Chapter 4


SPIRITUAL AND CHARISMATIC leadership may be understood to stem from the intersection of three dimensions: a leader’s message, his areas of activity, and his modes of operation. In this model, it is only by the leader operating in a given community that his message can take hold and his authority becomes realized. At the same time, his areas of activity and modes of operation must be affected by the specific conditions and religious climate of a concrete historical setting. This model, current in modern research, is my working hypothesis for this chapter that situates the discussion of the expansion of the charismatic Sufi masters’ scope of operation within the broader political, religious, and social milieu they inhabited.

The middle of the twelfth century marked the beginning of a new era in the history of Syria. In the Syrian cities of the interior—Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Baalbek and Damascus—that remained under Muslim rule, the Islamic Counter-Crusade movement arose, accompanied by a series of campaigns for the unification of Syria into a single political entity, and energetic efforts to render the Sunna victorious. Nūr al-Dīn, praised by medieval Muslim historians for his devotion to the military mission and struggle against the infidels, personal piety, and support for Sunni Islam within, was the first significant leader of this movement. Saladin, while still serving as a general in the army of Nūr al-Dīn, acquired control over Fatimid Egypt (in 1771) and subsequently consolidated his rule over most of Syria and the Jazira. By the end of the twelfth century, following the conquest of Jerusalem (in 1187), Saladin had regained almost all of the formally Islamic territory. Shortly after his death, however, the Ayyubid domains in Syria and Palestine became fragmented amongst several principalities based at Aleppo, Hama, Damascus, and other centres. These were all held by princes of the Ayyubid family, who usually used the title malik and were subject to the loose control of the Ayyubid sultan in Cairo. Frequent internal strife, ongoing confrontation with the Crusades along and beyond the borders of the Latin coastal principalities, and powerful enemies from without, put an end to the confederation. In 1260, the Mongols invaded Syria and sacked Aleppo. They were beaten back by the Mamluks, who effectively incorporated the Ayyubid kingdom into the Mamluk sultanate.1

1 The most comprehensive study of the political and military history of the period is that of Stephen R. Humphreys, From Saladin to the Mongols: The Ayyubids of Damascus, 1193–1260 (Albany: SUNY, 1977).
Demographically, long after the so-called “Sunni reaction,” which began with the Seljuk conquest of Syria and the subsequent overthrow of the Shi'i-tinged dynasties in the late eleventh century and was completed by the Zangids around the mid-twelfth century, the Syrian Muslim population—especially that of the northern region—still included sizable Shi'i groups. Among them were the Ismā'īlis, who left a sombre mark in the southern Damascene quarter of Bāb al-Ṣaghīr for a century and a half after their persecution and massacre (in 1154). The Mamluk Sultan Baybars seized their last fortress outside the city’s gates (in 1273). As the Mamluk period drew to a close, they concentrated in the mountains between Homs and the sea and no longer exercised ideological influence. The Nuṣayrīs, another extreme Shi'i sect, also established themselves in the mountainous area over Lattaqīya. As for the Imāmī Shi'is, they were far from being a marginal group. In the cities and towns of northern Syria, the Shi'i inclination of the residents seems to have retained its strength. In Damascus, some of them inhabited the Bāb Tūmā quarter (in the northwest part of the city) among Christians and Sunnis. These were the so-called rawāfiḍ—those who “refused” to recognize the first three caliphs in order to legitimize ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib alone—a term that from the early Mamluk period covered all forms of Shi‘ism. The Christians, more numerous than the Jews, formed diverse communities in Syria. In Damascus, their presence was visibly marked by churches, notably the Greek Orthodox Church of Maryam (also called the Church of the Christians), located in the traditional Christian quarter of Bāb Tūmā, and the church of the Jacobites south of the Christian quarter. Other churches, as well as a handful of monasteries, stood in the countryside surrounding the Orontes river, which flows north from Mt. Lebanon and passes through Homs and Hama, and in the villages of the Beqaa Valley (see Figs. 2 and 3). As for Mt. Lebanon, it was the home of the isolated Maronite community, as well as the tightly knit community of the Druze. Encounters between Muslim and non-Muslim urban dwellers and villagers in built and natural environments were a matter of course, a fact reflected in the saintly vitas.

The chapter commences with an examination of the role played by Sufi masters as active participants in the Sunnization movement that aspired to recast Islamic religious and social life based on the norms of the Holy Law and the prophetic tradition and to cleanse society of immorality and deviant practices. Specifically, it seeks to demonstrate how their constant concern with self-purity and morality was tightly tied to the concern for the moral conduct of others and how they employed their charismatic virtues to make fellow believers repent, spur their Shi'i neighbours to turn from their deviant

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2 On the “Sunni reaction” in Syria, see Jean-Michel Mouton, Damas et sa principauté sous les Seljoukides et les Bourides (468–549/1076–1154) (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale), 377.

3 On the various Shi'i groups that came under Sunni rule, see Pouzet, Damas, 250–55; and Geoffroy, Le Soufisme, 63.

4 On which, see Pouzet, Damas, 306–7.
practices, and prompt Christian neighbours to forsake their old faith. The narratives depicting the encounters leading to conversion attest to the shaykh’s prominent stature, the breadth of his activity, and the fascination with his presence and marvels. Drawing converts to Islam is displayed as yet another manifestation of the virtues and powers of the Sufi shaykh. At the same time, accounts of conversion also echo the motivations and expectations of the converted people.

The discussion that follows centres on the role of the revered shaykhs who served as patron saints and communal leaders. It examines how they understood and practised the activist, community-oriented Sufi tradition they embraced and the modes of their interaction with ruling authorities and ordinary Muslims. These modes are related to the influence the shaykhs exerted on local governors and their ability to take over the role of central political leadership in lobbying for public welfare and mediating disputes in addition to the enactment of their extraordinary virtues to protect their fellow believers from their external enemies and unjust rule. In so situating the accounts of their activities, my further aim is to highlight the correlation between the presentation of the saintly figures and the concerns and expectations of the surrounding society.
Like other representatives of the emerging Sunnization movement that began in the eastern lands of Iran and Iraq and filtered into Syria in the twelfth century, Ibn Qawān al-Bālisī and ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī joined scholars of the established Sunni legal schools to shape Islamic religious and social life and purify society. The phrases “he was one of the performers of commanding right and forbidding wrong” (al-amr bi-l-ma‘rūf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar) and a disseminator of the traditional knowledge and the proper Islamic conduct (al-‘ilm wa-l-‘amal) reoccur in the biographies of scholars, Sufis, and pious figures of their epoch. The sources sometimes specify the details of the Qur’anic injunction to command right and forbid wrong, and where and how it was performed. In the Syrian milieu, the revered shaykhs inhabited, this injunction most often concerned the private drinking of wine, or selling of wine, wrongs that performers of this duty encountered from earlier times.5

5 For an extensive discussion on the wrong of wine as a recurring theme from early Islamic history, see the monumental work of Michael Cook, Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 67ff.
Sufi masters who performed the duty “to command and forbid” were generally affiliated with legal and theological schools that relied heavily on the prophetic traditions for belief and conduct and as a source of the law. Some figures thus assimilated into the Shafi’i rite of legal interpretation that gained dominance in Ayyubid and Mamluk Syria and cultivated Ash’ari theological tendencies, while others found a home in the Ḥanbalī madhhab, in which piety and religious activism had been a solid base for the position of leadership from the time of its founder. However, to judge from hagiographical narratives about their encounter with wrongs that were transmitted by their disciples and companions, what distinguished these Sufi shaykhs from other virtuous figures acting as arbiters and disseminators of true religion and proper conduct was the extent to which they enacted their outstanding virtues. No less significant seems to be the diffusion of their moral authority throughout society and in private and public spaces, beyond the courts and law colleges (madrasas) that were controlled by the elites of scholars and office-holders and situated in the great urban centres of Damascus and Aleppo.

Accounts in the vita of Ibn Qawām al-Bālisī, probably one of the most celebrated Sufi master and Shāfi’ī legal scholar in Ayyubid Syria, make no mention of the doctrine of commanding right and forbidding wrong that was shaped in the literature of his legal school, starting with al-Ghazâlī and petering out over the following centuries. At the same time, the shaykh appears as an ardent practitioner of the duty. His preoccupation with self-purity—refusing food suspected of or detected as being impure, declining invitations to royal feasts and private homes where wine and illegally acquired food were served—was entwined with interest in the moral behavior of others.

In his celebrated treatise Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn (the Revitalization of Religious Disciplines), al-Ghazâlī enumerates five levels (marātib) of performance of forbidding wrong: informing, polite counselling, harsh language, physical action against objects, and the threat of violence or use of actual violence (mubâsharat al-ḍarb) that involves

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6 See Cook, Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong, 355, for examples of Shafi’is known for the performance of the duty in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Cook notes that although the inspection of the tables of contents of the classical handbooks of Sufism shows that forbidding wrong is not a Sufi topic, people referred to in the sources as Sufis freely engaged in forbidding wrong (Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong, 460–61).

7 For an important work on the significance of religious activism in the building of authority within the Ḥanbalī madhhab in tenth-century Baghdad, see Nimrod Hurvitz, “Authority within the Hanbali Madhhab: The Case of al-Barbahari,” in Religious Knowledge, Authority, and Charisma: Islamic and Jewish Perspectives, ed. Daphna Ephrat and Meir Hatina (Salt Lake City: Utah University Press, 2014), 36–49.

8 The most important contribution to the discourse on the duty of forbidding in the milieu studied here is the commentary by the Damascene Shafi’i traditional and legalist Imām Nawawi (d. 676/1277) upon which subsequent Shafi’i commentators based themselves. On the Shafi’i literature on forbidding wrong after al-Ghazâlī, see Cook, Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong, 348–52.
the infliction of blows with the hand or foot. Offences can arise when one has been admitted to another’s home and encounters a wrong, or in public places, in the street or in the market.

Stories in the saintly vita of Ibn Qawām give us a glimpse of his moral authority at play, the context in which the offence was encountered, and the means to which the omnipotent shaykh resorted to performing the duty. The first tells of a lay believer who once came to visit Ibn Qawām. Upon his entry to the shaykh’s lodge, Ibn Qawām inspected the food the visitor had eaten, proclaiming, “This food is harām; I can see smoke coming out of your mouth.” The man left the place to inquire about the food, and when he discovered that the shaykh was correct, he asked for God’s forgiveness. In two other stories, Ibn Qawām performs the duty of forbidding by threat and the use of force. The first tells of a young merchant who arrived from Bālis to Aleppo and came upon an unexpected situation of committing wrong. The shaykh, whose arcane knowledge made it possible for him to expose wrongdoing even in his physical absence or lack of informant, arrived on the scene at once. Here, he used just enough force to make the innocent young man leave the place, thereby preventing him from sinning. Ibn Qawām’s grandson and hagiographer recorded the following story:

I entered Aleppo with my paternal uncle when I was a youth. A member of my family took me to a certain place, fetched some wine, and said to me, “Drink!” When I took the cup and was about to drink, I suddenly saw the shaykh standing before me. He struck me on my chest with his hand and said, “Arise and leave!” I was in a high place, from which I fell and my face and head bled. I returned to my uncle with blood trickling from me. He asked me, “Who did this to you?” As I told him what had happened, he said, “Praise to God who caused His saints (awliyā’) to look after you and to protect you.”

The offence encountered in the second cited story is what al-Ghazālī defines as a “wrong of hospitality,” which is among the “wrongs that are commonly met with.” According to him, if one cannot protest when faced with improper conduct such as listening to musical instruments and singing girls, wearing silk, as well as serving forbidden food or wine, one has to leave the place. In this case, the shaykh appeared in a private home where wine was served and harshly punished a prince who associated with wrongdoers and did not refrain from drinking in the company. In the words of the narrator:

I heard the prince ‘Alām al-Dīn al-Shirāzī telling my father about his first visit to Damascus in the time of al-Malik al-Nāṣir Yūsuf [r. 1236–60] in order to take

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9 Cook, Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong, 431. See also 338–41, on the eight levels (darajāt) in al-Ghazālī’s treatment of the duty.

10 Cook, Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong, 100.

11 Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar, Manāqib al-Shaykh Abī Bakr ibn Qawām, fol. 23b. A similar story was related by a young merchant from Manbīj who was invited to the garden of one of his relatives where food and wine were served: al-Ḥalabī, Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh ‘Aqil al-Manbijī, fols. 46–47.

12 Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar, Manāqib al-Shaykh Abī Bakr ibn Qawām, fol. 11b.

13 Cook, Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong, 444–45.
care of his affairs. He said, "After I had taken care of all the necessities, one of my companions invited me to his garden and offered me alcohol. At first I refused, but the friend prevailed upon me. Just after I drank, the figure of the shaykh appeared before my eyes. The shaykh beat me in the chest and said, 'Rise now and leave this place.' I then fled that place at once, as one seized by frenzy. I asked for God's forgiveness and never repeated the act."  

The more fearless shaykhs directed their zeal for the duty to expose the wrongdoings of rulers by reprimanding them harshly. Thus, for example, when al-Malik al-Amjad Bahramshah, grand-nephew of Saladin and governor of Baalbek (r. 1182–1230), would visit the shaykh to seek his blessing and intercession (shafā'a), the shaykh would "call him out for his acts of injustice and was able to point out these deeds in detail."  

A further tale is told of the shaykh of the village of Sulaymiyya 'Izz al-Din ibn al-Nu‘aym mentioned above. It is related that the governor of the city once sent him skins of wine to test him. When the surfaces were opened and nothing came out, 'Izz al-Din ordered to trample them, and the most excellent honey began to flow. The Sufis (fuqarā') ate some of it and sent the rest to the governor, who denied sending the wine—thus proving he was an oppressor. These stories broadcast the political relevance and broader context of forbidding wrong. In the first account, the shaykh holds the ruler responsible for the spread of immorality and, by implication, criticizes his unwillingness or inability to take action against wrongdoers. In the second story, the ruler is the target of the duty of forbidding oppression—a harshly confronted offence to which we shall return.

It was in this framework of the larger scheme of commanding right and forbidding wrong that Ibn Qawām spurred their Shi‘i neighbours to cast aside their devotional practices, and ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīni made Christian neighbours forsake their old life and faith. In addition to their concern with the moral conduct of individual members of the Sunni communities and the ruling elite—shown by their uncovering of offence and inducing offenders to become better Muslims under their guidance—these shaykhs aspired to cleanse the public sphere of the unwarranted conduct of religious minorities. Narratives that describe them acting as agents of "repentance" (tawba) and conversion further attested to their spiritual power and prominence.

The hagiographer of Ibn Qawām attributes his grandfather’s unprecedented success in prompting repentance to his insistence upon establishing what the true faith and his ongoing condemnation of deviant practices (here: bida’) was. Among those whom he made repent were Shi‘is in his hometown of Bālis, which seems to have retained its Shi‘i character ever since the end of the rule of the Ḥamdanīs Shi‘i dynasty in the middle of the eleventh century and long after the occupation of the town by the Sunni Zangids in the early twelfth century."  

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16 al-Nabhānī, Jam‘ karāmāt al-awliyāʾ, 2:322.
17 On which, see André Raymond and J. L. Paillet, Balis II: histoire de Balis et fouilles des îlots I et II (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1955), 35. See also Stephennie Mulder’s extensive
Scholars have noted that the Sunni rulers and population of the Zabgid and Ayyubid periods tolerated the continuous presence of Shi‘i communities in Syrian cities and towns as long as their loyalty to their faith remained discreet.\textsuperscript{18} Violation of this commonly accepted rule may explain why Ibn Qawām made Shi‘is (rawāfīd) in Bālis forsake the public celebration of the anniversary of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn at Karbala on ‘Āshūrā‘, the tenth day of the month of Muharram (apparently performed since at least the Buyid period in the tenth and so-called Shi‘i century). The shaykh similarly strove to put an end to the public prayers in remembrance of the killing of the martyr that were held during the ceremony.\textsuperscript{19} A young man in the town was of Shi‘i inclinations, as well as a committed wine-drinker. Upon being received kindly by the shaykh, he renounced his devotional practices and turned to him in repentance. He then became the shaykh’s loyal servant (khādin), made the pilgrimage to Mecca with him several times, and complied with all his requirements concerning the performance of the obligatory prayers and all other religious ordinances (farā‘īd al-Islām).\textsuperscript{20}

Drawing converts to Islam must have held particular significance in a period marked by energetic efforts to restore Islam’s supremacy and solidify its dominance over non-Muslim communities that came under the control of the Zangid and Ayyubid regimes. Such sentiments may explain why the narratives that extol ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī as an agent of conversion are closely associated with his charismatic zeal in propagating true religion and cleansing the public sphere from the improper conduct of his Christian neighbours such as drinking or selling wine. A telling account narrates an encounter between the shaykh and a Christian wine-seller that led to his conversion. Significantly, the story was related by a jurist who recognized the shaykh’s extraordinary abilities and complied with his request. Jamāl al-Dīn al-Ya‘qūb, the judge of the town of Karak (east of the River Jordan and the Dead Sea and known for its crusader castle), related:

Once I saw Shaykh ‘Abdallāh, God be pleased with him, performing ablution in the river Tora, close to the White Bridge in Damascus, when a Christian passed by him, and with him was a mule carrying wine. All of a sudden, the animal stumbled on the bridge, and the load fell. I then saw the shaykh who had finished the ablution. All this happened on a scorching day, and no one besides us was on the bridge at that time. The shaykh approached me and said, “Come here, oh jurist, and help us place this load on the animal.” And so I did. The Christian

\textsuperscript{18} See especially, Berkey, \textit{The Formation of Islam}, 190–91; and Geoffroy, \textit{Le Soufisme}, 64.


\textsuperscript{20} Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar, \textit{Manāqib al-Shaykh Abī Bakr ibn Qawām}, fol. 22a. A later example of a charismatic shaykh who utilized his charismatic personality and influence to “convert” a Rāfīḍī is that of ‘Umar al-‘Uqaybī (d. 951/1544). In this case, the Shi‘i who wished to become the shaykh’s disciple was required to praise the first two caliphs, Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, instead of publicly cursing them. On which, see Geoffroy, \textit{Le Soufisme}, 65.
mounted the mule and embarked on his way. I was overwhelmed by this deed of the shaykh and followed the Christian and his mule as I was heading the city.

The Christian took the animal to [the Damascene neighbourhood of] ʿUqayba and went to a wine-seller there. The seller started to inspect the load and to his great amazement, found out that it contained vinegar, not wine. The Christian burst into tears and said, "I swear to God that this was wine. Now I know where this comes from." He then tied his mule in a nearby rest house (khān) and set out on foot to the mosque.

Upon entering the mosque, he observed the shaykh who had already performed the midday prayer and was engaged in praising the almighty God. The Christian approached him and said, "Oh my master, I embrace Islam as my creed. I proclaim that there is no God but God and that Muḥammad is the messenger of God." And from that time on, he became a pious-ascetic and virtuous believer.21

Accounts of causing Christians to change religious course through intimidation or force are rare in the saintly vita of ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī. Much more prominent are stories that show him making converts to Islam by virtue of his charismatic personality and his willingness to intercede God with their behalf. Narratives depicting encounters between the shaykh and his Christian neighbours that lead to their conversion attest to his prominent stature and the wide scope of his activity. At the same time, the conversion stories reflect the fascination exerted by the presence of the Muslim holy man and the awe he inspired. In this regard, an account of a Christian woman who trembled at the sight of Muḥammad, the son and successor of ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī, dismounting from his horse to approach her and let her embrace the faith at his hands, comes to mind.22 Such holy figures were considered capable of deploying their authority and manipulating their baraka to avert calamities, pursue justice, and fulfill the religious and material needs of believers—among them, converts. It may be surmised that Eastern Christian villagers, seeking means of subsistence, charity, and blessing, were attracted to charismatic Sufi masters. Their conversion sometimes involved becoming their disciples and entering a life of commitment under their guidance.

Several conversion stories present encounters between ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī and the Christian villagers in Mt. Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley and expose the motivations of the converts. (The headings are mine.)

The Story of Ibrāhīm the Christian from the Village of Jibbat Bushra

Shaykh Muḥammad al-Sakākīnī, one of the close adherents of Shaykh ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī related: "One night I was staying in the town of Baalbek, after one of the men had invited me, insisting that I accept his invitation to spend the night in his home. In the middle of the night, I said to myself, 'How can I sleep here when the shaykh ['Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī] is on the mountain?' So I rose and walked out

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21 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī, fol. 6a.
22 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī, fol. 47b.
until I arrived at the place of the pillar of the monk. Then I descended, left the
village, and went up to the shaykh’s lodge (zāwiyā) [. . .]. The shaykh said, ‘Oh my
companion, are you sending me people so that I provide for their needs? Who am
I for you to send me people to provide for their needs? Ibrāhīm the Christian (al-
Naṣrānī) from [the village of] Jibbat Bushra came to me for assistance and asked
me to pray for him to intercede with God on his behalf.’

At night, I retired to go to sleep at the shaykh’s lodge [. . .] on the second night, as
I was sitting at the entrance to the lodge, I saw someone and wondered what this
person was doing here, for there was nothing that he could get. I rose and gazed at
him and then discovered it was Ibrāhīm the Christian from Jibbat Bushra. I asked
him, ‘What do you seek in this place?’ He asked for the shaykh’s whereabouts,
and I replied, ‘He is in a cave immersed in contemplation and recollection of God
(dhikr).’ I asked, ‘What do you want from him?’ He replied, ‘Yesterday, in a dream,
I saw God’s messenger; God pray for him and give him peace, and he said, “Go to
Shaykh ʿAbdallāh and convert to Islam by his hand, as he has already interceded
with God on your behalf.”’

I then accompanied him on his way to the shaykh who at that time was sitting
in a cave. When the shaykh saw him he inquired, ‘Yes, companion, what is your
need?’ and then the man related what he had seen in his dream. Upon hearing
the story, the shaykh burst into tears and said, ‘The messenger of God has
designated me to be a shaykh.’ Ibrāhīm converted to Islam and was a good and
righteous man to whom God will be merciful.”

The Story of the Christian from the Village of al-Rās (in the Beqaa Valley)

Sharaf al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥasan transmitted an account according to which Shaykh
ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī, God bless his soul, travelled to Aleppo one day. When he left
Aleppo for Homs, numerous people to whom he showed kindness and benefited
escorted him to bid farewell. When he left Homs in the direction of Baalbek,
a Christian from al-Rās followed him. When they were on the way to the city,
the Christian thought, ‘If only the shaykh had given me a small portion of his
possessions, it would have been enough to meet my own needs and the needs of
my entire family.”

When the shaykh approached the olive trees of the village, he addressed his
servant saying, “Give the Christian all our possessions.” The servant obeyed the
shaykh’s order. The Christian was so amazed that he almost lost his mind. He
then returned to his house and family and recounted to them his encounter with
the shaykh. They were delighted, converted to Islam, and began to serve the
shaykh until they became his close companions.

By the close of the twelfth century, mainstream Sufi masters joined legalists in
denouncing the irreligious practices of antinomian groups that had sprung up in the

24 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī, 39b.
Some ascetics and Sufi groups, such as the muwallahūn (Fools of God), which seem to have been a distinctly Damascene phenomenon, the Ḥarīrīyya, the Ṣaydariyya, and the Qalandariyya, outwardly defied the ideals of Muslim piety by living in a state of ritual impurity, wearing soiled clothing, and not praying. Improper or provocative attire, as in the case of the disciples of ʿAlī al-Ḥarīrī, was seen as a threat to social identities and boundaries.

Occasionally, the political authorities lent their support to legal scholars and mainstream Sufis as part of their general policy of strengthening what may be labelled as a mainstream Sunni camp—ṣharʿi-minded theology, moderate Ḥanbali theology, and moderate Sufism—against its rivals. Radical Ḥanbali theologians, philosophers, claimants to prophecy, and ecstatic and antinomian Sufis were regarded as a threat to established norms—and thereby challenging, albeit indirectly, the political authorities and the public order. Two well-known examples concern the antinomian groups of the Qalandars and the Ḥarıyya, which gained influence in the Syrian milieu of the Ayyubid and early Mamluk periods. Ibn Kathīr relates that the Qalandars of Damascus, whose “evil” practices that disregarded the principles of the Shariʿa intensified after the death of their leader Jamāl al-Dīn Sāwūṭī (in 630/1232), were suppressed by the Ayyubid governor of Damascus al-Mālik al-ʿAṣhrāf. Later on, the Mamluk sultan Ḥasan issued a decree forcing them to wear “Islamic dress” and ordered that the disobedient be punished. Al-Ḥarīrī, the foremost representative of antinomian Sufism in Syria in the Ayyubid period, was found deserving of death by several leading Damascene legal scholars and was arrested by al-Mālik al-ʿAṣhrāf in 628/1231. By the end of the decade, he and his disciples had been banished from Damascus, as had the dervishes of the Qalandars. Their expulsion seems to have marked the disappearance of heterodox Sufism from Damascus for some thirty years.

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26 See Karamustafa, God’s Unruly Friends, 18–19, on the coiffure, apparel, and paraphernalia of antinomian dervishes.

27 See Talmon-Heller, Islamic Piety, 227ff., on the concern of the Ayyubid political rulers with what she calls the content of struggles against impiety and religious dissent and their support for the construction of boundaries between right and wrong. For a different interpretation, see Michael Chamberlain’s argument that political considerations were disguised as debates about religion in thirteenth-century Damascus: Michael Chamberlain, Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 16–73.

28 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:274.


30 See, Humphreys, From Saladin to the Mongols, 209–10.
Discernable already in the late Ayyubid rule in Syria, the endeavour of Sufi masters to purify society, and the public sphere in particular, of irreligious praxis became increasingly apparent in Mamluk times. Sufis, acting as groups of masters and companions and sometimes resorting to the use of force, struggled vigorously against the spread of offences and prohibited innovations. To judge by the frequency of their mention in contemporary sources, drinking alcoholic beverages and using ḥashīsh topped the list of encountered offences. Sufis often took aggressive steps against those who used these forbidden substances by destroying the plants producing them, the warehouses in which they were stored, and other sites connected with them. The economic and political crises that marked the end of the Mamluk period saw a rise in alcohol use in Syria, which in turn witnessed an uptick in Sufi protest of this phenomenon. Responses ranged from protest marches and street demonstrations to destruction of containers in stores and warehouses, and even lodging complaints with the authorities.  

By the close of the thirteenth century, then, charismatic Sufi masters had diffused their moral authority in the broader society and exerted their influence over political rulers who were aware of their religious and social status and sought their blessing. Moreover, Sufi shaykhs employed their authority and baraka to perform communal roles—to improve the lot of ordinary Muslims, to assume the tasks of the political powers in providing public welfare, to intervene with these authorities on behalf of individuals and local communities—in addition to their role as protectors of the people from external enemies and unjust rulers. Such areas of operation stood at the heart of the shaykhs’ veneration by the broader society.

**Patron Saints and Communal Leaders**

For members of local communities living in the historical setting under study, the true measure of a saint’s power was his ability to enact his heroic virtues on the mundane plane. This ability is revealed in its brightest light in the saintly life of ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī, the most famous “warrior-saint” of the Syrian milieu during the Counter-Crusader period. ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī came to be known as the “Lion of Syria” (asad al-Shām) thanks to the might he inspired and the part he played in the ongoing confrontations with the Crusaders at the side of Saladin and his successors. A collection of stories in the shaykh’s saintly vita is devoted to his feats as a zealous warrior, who “would never stay behind and abstained from participating in battles for the sake of religion (ghazawāt) that took place in Bilād al-Shām in his days [. . .], and shot a bow that weighed eighty ratl.[32] [. . .] His hope was to die for the sake of God in a war against the infidels (as a shahīd), risking his honorable soul for this cause.”  

One narrative in particular illustrates the scope of ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī’s activity as a fighter and his association with the glorious jihad hagiographical tradition that depicts

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32 One unit of ratl weighs 5 pounds in Syria and 15¾ ounces in Egypt.

ascetic Sufi saints as fulfilling a martial role. Like Ibrāhīm ibn Adham (d. 161/777), the famous warrior-saint and archetype of piety and self-denial, ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī is described as blending asceticism with holy war, an exemplary jihad warrior (mujāhid) who refused to mount a horse during military campaigns and rejected the spoils of war. The narrator elaborates on each of his steps in the continuous military campaign that took place in the Beqaa Valley and the region bordering Homs:

It was related that when al-Malik al-ʿĀdil Sayf al-Dīn [the brother and principal heir of Saladin in Syria] arrived in the town of Ṣāfīta (southeast of Tartus) in AH 592, Shaykh ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī told his servant to go to Baalbek and bring a mule from there. The servant returned with the mule, the shaykh mounted it, and they set out on their way in the dead of night, reaching the village of Ḥartha before dawn. The servant turned to the shaykh and said, “Oh my master, in this place, there are many crusaders; please do not raise your voice.”

The shaykh shouted, “Allāh Akbar!” and his shouts echoed back from the mountains. He then prayed the dawn prayer, and after sunrise continued on his way, riding the mule until he arrived at a place where there was no living soul, not even a bird. But from afar, on the side of the Castle of the Kurds (Ḥiṣn al-ʿAkrād), “something white” appeared to him. The shaykh thought that there were crusaders there, and he yelled, “Allāh Akbar, there is no day more blessed than this day when I arrive!” and rushed in the same direction at which he was raising his sword. The servant said to himself, “The shaykh is mounting a mule with a sword in hand and wants to attack crusaders?” Then the shaykh realized that they were not crusaders but only a herd of wild donkeys. At this, he was broken-hearted, and his enthusiasm waned.

People said, “Oh shaykh, you must thank God, who saw you alone, riding a mule, and wishing to combat one hundred crusaders.” People also said that when the shaykh and his servant stopped in Homs, the Warrior King [al-Malik al-Mujahid] came to visit him and gave him one of his horses. The shaykh fought by his side and performed wondrous deeds.

The prominence of Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī as a potent guardian of the people of Baalbek is evident in his vita. According to his companions’ reports, the city’s residents turned to him in anticipation of the crusader attack. In response, he proclaimed, “I am the shaykh


36 Krak des Chevaliers, which was first fortified by the Kurds and then reconstructed by the Knights Hospitaller who took control of the site in the twelfth century.

37 Probably the White Castle built by the Crusaders after the First Crusade.

[of the city], and they will not reach here.” The Crusaders, it was reported, turned back in fear.39 Along similar lines, eyewitnesses conveyed his composure in the face of political power.

The following account describes how the charismatic Sufi shaykh’s spiritual might transformed into temporal power and how he leveraged this capacity on behalf of the people of Baalbek, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

It was related that a Christian stonemason once came to the shaykh to complain to him that he had worked for al-Malik al-Amjad (the governor of Baalbek) and labored much, but the ruler had paid him nothing, and he was a poor man with many children. The shaykh sent someone to al-Malik al-Amjad to ask him to visit his lodge (zāwiya), and went out and sat on a rock waiting for him with an axe in his hand. The ruler arrived, kissed his hand, and sat beside him on the rock. The shaykh said, “Oh al-Malik al-Amjad, I would like you to hew a prayer niche for me in this rock.” Al-Amjad said, “Take a stonemason who will perform for you what you desire.” The shaykh said, “No, I want you to hew with your own hands,” and he gave him the axe.

Al-Malik al-Amjad was unable to avoid [the task] and began to work until his hand was aching, and he complained about it to the shaykh. But the shaykh ignored him and ordered him to continue until the axe had left marks on his hands and the ache that he felt intensified. Then the shaykh said, “How can you use these poor people and ultimately avoid giving them what they are due?” When al-Malik al-Amjad heard the shaykh’s words, he mounted his horse and returned to the citadel [of Hama]. He asked one of his men to go to the shaykh and say to him, “If Baalbek belongs to you, then give it to me. But if Baalbek belongs to me, then leave it and go elsewhere.” Then the men left and sat in front of the shaykh but did not dare to speak a word.40

In what follows, the hagiographer records how the shaykh of Baalbek compelled its unjust governor to leave the city, allowing him to return after he had repented of his misdeeds.

The shaykh said [to the ruler’s messenger], “Oh my son, go to al-Malik al-Amjad and tell him that Baalbek is mine and that he should leave it.” When the man returned, he found that the ruler had already left on a hunting trip. He followed him but uttered not a word that shaykh had spoken [. . .]. Finally, al-Malik al-Amjad summoned the man, saying, “Each time I wish to enter the city, I feel as though an iron wall was blocking me.” [. . .] When the man told him what had happened, al-Amjad said, “Go to the shaykh and request his permission to enter Baalbek.” So the man went on his way, conveyed the request, and the shaykh granted his permission [. . .]. Afterwards, al-Amjad came to the shaykh, kissed his hand, sat before him, and asked forgiveness for his deeds. The shaykh said, “Oh

39 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī, fol. 15a.
40 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī, fols. 23a–b.
my son, Baalbek was mine, and you only made an appearance there, and now it is yours, but when I go, you too will lose it." After a short while, the shaykh, may God’s goodwill be upon him, passed away, and al-Malik Amjad, mercy be upon him, lost the city of Baalbek.41

The historian Ibn Kathīr wrote that

Whenever al-Malik al-Amjad visited Shaykh ʿAbdāllah al-Yūnīnī, he would sit in front of him and the shaykh would say, "Oh al-Amjad, you did this and you did that." He would then command that which he needed to command him to do and forbid him from that which he ought to forbid. Al-Amjad, in turn, would obey the shaykh.42

The content of these orders is lost to history, but the overall sense of the encounter resonates with moral intent.

Yet the daring of the shaykh of Baalbek went further still. He was known to get into confrontations with the Ayyubid sultan al-ʿĀdil and his son and successor as governor of Damascus al-Malik al-Muʿażẓam ʿIsā (r. 1201–18). During one of their visits to ʿAbdāllah al-Yūnīnī, the shaykh expressed his protest about what he claimed was the spread of alcohol and ḥashīsh use in the state by refusing the money offered to him by the rulers and denying them his blessing.43 An account in the vita tells of the encounter between ʿAbdāllah al-Yūnīnī and a messenger of al-Malik al-ʿĀdil that took place in the Ḥanbali mosque and their stronghold in the city, where the shaykh and his group of disciples and companions would gather to participate in study sessions with scholars and their students. It is related that once, while they were sitting in the mosque, a man in soldier’s dress entered and began to distribute gold coins to the ascetics. When he reached the prayer rug of the shaykh, who had gone out to perform the ablution before prayer, he placed the money beneath the carpet and asked the servant to request that the master pray on his behalf. Upon returning and noting the gold, the shaykh inquired as to its source, and the servant replied that al-Malik al-ʿĀdil had provided the money and requested ʿAbdāllah al-Yūnīnī’s blessing. In response, the holy man took a stick and pushed the gold from underneath the rug, instructing the soldier to take it away. He did so and asked the shaykh to pray on his behalf. The shaykh replied, “How can I invoke God’s blessing for you while alcohol flows everywhere in Damascus? How can you request my intercession when you collect taxes on behalf of the sultan from a woman who weaves clothing to make a living?”44 Later, when al-Muʿażẓam came to the shaykh to ask him to invoke God’s blessing, the shaykh replied, “Do not be sinister like your father […] He assisted fraudulent dealings and incited quarrels among believers.” Al-Muʿażẓam left, returning the following day with 3,000 dinars to buy provisions for the shaykh’s boarders and guests at his lodge. The shaykh peered at the ruler, stating,

41 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī, fols. 23b.
42 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 12:263–64.
43 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī, fols. 7a–b.
44 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh ʿAbdallāh al-Yūnīnī, fols. 7b–8a.
“Oh, he who comes to test me, oh initiator of prohibited innovations, rise and leave before I ask God for the earth to swallow you. Be aware that we are sitting on a rug, and beneath it is a ditch of gold and silver.”

However, the interaction between the charismatic Sufi masters and the rulers did not conform to a single pattern. More often than not, the shaykhs would not eschew the relationship with the powerful and wealthy. Some associated with the rulers and not conform to a single pattern. More often than not, the shaykhs would not eschew beneath it is a ditch of gold and silver.


Reciprocally, charismatic Sufi masters hosted rulers in their lodges and gave them entry to their congregation. While the participation of an Ayyubid or Mamluk ruler governor in the spiritual life of the shaykh and his group did not make him into a member of the society, it did serve to bridge the gap between the official and public spheres. Moreover, the charismatic shaykhs refrained from employing their influence to challenge the legitimacy of the political authorities and their authority as enforcers of law and order in the public sphere. Instead, they sometimes took over the tasks of the rulers during civil conflicts, and in matters of public welfare, in addition to frequently intervening with the powerful on behalf of individuals and local communities and to catering to the poor and the needy.

Accounts of Sufi shaykhs and God’s Friends often portray them as benefactors of individuals and as communal leaders, associating their authority and spiritual power

45 In this regard, Bachrach notes that the dwellers of the citadel often descended from it into the city for a variety of worldly and religious purposes, and, while most city-dwellers probably never entered the citadel, some officials, merchants, artisans, religious scholars, and Sufis certainly did: Jere L. Bachrach, “The Court-Citadel: An Islamic Urban Symbol of Power,” in Urbanism in Islam, ed. Yukawa Takeshi (Tokyo: Middle Eastern Cultural Center, 1989), 3:207–8.


48 For an elaboration of this argument, see Ephrat, Spiritual Wayfarers, 155–57.
specifically with their communal roles. For all of their idealized dimension, episodes in
the saintly vita shed light on the interaction between the shaykhs and members of the
society around them, as well as on the concerns and expectations of fellow believers.
These eyewitness stories brim with details on the lives of lay believers. Taken together,
they show us how the shaykhs activated their power in the service of society, which, in
turn, shaped their image as patron saints and communal leaders.

A most telling account that portrays the charismatic shaykh as an influential and
authoritative mediator on the mundane plane is incorporated in the vita of ʿAbdallāh
al-Ŷūnīnī. It is narrated that the residents of Ŷūnīn accused a certain Nūfal al-Badawī
and others of murdering a member of their clan. For this, al-Badawī was imprisoned in a
jail in Baalbek. The family of the accused sent messengers to the governor of Damascus,
al-Malik al-Ashraf, to plead for amnesty, and he sent a group of notables to intercede
with the victim’s clan. They then turned to Shaykh Muḥammad, the son of Abdāl-lāh al-
Ŷūnīnī, and asked him to join them. The shaykh agreed and left in their company until
they arrived at the home of the murder victim. As his clan refused to accept the plea for
forgiveness, the shaykh threw off his turban and lay down his head on the ground. Upon
seeing the shaykh’s action, the people—men and women—shouted and laid their heads
on the ground. The narrator said, “I swear by God that I have witnessed everything that
occurred in the village. Everyone, including trees and objects, prostrated on the ground.
I, too, seeing this, prostrated myself on the ground. After the shaykh, may God be pleased
with him, lifted his honorable head from the ground, the family of the deceased agreed
to accept the plea, to forgive the accused and release him.”

Shaykh Ṭaʿlīl al-Manbijī was another influential shaykh who wielded his authority in
matters of crime and punishment. On one occasion, the shaykh noted the location of sheep
thieves and mobilized his companions to catch them, turn them over to the ruling authorities,
and return the flock to its shepherd. On another occasion, he sent his companions to
accompany the soldiers of the governor of Damascus to find highway assassins in a place
he could name. They beat the assailants until they confessed their deed, after which they
sentenced them to death. The narrator concluded, “The day of their execution became a
day of note in Damascus. Thank God.” In appreciation, his close companion, Ahmad ibn
Swidān, composed a poem in which he refers to the followers of Shaykh Ṭaʿlīl like persons
of profound faith, courageous individuals who “hover like the wind.”

The charismatic Shaykh Ibn Qawām, for his part, initiated a major public-works
project to provide the people of his hometown with their basic needs. In the Ayyubid
period, the Euphrates began to change its course, eventually flowing some eight
kilometres from the city. This fact might have motivated the shaykh to rally his many
followers to excavate a canal to bring water to the people of Bālis after their request for

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49 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh ʿAbdallāh al-Ŷūnīnī, fols. 43b–44a.
50 al-Ḥalabī, Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh Ṭaʿlīl al-Manbijī, fols. 49–50.
51 al-Ḥalabī, Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh Ṭaʿlīl al-Manbijī, 70–72.
52 On which see Raymond and Paillet, Bālis, 42.
the public work was refused by the sultan al-Malik al-ʿĀdil.53 Besides, Ibn Qawām dug a pool next to the town since its residents would only drink water from the Euphrates river, and this, according to the narrator, created many hardships, especially for the poor and the weak (perhaps because of the distance they had to traverse to reach the river while making their way on foot). It was said that when people heard that he had touched the water, they would immediately follow him to be blessed by it.54

Many other accounts present the venerated shaykhs as generous benefactors. While they satisfied themselves with wheat, barley, and water, they catered to the material needs of others and dispensed as a charity the gifts they received. The relationship of austerity to giving and the extension of the principle of service to others beyond the shaykh’s circle of intimates appear in a series of anecdotes in the vita of Ibn Qawām, who refused to accept gifts of money, saying that the sums offered to him could make a poor person affluent. Once, a wealthy person presented him 3,000 dirhams, which he had his son distribute to the poor and weak, leaving not a single coin for his family’s use.55 He would bring the contents of his own home to widows: money, clothing, and assorted items. On another occasion, a woman complained to him that her domestic beast had died and there was no one to remove it; he asked her to secure a rope and leave it near the creature so that he could send someone to drag it away. The shaykh himself showed up, tied a rope around the animal, and pulled it to the gate of the town. As this episode occurred during the harvest season in the fertile agricultural plain that sprawls between Bālis and the Euphrates, many people joined the shaykh in his effort.56

These are but a few examples of the phenomenon of charismatic shaykhs placing their authority and sanctity in the service of others. The more the scope of their activities extended, the more their spiritual and charismatic authority was enacted on the mundane plane. By the close of thirteenth century, their lodges and graves evolved both as centres of their small congregations and as focal points of domination and sacrality central to the life of members of local communities.

53 Muḥammad Ibn ʿUmar, Manāqib al-Shaykh Abī Bakr ibn Qawām, fol. 20b.
54 Muḥammad Ibn ʿUmar, Manāqib al-Shaykh Abī Bakr ibn Qawām, fol. 21b.
55 Muḥammad Ibn ʿUmar, Manāqib al-Shaykh Abī Bakr ibn Qawām, fol. 24b.
56 Muḥammad Ibn ʿUmar, Manāqib al-Shaykh Abī Bakr ibn Qawām, fols. 20b–21a.
PART TWO

EMPLACEMENTS OF AUTHORITY AND HOLINESS