has published the complete works of the Sudanese Mahdi in
seven volumes: *al-Athār al-kāmila*, Khartoum: Khartoum University Press
1990-94.

6   Al-Sayyid Aḥmad b. Zaynī Daḥlān, *al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya, baᶜda mudī al-
futuḥāt al-nabawiyya*, Cairo 1968, II, 290-3.

7   Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and
Modern Turkey*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988, II, 182-4,
186-7.

8   Disraeli's government in Britain proposed the occupation of Cyprus
as a means of guarding against Russian expansion into Ottoman Ana-
tolia and, by extension, into the Mediterranean. The Cyprus

the French occupation of Tunisia in 1881;[9] and the ʿUrābī Revolt and the British occupation of Egypt in 1882.[10]

It is no accident that his discussion of the Sudanese Mahdi follows this dismal chronicle of territorial loss in the Islamic world. Implicit in Daḥlān's attitude towards Muḥammad Aḥmad of the Sudan is the tentative hope that he could be on a God-inspired mission, sent to restore the position of Islam and to fortify Muslims both spiritually and politically. Hence Daḥlān's attitude towards the Sudanese movement is simultaneously cautious and open-minded.

Much news reached Daḥlān about the events occurring in the Sudan. He wrote that in 1297/1879-80[11] there emerged a man

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Convention of 4 June 1878, turned the region into a British protectorate operating in the name of the Ottoman sultan. The Ottomans continued to control the island's religious, judicial, and educational affairs; Shaw and Shaw, *Ottoman Empire,* 190.

9   Daḥlān's dating for the French conquest of Tunisia appears to be too early by at least a few months. He suggests that the occupation occurred in 1297/1879-80, when in fact France invaded Tunisia in late April 1881 (Jumādā I 1298). Similarly, he attributes an early date to the beginning of the Sudanese Mahdist movement; see below. On the role of France in Tunisia, see Lisa Anderson, *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980,* Princeton: Princeton University Press 1986.

10   A large literature exists on the ʿUrābī Revolt and on the British occupation of Egypt. One of the most recent works is Juan R.I. Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's ʿUrabi Movement,* Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993.

11   Daḥlān's chronology raises an interesting point. The standard date for Muḥammad Aḥmad's declaration of *mahdī*-ship to his disciples is Rabīʿ II 1298/March 1881; see Holt, *Mahdist State,* 53. It would first appear that Daḥlān's dating for the emergence of Muḥammad Aḥmad as *mahdī* would be at least a few months too early to be accurate. But Yoshiko Kurita has informed this writer that oral traditions from the Sudan's Ḥalāwīn district of the Gezira region suggest that Muḥammad Aḥmad had been been confiding his *mahdī*-ship to close friends for some time before March 1881 (Yoshiko Kurita, interviews in Ḥalāwīn district, February 1994). Theoretically it is possible that early news of Muḥammad Aḥmad's immanent declaration travelled along the network of religious scholars and reached Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān in Mecca.

named Muḥammad Aḥmad, reputedly a Ḥasanī *sharīf* (a descendant of the Prophet through his grandson Ḥasan) and a *shaykh* of the Sammāniyya Sufi *ṭarīqa* who was famous for his piety. In clashes with the troops of Khedive Tawfīq and later of the British—at Kordofan, Kassala, Khartoum, Berber, and Dongola—Muḥammad Aḥmad won, although remarkably, his supporters wielded mere spears and knives in contrast to the sophisticated weaponry of the other side. Near Suakin, an associate of Muḥammad Aḥmad named ʿUthmān Diqna[12] defeated British and Egyptian troops in spectacular victories. Reports suggested that Muḥammad Aḥmad's forces numbered 300,000 men or more.[13]

Was Muḥammad Aḥmad the *mahdī*? The reports that reached Dahlān differed. Some said that he called himself the *mahdī*; others claimed that he had not done so, but that his goal was simply to restore the *sharīʿa* and to expel the British from Egypt. Whereas most said that he was truly a pious man, others condemned him on the grounds that his troops engaged eagerly in plundering and in the killing of innocent people, including ʿulamāʾ, pious men, women, and children. Still others insisted that Muḥammad Aḥmad frowned upon the killing and looting that his followers carried out.[14]

Following this survey of events in the Sudan, the treatise resorts to the historical technique of citing the works of past scholars at length. Discussion revolves around *ḥadīth* on the *mahdī* as analyzed in relevant works by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 1565), al-Qurṭūbī (d. 1272), and others. The author also surveys the historical theories of Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1382) on mahdist movements. It is difficult to isolate Dahlān's position towards the Sudanese movement, since he deftly weaves his own ideas on the subject into what is largely a narrative of historical paraphrase. Nevertheless, by carefully

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12   A brief summary of the life of the Mahdist *amīr* ʿUthmān Diqna (*c*. 1840-1926) appears in Richard Hill, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, 2nd edn, London: Frank Cass & Co. 1967, 367-8. See also H.C. Jackson, *Osman Digna,* London 1926.

13   Dahlān, *Futuḥāt,* II, 293-4.

14   Dahlān, *Futuḥāt,* II, 294.

following the threads of the author's argumentation, it becomes apparent that Daḥlān's opinions on the subject were firm and clear.

In short, Daḥlān is willing to accept the idea that Muḥammad Aḥmad of the Sudan may be a *mahdī*—a rightly guided leader sent to restore the faith—since he possesses some of the qualities which various *ḥadīth* specify, and since he may be on a pious mission to re-establish justice and the *sharīᶜa*.[15] However, Daḥlān indicates that Muḥammad Aḥmad cannot be *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*–the true herald of the end of time, the forerunner of Christ (ᶜĪsā) and the Anti-Christ (al-Dajjāl). To be *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*, one must fulfil certain crucial prerequisites: one must be a descendant of Fāṭima, one must emerge in Mecca, and one must appear at a time of chaos (*fitna*) when Muslims are lacking a caliph (*khalīfa*).[16] Muḥammad Aḥmad of the Sudan cannot be *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*, says Daḥlān, because the Muslim world does have a caliph and a commander of the faithful—namely, the Ottoman Sultan, ᶜAbd al-Ḥamīd II.[17]

Daḥlān's wording suggests that he accepted the premise of ᶜAbd al-Ḥamīd's caliphate, and by extension the cause of Pan-Islamism,[18] insofar as the Ottoman sultan could serve as a unifying force for Muslims in the troubled times when Daḥlān was writing. Hence Daḥlān declares that if Muḥammad Aḥmad is not a *mahdī*, but rather a tyrant rebelling against the sultan, then he should be killed. If he is not a *mahdī*, his mission may nevertheless serve the good purpose of expelling the British from Egypt and helping the Ottoman state (*al-dawla al-ᶜUthmāniyya*). In case

15 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt,* II, 295.
16 See 'Ignaz Goldziher on al-Suyūṭī', edited and annotated by John O. Hunwick in *The Muslim World*, xlviii, 1979, 77-99 where his ideas on *tajdīd* and the *mahdī* are discussed in detail.
17 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt,* II, 297. Sultan ᶜAbd al-Ḥamīd staked his claim to be the universal caliph for Muslims in Articles 3 and 4 of the 1876 Ottoman Constitution; Shaw and Shaw, *Ottoman Empire,* 175.
18 Shaw and Shaw call Pan-Islamism 'the most widespread ideological force in the Ottoman Empire during Abdulhamit's years'. They see it as a reaction against Western influence and European penetration which largely succeeded in deterring the Great Powers from further expansionism after 1882; Shaw and Shaw, *Ottoman Empire,* 259-60.

of the latter, Daḥlān speculates that Muḥammad Aḥmad may
fulfil a *ḥadīth* cited by al-Suyūṭī, according to which an African
amīr will act as precursor to *al-mahdī [al-muntaẓar]*.[19]

In endorsing a theory of multiple *mahdī*s but of one *mahdī
muntaẓar*, Daḥlān points to Ibn Ḥajar for precedent. He also
implies that some of the other men who were acclaimed as *mahdī*
figures in the past—Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya (d. 700), ᶜUmar
b. ᶜAbd al-ᶜAzīz (d. 720), Ibn Tūmart (d. 1130), and Muḥammad
b. ᶜAbd Allāh 'the Pure Soul' (d. 762), for example[20]—may have
been *mahdī*s but were likewise not *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*.[21]
Trying to predict the advent of *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar* is futile,
Daḥlān argues, because his arrival depends upon the will of
God—and even the Prophet Muḥammad himself did not realize
the immanence of his mission until after the angel Gabriel
appeared to him. Also, *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar* cannot declare
himself; his presence will be made clear through the acclamation
of the people who pay him homage (*bayᶜa*).[22]

The battles of the Sudanese Mahdist movement are the last
battles to which *al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya* refers. This discussion of
Muḥammad Aḥmad's movement and of mahdist movements
across history provides Daḥlān with an opportunity to present his
own opinions on the nature and legitimacy of Muslim activism
and reform during troubled times. 'I have seen from many trea-
tises written on the *mahdī* issue that [the *mahdī*] cannot succeed in
his cause unless he implements the *sharīᶜa* and follows the
example of the Prophet (may God bless and protect him) and of
the rightly-guided caliphs…'[23]

For Daḥlān, the key to emulating the Prophet and the first
four caliphs, and therefore the key to restoring the religious and
political vitality of the Muslim world, rests in *zuhd*—that is, in
self-restraint or asceticism in this-worldly affairs, accompanied by
hard work and simple living. 'They say that people follow the
religion of their kings', writes Daḥlān, 'thus the greatest caliph is

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19   Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt,* II, 296-7.
20   See Madelung, 'al-Mahdī'.
21   Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt,* II, 298.
22   Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt,* II, 300.
23   Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt,* II, 305.

the one who serves as a model for all Muslims'.[24] He resorts to historical example to prove his point. The Umayyad caliph al-Walīd b. ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 705-15) was obsessed with architectural projects; hence in his time the people were mainly interested in the construction of monuments and castles.[25] Walīd's brother and successor, Sulaymān b. ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 715-17), was a glutton, obsessed with food; hence Muslims in his time took pride in grand cuisine.[26] (In Daḥlān's eyes, both reigns symbolized the sorry state of the Umayyad caliphate.) It was only when ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (r. 717-20) became caliph that a link was forged to the rightly-guided caliphs. ʿUmar II occupied himself with pious deeds, the implementation of justice, and so forth, and the result was that the people became similarly interested in matters of the faith and in good works.[27] The moral of the story is that only when the leaders of society—kings, sultans, *amīr*s, judges, and *ʿulamāʾ*—display this quality of *zuhd*, will the people follow.

He who demands *zuhd* in this world, writes Daḥlān, is the greatest caliph, paving the way for religious reform (*iṣlāḥ*), the implementation of the *sharīʿa*, the killing of unbelievers, and so on. For a ruler to show *zuhd* he must put himself on parity with other Muslims and show self-restraint in regard to the treasury (*bayt al-māl*).[28] Commoners and elites alike must take for them-

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24   Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt,* II, 305.
25   Among Walīd's building projects were the Umayyad mosque of Damascus (transforming the Basilica of St. John the Baptist on the same site) and the great mosques of Mecca and Medina. H. Lammens, 'al-Walīd b. ʿAbd al-Malik', *EI* (1), VIII, 1111. Walīd's father, the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik, had embarked on large public works projects, notably by expanding the Iraqi irrigation system. Shaban writes, 'But Walīd I's projects, mainly in Syria and Hijaz, were altogether more elaborate and it is rather more difficult to see the rationale behind them'. M.A. Shaban, *Islamic History, A.D. 600-750,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1971, 117-18.
26   See Shaban, *Islamic History,* 127-30.
27   See Shaban, *Islamic History,* 131-7.
28   In his article on the *mahdī* concept, Madelung writes, 'In the late Umayyad age, Maṭar b. Ṭahmān al-Warrāḳ (d. 125/743?), a Khurāsānian resident in Baṣra and the senior disciple of Ḳatāda, rejected the view that ʿUmar II was the Mahdī, stating that the Mahdī

selves only what they need to subsist, and must practice charity
towards the poor. The long-term effect will be for poverty to dis-
appear over time, and for harmony to prevail. Unbelievers are
conquering Muslims today, warns the author, because Muslims
are succumbing to this-worldly desires, and because Muslim
rulers are dipping into the treasuries to bestow favours upon their
friends. Simple living and social equity—patterned on the exam-
ple of the rightly-guided caliphs—are the keys to Muslim unity
and to Muslim victory over the unbelievers.[29]

Al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya begins in Volume 1 by charting the
spectacular military victories of the early Muslim community. By
contrast, the last section devoted to military history in Volume 2
chronicles the Ottoman Empire's territorial losses in the face of
European encroachment. Prompted by this bleak record, the
author urges Muslims to reverse the negative trends of the present
by patterning themselves on the rightly-guided caliphs. Thus the
very last pages of the treatise present for emulation the
biographies of the Prophet, of the first four caliphs, and strik-
ingly, of the Umayyad caliph ᶜUmar b. ᶜAbd al-ᶜAzīz.[30]

Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān, like many Muslims before and after
him,[31] hailed ᶜUmar b. ᶜAbd al-ᶜAzīz as the one caliph who
approximated the example of the rightly-guided caliphs long
after the age of the rightly-guided had passed. In his treatise he
suggests that the Muslim world of his day needed another man
like ᶜUmar II to restore the pristine faith and power of the early

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would do something ᶜUmar II had not done: he would refuse to accept
money returned to the treasury by someone who, after requesting it,
found that he had no need of it'; Madelung, 'al-Mahdī', 1232.
Daḥlān's thoughts on treasury policy echo this idea, so it seems
plausible to suggest that he was familiar with the work of Maṭar (or
another source who quoted him).

29 Daḥlān, *Futuḥāt,* II, 306.
30 Cf. *Bayān wujūb al-ḥijra* of ᶜUthmān b. Fūdī which follows a similar
pattern. Of course, the Sudanese Mahdi himself appointed three of his
followers to positions named after the rightly-guided caliphs.
31 For example, on the exemplary stature of ᶜUmar b. ᶜAbd al-ᶜAzīz in
the political thought of Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1930), see Hamid Enayat,
Modern Islamic Political Thought, Austin: University of Texas Press
1982, 71.

years of Islam, to conquer as Europe was now conquering them. Or rather, the Muslim world needed *al-mahdī al-muntazar*. In his treatise he explains that when the *mahdī* comes:

He will follow the path of the rightly-guided caliphs; he will renounce this world,[32] he will only take from the treasury according to need. The people in his time will follow his manner, doing as he does. Then it will appear from this that … all the people will become an army for the triumph of Islam.[33]

Dahlān doubted whether Muḥammad Aḥmad of the Sudan was such a man**.** Nevertheless, as *al-Futuḥāt al-islāmiyya* makes clear, he was ready to welcome any efforts which could help to reverse the current tide of events.

32   That is, he will show *zuhd* in this world: '*yazhadu fī 'l-dunyā*'.
33   Dahlān, *Futuḥāt,* II, 306-7.