

# Zaydism

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Zaydism is often depicted as the variant of Shī'ism most similar to Sunnī Islam. Popular and academic works emphasize the apparent overlap between Zaydī and Sunnī (Shāfi'ī) legal methodology. There is also a general assumption that the Zaydīs accept the legitimacy of the caliphal reigns of Abū Bakr and 'Umar in contrast to the more intransigent and hostile attitude of the Ismā'īlīs and the Twelvers.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Zaydīs are often identified as Shī'ī exclusively on the basis of their belief in 'Alī's right to the succession after the Prophet's death. Such characterizations obfuscate one of the central dynamics in Zaydī history—namely, the Zaydī community's oscillation between Sunnī and Shī'ī positions in matters of theology and law. A proper understanding of Zaydī Shī'ism in its “classical” form (referred to below as “Hādawī”) requires the examination of two important transformations: (i) an initial shift from a predominantly (proto-)Sunnī to a Shī'ī orientation in the ninth century and (ii) a subsequent “Sunnification” fueled by political and religious pressures beginning as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

## 1 The Initial Oscillation: The Emergence of Hādawī Zaydism

Zayd b. 'Alī was quite moderate in his views on the Prophet's succession, refusing to condemn the first two caliphs as usurpers and extending the scope of legitimate religious authority to non-'Alid scholars (e.g., his teacher Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā'). This stance was opposed by many Shī'ī groups, who denounced the early caliphs and restricted religious authority to the family of the Prophet. According to the heresiographers, Zaydism resulted from the merging of two varieties of Shī'a known as the Batrīs and the Jārūdīs.<sup>2</sup> The Batrīs held positions similar to those of Zayd, whereas the Jārūdīs embraced the more activist agenda of other Shī'ī groups. By the end of the ninth century,

1 By comparison, most Shī'ī groups condemn the caliphate of 'Uthmān (r. 644–56) as corrupt and nepotistic.

2 This is a slight simplification; the heresiographies list additional groups that fall along a spectrum between the Batrīs and the Jārūdīs.

the *Batrīs* disintegrated and were absorbed into an emerging Sunnism, and the *Jārūdīs* came to dominate Zaydism.

The central narrative here is one of internal conflict, with two competing factions fighting for control of the movement. Although such a depiction seems clear and reasonable, it is complicated by its grounding in the premodern heresiographical tradition. Heresiographies explain divisions within the Muslim world through a framework established by a famous tradition ascribed to Muhammad:

The Jews were split up into seventy-one or seventy-two sects; and the Christians were split up into seventy-one or seventy-two sects; and my community will be split up into seventy-three sects. All of them will be in the hellfire except one.

Variants of this statement differ on the number of Muslim divisions, with figures ranging from seventy-one to seventy-three. Although only one Muslim sect is saved in most formulations of the tradition, there are also versions in which only one sect is doomed and the rest are saved. As a whole, the traditions predict a systematic (and inevitable) fragmentation of the Muslim community.

This framework exercised a decisive influence on heresiographers, who sought to document the proliferation of a predetermined number of sects and positioned their own group as the sole representative of the Prophet's original message. Such a view did not allow for the doctrinal evolution of any single group. A sect was a cohesive and unchanging unit that held a discrete set of doctrines and beliefs. This assumption fundamentally distorts the dynamic nature of individual Muslim communities. It also complicates the use of heresiographies as historical sources, prompting Josef van Ess's cautionary observation that "we must never forget that [sects] owe their names mainly to the need for systematizing felt by the heresiographers and that these names are not necessarily a reflection of social or historical reality."<sup>3</sup>

Recent scholarship suggests the need to reevaluate the heresiographical narrative of early Zaydism. It appears that terms such as "*Batrī*" or "*Jārūdī*" refer to theological orientations as opposed to specific, discernible groups. The heresiographers may have used these terms to explain Zaydism's shift from a perspective that aligned closely with (proto-)Sunnism to one more attuned to early Shī'ism. In such a scenario, *Batrī* and *Jārūdī* Zaydism represent the starting and end points of a transformation that spanned two centuries. The

3 Van Ess, "The Kamiliyya," 216.

Zaydism of the early eighth century was predominantly Batrī, whereas that of the late ninth century was overwhelmingly Jārūdī.

In this section, I first outline the central beliefs and doctrines of Batrī and Jārūdī Zaydism. Then I discuss some of the factors that contributed to changes in Zaydī Shī'ism, particularly the impact of a series of failed rebellions in the eighth and ninth centuries. I conclude by examining the final step in the crystallization of classical (or Hādawī) Zaydism—namely, the group's appropriation of a Mu'tazilī theological framework.

### 1.1 *From Batrism to Jārūdism*

Historical works on early Zaydism are dominated by discussions of Batrīs and Jārūdīs. As we have noted, these terms signify two moments in the group's evolution: Batrism represents the views of most Zaydīs in the early eighth century, and Jārūdism represents the beliefs that predominated among Zaydīs by the end of the ninth century. I retain the use of the words "Batrī" and "Jārūdī" in the interest of clarity (they are present in much of the secondary literature) but remind readers that these terms do not necessarily reflect discrete groups.

#### 1.1.1 Batrism

The Batrī Zaydī position on succession held that the Prophet's appointment of 'Alī was implicit rather than explicit. In practical terms, this meant that 'Alī's rights were apparent to those who investigated the matter properly, but it left open the possibility that well-intentioned Companions might arrive at incorrect conclusions. Those early Muslims who elected Abū Bakr made an error in judgment by choosing a less qualified candidate as caliph. Such a mistake, however, did not constitute an act of disbelief (*kufṛ*), and they remained upright Muslims. A similar logic applied to those Companions who took up arms against 'Alī during the first civil war. These figures were condemned, but they remained within the bounds of Islam and were sometimes portrayed as later regretting their actions. By contrast, many early Shī'ī groups went as far as to declare those who opposed 'Alī's claims apostates.

Although 'Alī was the rightful successor to the Prophet, the Batrīs upheld the legitimacy of the first two caliphs (i.e., Abū Bakr and 'Umar). They argued that the lack of a formal objection from 'Alī constituted a tacit approval of their rule. If 'Alī was satisfied with these men, then there were no grounds for any Muslims to denounce or curse them. As a whole, the Batrīs held that a less worthy candidate could hold power in the presence of a superior candidate as long as he ruled in a just and upright manner. The case for 'Uthmān was more complex, with Batrīs affirming the first six years of his reign and condemning the last six because of his turn toward nepotism. Even in the case of 'Uthmān,

however, the Batrī position did not go so far as to declare him an apostate, and a small minority withheld judgment altogether. The broader Shī'ī community rejected Batrī reasoning and restricted legitimate leadership to the most worthy candidate, who, in this instance, was clearly 'Alī.

With respect to the law and legal authority, the Batrīs believed that proper religious knowledge was vested in the Muslim community at large. They allowed 'Alids to study with a range of non-'Alid scholars, including those who emphasized the exclusive legal authority of traditions transmitted by the Companions of the Prophet. The fact that the Batrīs affirmed the moral standing of all the Companions further cemented their investment in traditions as sources for religious knowledge. Because all such knowledge was learned rather than divinely inspired, candidates for the Imāmate had to demonstrate a mastery of the law and its foundational sources. This doctrine of knowledge fit firmly within the bounds of the proto-Sunnism of the early eighth century.

The Batrīs were particularly hostile to many of the central theological beliefs associated with the larger Kufan Shī'ī community. The Batrīs were most vocally opposed to the idea of *raj'a* (return), which held that some figures would return from the dead before the Resurrection. This doctrine was apparently endorsed by a number of early groups but rose to prominence only beginning in the mid-eighth century when some Shī'a began to claim that various deceased Imāms would return from the dead at an indeterminate point in the future.

The Batrīs also rejected the notion of *taqiyya* (precautionary dissimulation), whereby adherents were permitted to hide their true beliefs in threatening situations. This often resulted in hostile encounters that feature prominently in Batrī historical reports. In a typical anecdote preserved in the heresiographical literature, a Kufan named 'Umar b. Riyāḥ (d. c. eighth century) visits al-Bāqir in Medina and asks a question pertaining to ritual law that he had originally posed a year earlier. On this occasion, however, al-Bāqir purportedly issues a ruling that contradicts his previous one. When 'Umar presses him to justify the apparent contradiction, the Imām cites *taqiyya*. 'Umar is not satisfied and notes the lack of any external threat that would permit dissimulation. He reports the incident to some of his colleagues in Kufa, who then convert to Batrī Zaydism.

Finally, the Batrīs were critical of the concept of *badā'* (a change in the divine decision resulting from historical circumstance). Recall that some Shī'a invoked this idea during the contested succession of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq when he was predeceased by his expected successor (his eldest son,

Ismā'īl). The heresiographers note that many of al-Šādiq's followers rejected this explanation and became Batrīs.

It is instructive to take a step back and examine the portrait of Batrī Zaydism presented here. Batrī positions on the status of the Companions, the diffusion of legal knowledge, the authority of traditions, and theological doctrines (e.g., *raj'a*, *taqīyya*, *badā'*) align closely with those of most proto-Sunnī groups. The only Batrī positions that suggest a Shī'ī identity are (i) the belief that 'Alī was the Prophet's rightful successor and (ii) the restriction of legitimate political authority to his descendants. This is quite a loose definition of Shī'ism and explains perhaps the persistent tensions in the historical sources between the early Zaydīs and other Kufan Shī'ī groups. Overall, Batrism embodies the dominant doctrinal views of a majority of Zaydīs in the early and mid-eighth century.

### 1.1.2 Jārūdism

The Jārūdīs (ostensibly named after Abū al-Jārūd Ziyād b. al-Mundhir, d. mid-eighth century) held that the Prophet had explicitly and unambiguously designated 'Alī as his successor. In addition, they argued that the Prophet had also designated Ḥasan and Ḥusayn to succeed their father as Imāms. As evidence, they cited a number of Qur'ānic arguments and, in particular, the events at Ghadir Khumm during the Prophet's final pilgrimage. Given the clarity of the evidence, the Jārūdīs asserted that those Companions who actively opposed 'Alī or usurped his rights had committed an act of disbelief (*kuf'r*) and apostatized. This group included the first three caliphs (Abū Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthmān) along with 'Alī's opponents in the first civil war (e.g., 'Ā'isha, Ṭalḥa, al-Zubayr, and Mu'āwiya). The Jārūdī rejection of the first three caliphs was also a consequence of their limiting of legitimate leadership to the most worthy candidate.

The Jārūdīs restricted legal authority to the descendants of 'Ali and Fāṭima. This position led them to deny the authority of non-'Alid figures and reduce the importance of traditions transmitted by early Companions and jurists. Some Jārūdīs went so far as to discount age or seniority, equating the opinion of an old 'Alid scholar with that of an 'Alid infant in a cradle. In cases in which an Imām *appeared* to lack the proper credentials, they argued that God would inspire knowledge in his heart as a seed sprouts in the rain. Such a view meant that a candidate for leadership need not rely on formal legal methodology in the derivation of law.

The Jārūdīs affirmed a number of those theological beliefs that were rejected by the Batrīs. They upheld the doctrine of *raj'a*, with some groups

going so far as to assert that the 'Alid rebel al-Nafs al-Zakiyya (d. 763) would return from the dead. The Batrīs equated this idea with disbelief and often used it to justify their claims that the Jārūdīs were apostates. The Jārūdīs also accepted both *taqīyya* and *badā'*.<sup>4</sup> Although these doctrines are rarely ascribed to individual Jārūdīs, they can be deduced from polemics between Batrīs and other Shī'ī groups. Those figures who reject al-Bāqir (for *taqīyya*) or al-Şādiq (for *badā'*), for example, invariably convert to Batrism as opposed to Jārūdism. This suggests a convergence between Jārūdīs and other early Shī'ī groups on these theological issues.

This description of Jārūdī beliefs places them firmly within the bounds of early Shī'ism. The Jārūdīs affirm 'Alī's explicit right to succession and condemn (and even declare apostates) those Companions who opposed him. They elevate the descendants of 'Alī and Fāṭima above the rest of the early Muslim community by investing them with an exclusive political and religious authority. Finally, they uphold a number of distinctively Shī'ī theological positions that were denounced by both the Batrīs and most proto-Sunnī scholars. The primary differences between the early Imāmīs (the forebears of both the Twelvers and the Ismā'īlīs) and the Jārūdīs center on the identity of the Imām and the process of his selection.

### 1.1.3 An Explanation of Terminology

Table 5.1 lists the primary characteristics associated with Batrī and Jārūdī Zaydism. Recall that these terms are often used by heresiographers to identify two separate groups of Zaydīs that came together during Zayd's revolt in Kufa and then struggled for control of the movement into the ninth century. As discussed earlier, this portrait is problematic because of its provenance in heresiographical literature. There is considerable evidence that the terms Batrī and Jārūdī do not represent different groups but rather different moments in history. Zaydīs in the middle of the eighth century were predominantly Batrī and therefore aligned closely with the segment of Kufan society that eventually became Sunnī. Zaydīs in the ninth century were increasingly Jārūdī, sharing many of the characteristic beliefs of other Shī'ī groups. These two views provide a road map for the evolution of Zaydism over the course of a century. In the next section, we examine some of the reasons for this change.

4 Zaydīs permit *taqīyya* only as long as an Imām's level of support remains below a certain minimum. After he has won enough followers, he is required to rebel against an unjust government. Zaydī scholars disagree as to how many supporters are necessary before revolution becomes incumbent.

TABLE 9.1 Batrī and Jārūdī Zaydism

Batrī Zaydism [The dominant form of Zaydism c. 740]	Jārūdī Zaydism [The dominant form of Zaydism after 802]
<p>‘Alī’s designation was implicit. Opponents of ‘Alī made a mistake in reasoning. Those who took up arms repented.</p> <p>Judgment: No cursing them or declaring them apostates.</p> <p>Allows for the Imāmate of the less worthy candidate.</p> <p>Legal authority diffused in the larger Muslim community.</p> <p>Rejects the theological doctrines of <i>raj’a</i>, <i>taqīyya</i>, and <i>badā’</i>.</p>	<p>‘Alī’s designation was explicit. Opponents of ‘Alī are apostates. Those who took up arms are also apostates.</p> <p>Judgment: Cursing them and declaring them apostates is allowed.</p> <p>Restricts the Imāmate to the most worthy candidate.</p> <p>Legal authority restricted to the descendants of ‘Alī and Fāṭima.</p> <p>Accepts the theological doctrines of <i>raj’a</i>, <i>taqīyya</i>, and <i>badā’</i>.</p>

### 1.2 *Revolution and Charisma*

The shift in Zaydism from a proto-Sunnī (Batrī) to a Shī‘ī (Jārūdī) orientation is observable in the changing demographics of ‘Alid rebellions. Support for Zayd b. ‘Alī in 740 included numerous scholars later considered leading Sunnī authorities, most prominently Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767), the eponym of one of the four surviving Sunnī schools of law. These figures were part of the piety-minded movement that was committed to the establishment of an Islamic social order under the leadership of an ‘Alid. A similar profile of supporters appeared during the revolt of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya and his brother Ibrāhīm in 762. This rebellion witnessed the first appearance in the historical sources of a group that self-identified as Zaydīs. A mere twenty years later, however, the uprising of Ṣāhib Fakhkh Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī (d. 786) won little backing from scholars of a proto-Sunnī inclination. In fact, the most telling feature of this rebellion was the lack of any discernible Batrī elements. This change suggests that Zaydism was increasingly less appealing to the proto-Sunnī population and more closely aligned with early Shī‘ī beliefs.

It is worthwhile to pause and consider the impact of revolutionary failures on the Zaydī community at large. The first point to emphasize is that the rebellions of early ‘Alids were not exclusively Zaydī in any sense of the word. The sources often depict significant tensions between the Zaydīs and their chosen

Imām. Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abd Allāh, for example, was routinely questioned by his Zaydī followers about the structure of his ritual prayer and his allocation of funds. After his death, the Zaydīs went underground and united around the figure of ‘Īsā b. Zayd (d. 785) in Kufa. ‘Īsā, who never organized a rebellion, was ascribed a number of Batrī views, particularly with respect to ‘Alī’s succession and the permissibility of religious knowledge from non-‘Alid sources. During the twenty years of his leadership, the Zaydīs were relentlessly pursued by the ‘Abbāsids. The burden became so great that they decided to inform the ‘Abbāsīd caliph of ‘Īsā’s death to relieve the pressure on the larger community. Kufa remained the center for a Zaydism that was primarily Batrī in perspective but ‘Abbāsīd persecution had significantly weakened the movement, prompting it to adopt a general political quiescence over the next few decades. This provided an opening for a fundamental theological transformation that first coalesced in the Ḥijāz region of Arabia.

The rebellion of Ṣāhib Fakhkh Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī in Medina in 786 was a key turning point for Zaydī Shī‘ism. The unrest was initially caused by the policies of the new ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Ḥādī (r. 785–86). Shortly after his ascension, al-Ḥādī ordered a number of prominent ‘Alids to relocate from Kufa to Medina, where they could be more easily monitored. The governor of Medina and Mecca then instituted a series of measures designed to keep track of the ‘Alids, including a mandatory daily roll call. After some ‘Alids refused to comply with the new regulations, the governor threatened Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī, the senior member of the Ḥasanid branch of the ‘Alids. The ‘Alids quickly united under his leadership and rose up in rebellion. They were defeated by a makeshift Umayyad army at Fakhkh (six miles outside Mecca).

The most vocal proponent of the rebellion was Yaḥyā b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥasan b. Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 802–3), who, along with his brother Idrīs (d. 791), was placed in charge of military affairs. The sources depict him as an advocate of distinctively Shī‘ī practices such as the inclusion of the phrase “Hurry to the best of works” in the call to prayer. After the rebellion failed, Yaḥyā inherited the leadership of the Zaydīs, but he differed in important ways from his predecessors. Most significantly, his father (also the father of the rebels al-Nafs al-Zakiyya and Ibrāhīm) had died when he was quite young, leaving him and Idrīs to be raised in the household of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (the sixth Imām of the Twelvers). This upbringing shaped his ritual practice and theological views along Twelver Shī‘ī lines. In other words, Yaḥyā held beliefs best characterized as Jārūdī, as opposed to the Batrī inclinations of previous Zaydī Imāms. This difference became particularly apparent in Yaḥyā’s dealings with the (largely Batrī) Kufan Zaydī community. For example, Yaḥyā reportedly refused to lead the Kufans in prayer because they would not abandon Batrī ritual practices



(e.g., the drinking of date wine, the wiping of leather socks during ablution). The resulting tensions reflected the gap between an older (Batrī) and newer (Jārūdī) Zaydism.

Yaḥyā and Idrīs escaped the battle of Fakhkh by mixing with throngs of pilgrims, traveling first to Abyssinia and then to a series of locations from Yemen to Armenia. Yaḥyā eventually made his way to Khurāsān and Daylam (both in modern Iran) while dispatching his brother to North Africa. Idrīs was killed before he could organize a rebellion, allegedly (according to the Zaydī sources) at the hands of a Zaydī theologian whose views resembled those of the Batrīs. Yaḥyā found supporters in Daylam and led an uprising in 791–92. When the rebellion failed, Yaḥyā secured a favorable amnesty agreement from the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Rashīd (r. 786–809). The agreement contained the following provisions: (i) unconditional pardons for Yaḥyā and seventy of his followers, (ii) freedom of movement through out the empire, (iii) a guarantee of no government surveillance, and (iv) a large sum of money. The penalties on al-Rashīd for violating the terms were high and included an automatic triple divorce from his wife and the freeing of all his slaves and concubines.

The importance of this agreement cannot be overstated. From 792 through 800, Yaḥyā was able to travel relatively freely with access to incredible financial recourses. He compensated ‘Alid families for the loss of relatives at Fakhkh. He rebuilt Zaydī networks and expanded their scope to regions outside of the Arabian Peninsula and Iraq, such as North Africa and northern Iran. He also benefitted from the fact that the amnesty agreement did not specify the names of his followers. Whenever al-Rashīd arrested a Zaydī for seditious activity, Yaḥyā would claim that he was one of his (unspecified) seventy followers and therefore immune from prosecution. These terms infuriated al-Rashīd, who pressured prominent scholars to invalidate the amnesty document. Yaḥyā was eventually arrested in 800 on a (false) charge and kept prisoner in Baghdad, where he was executed in 802. By this point, however, he had precipitated a fundamental change in Zaydism both in terms of its legal and theological principles (a strong transition toward Jārūdism) and its political strategy (a new focus on outlying areas).

### 1.3 *Embracing Mu‘tazilism*

Operating far from ‘Abbāsīd central authority, the Zaydīs established independent states in the Caspian region in 864 and the Yemen in 897. These states affirmed Jārūdī principles, but they differed on issues of law and theology. The legal differences were not overly problematic given the theoretical ability of each Zaydī Imām to craft his own school of law. Although Imāms were increasingly pressured to adhere to the established precedent

of previous rulings, they retained the right to issue their own legal opinions. Theological differences were more problematic, as Zaydī scholars defined Zaydī communal identity primarily on the basis of theology.

The first part of this book discussed the theology of various Shī'ī groups, noting the eventual Zaydī appropriation of Mu'tazilism. This development is reflected, for example, in Zaydī narratives that emphasize the pupil-teacher relationship between Zayd b. 'Alī and the Mu'tazilī scholar Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā'. In reality, however, it took a number of centuries for the Zaydīs to adopt Mu'tazilī theology. The Zaydīs in the southern Caspian regions were divided between two theological positions: the Nāṣiriyya and the Qāsimiyya. The Nāṣiriyya (named for al-Nāṣir Ḥasan b. 'Alī al-Uṭrūsh [d. 914]) were adamantly opposed to the Mu'tazilīs. The Qāsimiyya (named for Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm al-Rassī [d. 860]) also differed from the Mu'tazilīs but agreed on issues such as free will and anti-anthropomorphism. More important, they were not as openly hostile to the Mu'tazilīs as the Nāṣirīs were. Madelung has argued that this moderation made later Qāsimīs receptive to Mu'tazilī theological positions. A similar moderate tendency characterized the views of al-Hādī Yaḥyā b. Ḥusayn (d. 911), the founder of the Zaydī state in Yemen.

The Zaydī appropriation of Mu'tazilī theology was aided by the decline of the Caspian Zaydī community in the late twelfth century (although even it had adopted Mu'tazilī positions in the eleventh century) and the concurrent rise in Yemen of Zaydī Imāms who were staunch advocates of Mu'tazilism. This victory was not absolute, and opposition to some Mu'tazilī views persisted among Zaydī scholars. Overall, however, Mu'tazilism exerted a strong influence on Zaydī identity and helped shape the school's foundational theological beliefs. It also affected the way in which Zaydī scholars wrote and remembered their past.

By the twelfth century, Zaydism had acquired its classical (Hādawī) form, which consisted of a Jārūdī foundation paired with a Mu'tazilī theological edifice. This new Jārūdī-Mu'tazilī nexus was a dramatic change from the Batrī and anti-Mu'tazilī views of the Zaydī community at its founding in the early eighth century.<sup>5</sup> The Zaydīs essentially moved from a position that resembled that of proto-Sunnīs to one that resonated with Shī'ī groups such as the Ismā'īlīs/

5 One area in which this new configuration produced a change in standard Jārūdī beliefs involved the status of the Companions who had opposed 'Alī. Whereas the Jārūdīs cursed these Companions and declared them apostates, the Mu'tazilīs inclined toward a more equivocal approach. Yemeni Zaydīs ultimately adopted a wide range of views on the probity of the Companions and the permissibility of cursing them. See Haykel, *Revival*, 139–64.

Twelvers. The next section traces a second major transition in Zaydism, a shift back toward Sunnī Islam that began in the fifteenth century.

## 2 The Impact of Politics and Power: Sunnification<sup>6</sup>

The dominance of Hādawī Zaydism<sup>7</sup> in the Yemeni highlands was contested in the fifteenth century by Sunnī traditionist scholars,<sup>8</sup> who believed that the Qurʾān and Prophetic traditions were the exclusive means for discerning God's will. They asserted the superiority of Sunnī methods for detecting forged accounts and considered the Sunnī canonical collections the primary repositories for authentic traditions. The traditionists were also critical of the established Sunnī and Shīʿī schools of law (*madhhabs*) and asserted the right to issue independent legal rulings unbound by juristic precedent. According to the traditionists, the Zaydīs were too bound to past interpretations grounded in arbitrary human judgment. They blindly imitated (*taqlīd*) their predecessors in matters of belief and utilized personal opinion (*raʾy*) in matters of law. Even worse, the Zaydīs were heavily invested in dogmatic theology (*kalām*) through their affirmation of core Muʿtazilī principles.

The first representative of the traditionist school in Yemen was Ibn al-Wazīr (d. 1436). He was followed by a line of similar scholars that included most prominently Bahrān al-Ṣaʿdī (d. 1550), Muḥammad b. Ḥasan b. al-Qāsim (d. 1668), Ṣāliḥ b. Mahdī al-Maqbalī (d. 1696), and Ibn al-Amīr (d. 1769). The most important and influential traditionist was Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1834), who was born into a Hādawī Zaydī family in a town outside Sanaʿa in 1760. This was a particularly opportune moment in Yemeni history. The ruling Zaydī dynasty (the Qāsimīs) had lost significant support among Hādawī Zaydī scholars and was seeking an alternate source of political legitimacy. The Zaydī state, which was traditionally restricted to northern Yemen, had also established close ties with Sunnī (Shāfiʿī) scholarly circles in southern Yemen.

6 The discussion of the Qāsimī dynasty and al-Shawkānī in this section is largely derived from Bernard Haykel's *Revival and Reform in Islam*.

7 As mentioned previously, this term refers to a form of Zaydism that combines Jārūdī and Muʿtazilī beliefs with legal positions ascribed to al-Hādī.

8 There is considerable ambiguity in the term "traditionist." In the context of this study, the word is meant to convey a position that privileges the use of Prophetic traditions in the articulation of law. Although traditionists sometimes deny the normative authority of the Sunnī law schools, they continue to rely on Sunnī legal theory. For this reason, I often use the terms "Sunnī" and "traditionist" interchangeably. Readers should note that "traditionism" is not the same as "Wahhābism" or "Salafism." The latter rejects the entirety of the Sunnī legal tradition and calls for a reformulation of Islamic law on the basis of the revealed texts alone.

TABLE 9.2 The Qāsimī Imāms of Yemen

Imām	Duration of Reign
(H) al-Manṣūr al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad	1598–1620
(H) al-Muʿayyad Muḥammad	1620–1644
(H) al-Mutawakkil Ismāʿīl	1644–1676
(H) al-Mahdī Aḥmad	1676–1681
(H) al-Muʿayyad Muḥammad (II)	1681–1686
(T) al-Mahdī Muḥammad (Ṣāhib al-Mawāhib)	1686–1718
(T) al-Mutawakkil al-Qāsim	1718–1727
(T) al-Manṣūr Ḥusayn	1727–1748
(T) al-Mahdī al-ʿAbbās	1748–1775
(T) al-Manṣūr ʿAlī	1775–1809
(T) al-Mutawakkil Aḥmad	1809–1816
(T) al-Mahdī ʿAbd Allāh	1816–1835

From 1835 to 1853, there were nine Qāsimī Imāms, whose reigns lasted from less than a year to four years. The final Qāsimī Imām was al-Hādī Ghālib (1851–1853).

*Note:* (H) signifies an Imām inclined toward Hādawī Zaydism, whereas (T) signifies an Imām inclined toward traditionism.

These developments produced a unique political and intellectual climate that allowed al-Shawkānī to challenge Zaydism in an unprecedented way.

### 2.1 *The Early Qāsimī Zaydī Imāms of Yemen: The Classical Paradigm*

The Zaydī dynasties that ruled parts of northern Yemen beginning in 897 adhered to a classical Zaydī archetype of leadership. An Imām was expected to possess a number of qualities.<sup>9</sup> He had to be a descendant of ʿAlī and Fāṭima with the physical capacity to rule. He had to establish his scholarly credentials by authoring original works and achieving the rank of independent jurist (*mujtahid*). The Imām was also held to elevated ethical and moral standards that included manifesting piety in the performance of religious rituals, abstaining from forbidden practices, and exhibiting justice in his management of taxes and other state funds. In practical terms, a Zaydī Imām had to demonstrate excellence on the battlefield and skill in administration

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the Zaydī Imāmate. Many of these qualities are also detailed in Haykel, *Revival*, 26–31.

and governance. This real-world competence was often associated with his success at summoning people (*da'wa*) to rise up (*khurūj*) against an oppressive ruler. In other words, a qualified candidate earned followers through his scholarly and personal qualities and seized power through his military prowess. The ideal Zaydī Imām was both a “man of the pen” and a “man of the sword.”

The Zaydī theory of the Imāmate destabilizes the institutional assumptions of a state (*dawla*) in a number of ways. First, it does not allow for a lineal succession in leadership. The Imām acquires political (and religious) legitimacy through a broad scholarly consensus in favor of his claims. Zaydī successions required the son of an Imām to issue a formal summons to Zaydī scholars upon his father's death. If there was more than one candidate, the scholars would evaluate each, with the less qualified deferring to the better candidate. Such procedures had a destabilizing effect, with rival candidates often establishing small Imāmates in isolated localities. Second, the Imām's authority is contingent on his possession of a set of ideal characteristics. A moral failing or the mishandling of government finances undermines the very foundations of his power, potentially opening the door to rival claims. Third, the entire state edifice is built around the person of the Imām, who guarantees the religious probity of the state. The Imām has the exclusive right to interpret law, enforce punishments and ensure justice. Because he does not delegate these responsibilities to subordinates, early Zaydī Imāmates did not include offices such as “chief judge” found in other Muslim states. They were also devoid of the formal trappings of state power such as processions, guards, gatekeepers, and a bureaucracy. Finally, the Imām depends on the voluntary military support of his followers. In the Yemeni context, this meant that the Imām had to secure the allegiance of tribes. The inability to do so invariably resulted in a fall from power.

Bernard Haykel emphasizes the unstable and ephemeral nature of the Zaydī Imāmate. Discussing the Yemeni Zaydī state before the eighteenth century, he notes:

The image one gets from the Zaydī sources of an imam ... is perhaps in part idealised, but central to their [the Zaydīs'] description of a “summons”<sup>10</sup> is the personality of the imam whose attributes count for both its legitimacy and effectiveness. The political structures they established are not to be understood in terms of a state (*dawla*); rather, theirs was a *da'wa*

10 Here Haykel translates the Arabic word *da'wa* as summons. The term represents a Zaydī Imām's summoning of followers to aid his establishment of a state.

[summons] whose fortunes followed those of the imam. As a result, these *da'was* had an evanescent and terminal quality.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, authority in a Zaydī Imāmate was vested in an individual and did not necessarily carry through to his descendants. This differs from standard Sunnī political theory that allows for lineal succession and locates authority in the institutions of state bureaucracy.<sup>12</sup> Each Zaydī Imām, by contrast, could articulate his own legal code and develop personalized institutions for governance.

Initially, the Zaydī Imāms of the Qāsimī dynasty in Yemen fit the Zaydī model of the Imāmate. The dynasty was founded by al-Manṣūr al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad (r. 1598–1620), a widely respected scholar who reportedly authored forty-one works on subjects ranging from poetry and theology to jurisprudence. Al-Manṣūr al-Qāsim spent his life in open rebellion against the Ottoman Turks, who ruled much of Yemen at the end of the sixteenth century. By his death in 1620, al-Manṣūr al-Qāsim controlled significant areas in northern Yemen. He was succeeded by his sons, al-Mu'ayyad Muḥammad (r. 1620–44) and al-Mutawakkil Ismā'īl (1644–76), who expelled the Ottomans in 1635 and established for the first time a Zaydī state spanning most of Yemen from the northern highlands to the southern coastal ports of Hadramawt. Both sons met Zaydī expectations, authoring numerous scholarly works and leading successful military campaigns.<sup>13</sup> Al-Mutawakkil Ismā'īl was succeeded in turn by his nephew al-Mahdī Aḥmad (r. 1676–81) and his son al-Mu'ayyad Muḥammad (1681–86).

The policies of these early Qāsimī Imāms clearly reflected their Hādawī Zaydī inclinations. Al-Mutawakkil Ismā'īl, who ruled the Qāsimī state at its territorial apogee, for example, dispatched Hādawī scholars to non-Zaydī regions to convert local populations, supported 'Īd al-Ghadīr celebrations, and prohibited Sufi rituals involving musical instruments in southeastern Yemen. The early Qāsimī Imāms also exhibited Hādawī proclivities in their correspondences with foreign leaders by rhetorically claiming the mantle of Prophetic leadership. These Imāms were chosen in the classical fashion with rival claimants issuing a summons, the scholars and other interest groups evaluating each claim, and the less qualified deferring to the more qualified.

11 Haykel, *Revival*, 29.

12 For the standard Sunnī approach to government, see al-Māwardī's *The Ordinances of Government*.

13 It is reported that al-Mu'ayyad Muḥammad produced thirteen works, whereas al-Mutawakkil Ismā'īl produced twenty-three. Haykel, *Revival*, 36.

Although lineal descent was significant, it was not sufficient to command the support of the scholars and the tribes. A candidate needed to demonstrate that he possessed all the necessary qualities of leadership. The importance of individual merit was embodied in coinage that featured the family of the Prophet rather than the dynastic claims of the ruling Imām.

## 2.2 *The Later Qāsimī Zaydī Imāms of Yemen: Embracing Traditionism*

The nature of the Qāsimī Imāmate changed with the succession of al-Mahdī Muḥammad, known by the title Ṣāhib al-Mawāhib (r. 1686–1718), whose authority was predicated exclusively on military force. The subsequent history of the Qāsimī dynasty saw a steady abandonment of Hādawī Zaydī principles. From 1718 until 1836 (a period encompassing six Imāmates), Imāms were appointed by their predecessors with no regard for scholarly (or any other) qualifications. Many of these rulers were considered “restricted” Imāms. This meant that they did not have access to the full powers or authority of the Imāmate and lacked the legitimacy of “full” Imāms. Given their vulnerability, later Qāsimī Imāms sought the support of traditionist scholars, such as al-Shawkānī, who upheld the validity of a dynastic succession through formal appointment (citing the example of Abū Bakr and ‘Umar) and prohibited uprisings against a sitting ruler regardless of his scholarly credentials as long as he fulfilled his basic religious obligations.

The later Qāsimī state included offices previously unknown in the Yemeni Zaydī context, such as chamberlains (who controlled access to the sovereign) and personal servants/guards (who secluded the ruler from the public). It rested on a formal court bureaucracy (*dīwān*) that managed the state in lieu of the direct administration of previous Zaydī Imāms. The bureaucratic structure included a centralized education system and a judiciary led by a chief judge (*qāḍī al-quḍāt*). There was also a move away from a tribal military to one composed primarily of slaves, freeing the succession process from the need to summon and win the support of tribes. Finally, state coinage adopted an Ottoman style, replacing mention of the family of the Prophet with assertions of dynastic succession. All of these changes aligned the Qāsimī state with Sunnī dynasties modeled on the ‘Abbāsīd Empire in Baghdad and the Ottoman Empire in Istanbul.

Haykel offers three explanations for the transformation of the Qāsimī state, each of which is related to its early success. The first explanation is economic and stems from the dynasty’s control of major ports and the growth of agricultural (i.e., coffee) exports. The resulting revenue surplus enabled the Qāsimī state to maintain its hold over an increasingly unmanageable realm that stretched from the northern highlands to the desert valleys of the southeast.

Although the Imāmate lost control of the ports in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, it remained dependent on the tax revenue of predominantly Sunnī agricultural areas. The economic importance of these regions likely influenced the religious policies of the Qāsimī Imāms, who patronized traditionist scholars to maintain the support of local Sunnī populations.

Haykel's second explanation focuses on the influence of Sunnī centers of learning in the southern regions of Yemen. As early as al-Mutawakkil Ismā'īl, a number of Hādawī scholars wrote works that reframed Zaydism in a manner that would secure Sunnī approval, sometimes at the cost of core Zaydī beliefs. The direct causes of this phenomenon are difficult to identify with certainty. The Qāsimī state extended far beyond the traditional northern highland borders of previous Zaydī Imāmates, allowing for a more globalized scholarly perspective. Perhaps Zaydī scholars felt pigeonholed in one corner of the Arabian Peninsula and wanted to find a place in a global Muslim community. They may have also been motivated by a genuine desire to foster unity among different legal and theological schools in the wider Muslim world. Regardless of their motivations, these Zaydī scholars began directly engaging Sunnī sources. Although they remained marginal and isolated in their homeland, they found official support and patronage in the policies of the later Qāsimī Imāms.

Haykel's third explanation draws on the previously mentioned legitimacy crises of the Qāsimī Imāms that followed Ṣāḥib al-Mawāhib. These Imāms did not fit the archetype of a classical Zaydī Imām; they lacked scholarly credentials and based their rule on a combination of dynastic appointment and military might. This left the door open for potential rivals to issue summons to revolution and to challenge their authority. If such a movement secured tribal military and scholarly support, it could threaten the very existence of the Qāsimī state. This was, in fact, the established historical pattern for the emergence of new Zaydī Imāmates.

The later Qāsimī Imāms responded to the crisis by adopting Sunnī notions of political legitimacy that (i) allowed for dynastic succession, (ii) were not predicated on a ruler's intellectual abilities, and (iii) expressly forbade revolution. In practical terms, the ruler delegated his religious duties to a qualified scholar and his administrative duties to a formal bureaucracy. This new governmental configuration was firmly Sunnī in its orientation. For the first time in Yemeni history, a Zaydī Imāmate lavished patronage on Sunnī traditionist scholars at the expense of the Hādawī Zaydī establishment. In exchange for powerful and lucrative government posts, these scholars provided the Imāms with much needed political and religious support. The central figure in this relationship was Muḥammad al-Shawkānī.



### 2.3 *Muḥammad al-Shawkānī and the Legacy of Sunnification*

Muḥammad al-Shawkānī was born in 1760 to a notable family of Hādawī Zaydī scholars. His father served as a judge under the Qāsimī Imām al-Mahdī al-‘Abbās for forty years. Al-Shawkānī received a fairly typical Hādawī Zaydī education, but he was apparently unsatisfied with the reasoning his teachers offered for choosing one legal opinion over another. This prompted him to study with Sayyid ‘Abd al-Qādir b. Aḥmad al-Kawkabānī (d. 1792), a renowned traditionist scholar in Sana‘a. The experience initiated a gradual but steady turn from Hādawī Zaydism to Sunnī traditionism. Over the next few years, al-Shawkānī acquired his own circle of students and began issuing legal rulings that were spread throughout Yemen. According to Haykel, scholars such as al-Shawkānī were “juridically and religiously knitting together the Shāfi‘ī regions of Yemen with the Zaydī highlands, and more specifically with the seat of government in Sanaa.”<sup>14</sup>

At the age of thirty, al-Shawkānī claimed the title of *mujtahid muṭlaq* (an unrestricted religious authority). This constituted a rejection of the Muslim law schools (Sunnī and Shī‘ī), which he deemed too dependent on the judgment of previous human authorities and too dismissive of the revealed sources. The primary targets of al-Shawkānī’s criticism, however, were the Hādawī Zaydīs, whom he accused of abandoning independent legal reasoning (*ijtihād*) in favor of blindly following (*taqlīd*) the opinions of past jurists. The Zaydīs permitted the use of *ijtihād* and empowered each Imām to formulate his own legal code. Al-Shawkānī was essentially arguing that his views were more representative of classical Zaydī legal theory than were those of his Hādawī Zaydī opponents.

The legal method espoused by al-Shawkānī required scholars to return to the early sources and to issue rulings backed by clear textual evidence. For al-Shawkānī, the most reliable Prophetic traditions were found in Sunnī collections. On the basis of these traditions, he arrived at conclusions that contradicted central Zaydī beliefs. In line with Sunnī legal theory, he rejected the special status of the family of the Prophet and dispersed legal authority within the Muslim community at large. He also rejected the most distinctive Hādawī Zaydī requirements for the Imāmate, including (i) the lineal condition that an Imām must be a descendant of ‘Alī and Fāṭima, (ii) the activist condition that an Imām must issue a summons (*da‘wa*) and rise up in rebellion (*khurūj*), and (iii) the scholarly condition that the Imām must demonstrate legal expertise.

14 Haykel, *Revival*, 19.

In 1795, al-Manṣūr ‘Alī (r. 1775–1809) appointed al-Shawkānī to the post of chief judge. He would hold this position for the next thirty-nine years, serving three Qāsimī Imāms and, in the process, fundamentally altering the religious landscape of Yemen. A close study of al-Shawkānī’s writings and political career is beyond the scope of the current study. It suffices to say that he steadily increased his power by providing the Qāsimī Imāms with a basis for legitimacy independent of the Hādawī Zaydī scholarly establishment. Al-Shawkānī’s impact, however, went far beyond the political realm. First, he had access to significant financial resources, which he used to mentor large numbers of students who spread Sunnī traditionist ideas in the Zaydī highlands. Second, he used his power over judicial appointments to place his students and scholars of similar views in positions of authority. His long career meant that Sunnī traditionist scholars were able to consolidate their hold over these offices at the expense of Hādawī Zaydīs, who had previously dominated the state judiciary. Finally, he utilized the full resources of the Qāsimī state to wage an increasingly aggressive battle against his Hādawī Zaydī rivals. In 1796 and 1802, he convinced the Qāsimī Imāms to side with the Sunnī traditionists against the Hādawī Zaydīs when the two sides clashed in the streets of Sana’a. In 1825, he (likely) encouraged Imām al-Mahdī ‘Abd Allāh to execute the Hādawī Zaydī scholar Ibn Ḥarīwa for his criticism of state policies and his attacks on al-Shawkānī’s traditionist writings.

When al-Shawkānī died in 1834, the Qāsimī Imāms had fully embraced Sunnī traditionism. There was a brief Hādawī restoration under Imām al-Nāṣir ‘Abd Allāh (r. 1836–40) but with little lasting impact. The backing of governmental resources allowed traditionist ideas to penetrate the Zaydī heartlands in unprecedented ways. Hādawī Zaydī scholars began studying the Sunnī canonical collections, with increasing numbers embracing traditionism. The result was a split among Zaydī scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries between those with a classical understanding of Zaydism (the Hādawī position) and those with a commitment to a traditionism that resembled Sunnism (the al-Shawkānī position). This important division persists into the twenty-first century and serves as the backdrop to the discussion of modern trends in Zaydī Shī‘ism below.

### 3 Zaydism at the Crossroads

The contemporary Zaydī Shī‘ī community continues to struggle with the challenges posed by Sunnī traditionism. These challenges have persisted through the end of the Qāsimī Imāmate in 1853, the rise of a new Zaydī Imāmate (the

Ḥamīd al-Dīns) in 1918, and the establishment of a Yemeni Republic in 1962. This chapter is organized chronologically and begins with an examination of the continuities between the later Qāsimī and Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāmates. It then turns to the Republican period, during which the state has patronized a version of Zaydism that closely resembled Sunnī traditionism while persecuting Hādawī Zaydī communities. The chapter ends with a survey of the multiple strategies Hādawī Zaydī scholars have used to create a space for themselves in the social and political landscape of twenty-first-century Yemen.

#### 4 The Ḥamīd Al-Dīn Imāmate (1918–62)

After the collapse of the Qāsimī Imāmate in 1853, Yemen endured twenty years of chaos (1853–72) followed by thirty-five years of Ottoman rule (1872–1918). In 1890, Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn (r. 1890–1904), a descendant of the first Qāsimī Zaydī Imām, organized a rebellion in northern Yemen with the support of a tribal coalition that included a number of the most important Sayyid<sup>15</sup> clans. He was succeeded by his son al-Mutawakkil Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad (r. 1904–48, subsequently referred to as Imām Yaḥyā), who seized control of the entire country in 1918 after the Ottoman defeat in World War I. This marked the start of the last Zaydī Imāmate in Yemen.

Any assessment of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāms is complicated by their contentious place in contemporary Yemeni polemics. As part of a broad propaganda effort, the current Republican regime depicts these Imāms as elitist and oppressive figures and ascribes to them views associated with Hādawī Zaydism. In reality, however, the Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāms were oriented toward Sunnī traditionism and continued many of the policies first instituted by the late Qāsimī Imāms.

The influence of Sunnī traditionist ideas was particularly evident in the reign of Imām Yaḥyā. Despite publicly asserting allegiance to Hādawī Zaydism, he borrowed heavily from late Qāsimī symbols of authority (e.g., royal umbrellas) and surrounded himself with retinues of guards and servants. He also established a standing army and erected an administrative structure (including the post of chief judge) reminiscent of the eighteenth-century Qāsimī state. Imām Yaḥyā's legal code cited prominent Hādawī Zaydī jurists, but it also included numerous breaks, exemptions, and emendations in the form of special rulings

15 The title "Sayyid" refers to a descendant of the Prophet through 'Alī and Fāṭima. Sayyid clans claim such descent and were particularly influential in establishing the legitimacy of those who sought the Imāmate.

(known as *ikhtiyārāt*). It was in these exceptions that his traditionist inclinations were most apparent. He rejected, for example, the seminal Hādawī Zaydī opinion that social equality (*kafā'a*) was a condition for marriage, thereby allowing unions between Sayyid women and non-Sayyid men.<sup>16</sup> These special rulings were supported by traditions taken from the Sunnī canonical collections and the opinions of Sunnī traditionist scholars such as Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350) and Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1834).

The traditionist policies of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāms were partially aimed at mobilizing support in the larger (Sunnī) Muslim world.<sup>17</sup> Another component of this effort involved the depiction of traditionist scholars (e.g., al-Shawkānī) as representatives of Hādawī Zaydism. The Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāms wanted to build a bridge between the Zaydis of Yemen and a growing cohort of modernist Sunnī thinkers. The strategy was initially quite successful, with important Sunnī intellectuals such as Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) praising the Zaydī tradition in their public writings. At the same time, it was fundamentally misleading because it ignored (or willfully erased) the theological and intellectual foundations of Hādawī Zaydism. The dubious claim that Zaydism was essentially identical to Sunnism was routinely circulated throughout the Ḥamīd al-Dīn period.

The most important way in which the policies of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāms broke from Hādawī Zaydism involved the explicit endorsement of dynastic rule. The late Qāsimī Imāms, despite their embrace of traditionist forms of political legitimation, had never directly claimed kingship. By contrast, the Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāms used the title “king” and called their state “the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen.” This unprecedented move was especially striking given the deep hostility of Hādawī Zaydism to royalist institutions. Although Imām Yaḥyā claimed that the title was primarily semantic (the international community was not familiar with the word “Imām”) and had little bearing on the nature of his rule, its adoption suggested a very different conception of political power and legitimacy.

Imām Yaḥyā's monarchical tendencies were further evidenced by his designation of his son Aḥmad as crown prince (*walī al-ahd*) in 1924. According to the sources, he was persuaded to do so by a letter he received from a number of government scholars and public officials. The letter quoted traditions drawn from the Sunnī canonical collections and employed a nationalist rhetoric that warned of the potential for foreign machinations in Yemeni politics. Although

16 This contradicted one of the seminal assumptions of Hādawī Zaydism—namely, the elevated status of Sayyid lineage.

17 Haykel, *Revival*, 206.

dynastic succession was practiced by the late Qāsimī Imāms, its use in the Ḥamīd al-Dīn period was institutionalized in a manner that resembled prominent Sunnī dynasties (e.g., the ‘Abbāsids).<sup>18</sup>

Imām Yaḥyā was assassinated in 1948 by a conspiracy that involved a number of prominent Sayyid families. After a period of chaos and conflicting claims, his son Imām Aḥmad (r. 1948–62) seized power and reaffirmed most of his father’s policies. The state was now officially called “the Mutawakkilite Kingdom” and was ruled by a sovereign who was expected to appoint his son as crown prince. Imām Aḥmad continued the use of special rulings, often simply confirming those of his father. In the appointment of public officials, he was primarily motivated by political loyalty as opposed to ideology or theology. This meant that both Hādawī Zaydī and traditionist scholars received judicial and administrative positions. Overall, however, the most important and influential posts remained in the hands of traditionists and, particularly, the students of Muḥammad al-Shawkānī.

## 5 Republican Yemen (1970–Present)

Imām Aḥmad’s death in September 1962 sparked an armed uprising led by a small group of Yemeni military officers who were known as the Free Yemenis.<sup>19</sup> This plunged the country into a civil war that lasted eight years and ended with the defeat of royalist forces loyal to Aḥmad’s son Muḥammad al-Badr. The new state was ideologically dominated by Free Yemeni intellectuals, such as Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Zubayrī and Muḥammad al-Akwa‘, who unequivocally rejected Yemen’s Hādawī Zaydī past. In their writings and speeches, they criticized Zaydī scholars for legitimizing the elitist domination of Sayyid families in Yemen. They also forwarded traditionism as the ideal means for establishing links with the broader Sunnī Muslim world. To acquire global influence, Republican Yemen had to break free of the parochialism and royalist inclinations of Hādawī Zaydism.

Free Yemeni intellectuals enjoyed the exclusive patronage of the new Republican government, which took control of North Yemen in 1970 and the entirety of Yemen after the unification agreement of 1990. Supporters of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn regime were labeled “royalists” and accused of condoning Sayyid

18 In this model, the crown prince’s right to the succession is symbolized by his assumption of a particular set of administrative and military functions.

19 The Free Yemenis were not a new group. They had been active in the politics of northern Yemen since the 1930s with intellectual roots that stretched back into the 1920s.

oppression of the Yemeni non-Sayyid population. The Republican state (led by Ali Abdullah Saleh from 1978 to 2012) also fundamentally reinterpreted the history of the late Qāsimī and Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāmates. Figures such as Imām Aḥmad who had explicitly favored traditionist scholars were now depicted as avid, if not fanatical, Hādawī Zaydīs intent on persecuting all other religious groups. The revolution was then presented as a conflict between a Yemeni population seeking freedom and tyrannical Sayyids. Such a reinterpretation, however, was contradicted by the long history of cooperation between the late Qāsimī and Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāms and Sunnī traditionist scholars. The Free Yemenis explained this discrepancy by recasting traditionist scholars as advocates for the “oppressed” population. Al-Shawkānī was thus transformed from a key power broker in the later Qāsimī Imāmate to an outsider who accepted a government office only in the interests of spreading his teachings. The Qāsimī Imāms had sought to conceal their own inadequacies behind his reputation and prestige.

Al-Shawkānī’s traditionism provided the Yemeni Republican government with the basis for a new global identity. As detailed earlier, the traditionist project drew on the Sunnī canonical collections to produce a theological and legal system that undercut the foundations of Hādawī Zaydism. In particular, the doctrine of the scholar-activist Imām from a Sayyid family was rejected in favor of the conventional Sunnī notion of political leadership. The Republican government’s preference for Sunnī traditionist voices was further reinforced by the rise of Saudi Arabia, whose Wahhābī ideology also called for a return to the textual sources. In practical terms, the Republican state conflated Zaydism and traditionism in a manner that resembled the earlier policies of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāms. This allowed it to forward Yemen as an important voice in the (Sunnī) Muslim world. Many Zaydī scholars embraced this perspective. They continued to identify as Zaydīs even as they rejected the Hādawī Zaydī notion of the Imāmate and adopted al-Shawkānī’s legal methodology.

The Republican state’s overt hostility toward Hādawī Zaydism was manifested in a number of ways. First, the state subjected many Sayyids to persecution or even execution, creating an atmosphere of paranoia and fear. This tactic stemmed from the government’s belief that all Sayyids were potential political threats. Second, the state either funded or allowed the foreign funding of traditionist missionary activities in Hādawī Zaydī regions in North Yemen. The Saudis played a particularly important role in this regard by financing “scholarly institutes” (*al-ma‘āhid al-‘ilmīyya*) explicitly designed to spread Sunnī traditionist ideas and to counter Hādawī Zaydism. The most prominent representative of this trend was Muqbil al-Wādī‘ī (d. 2001), who was educated in Medina and then returned to Yemen to lead one of these institutions in the

city of Ṣaʿda, the very center of Hādawī Zaydī learning in the Yemeni highlands. Third, the Republican state made it effectively illegal to hold Hādawī Zaydī theological views pertaining to the Imāmate. It was deemed outside the bounds of acceptable discourse and patently anti-Republican to believe in the superiority of Sayyids or affirm the legitimacy of armed uprising. Fourth, the government systematically discriminated against Hādawī Zaydīs in the allocation of state resources. There was a marked decrease in the number of Hādawī Zaydī scholars who received administrative, political, or judicial appointments. Moreover, Hādawī Zaydī educational institutions were severely underfinanced and often shut down for spreading subversive ideas.

Lacking any real political power and viewed as a hostile force by the state, Hādawī Zaydism declined steadily through the Republican period. In its place emerged a community of scholars from Zaydī backgrounds (many of whom continued to identify as Zaydīs) who adopted the Sunnī traditionist positions of Ibn al-Wazīr (d. 1436) and al-Shawkānī. Their rise was reflected in regular claims in the popular press and scholarly writings that Zaydism closely resembled Sunnism. Such characterizations are patently false and misrepresent the historical and intellectual legacy of Zaydism in Yemen. A contemporary scholar describes the situation as follows:

Any visitor to Yemen cannot help but notice the lack of knowledge surrounding the *madhhab*, even amongst self-identifying Zaydīs. As Zaydīs became largely powerless to promote Zaydī thought and history to the Yemeni population, countless individuals and communities in the historically Zaydī tribal regions of Upper Yemen assimilated into a dominant Sunnī religious culture. These “conversions,” ranging from a conscious repudiation of Zaydī Islam in favor of inimical traditions or ideologies to passive indifference to its basic [tenets], are the products of opaque identity interactions that transcend labels like “Zaydī” or “Sunnī.”<sup>20</sup>

The next section examines the multiple strategies the Hādawī Zaydī community has used to reconstitute itself in contemporary Yemen.

## 6 A Zaydī Revival?

Hādawī Zaydism in modern Yemen is deeply divided as scholars struggle to adapt and reorganize under the strictures of the Republican state. James King

<sup>20</sup> King, “Zaydī Revival,” 406.

identifies a number of disparate groups that self-identify as Zaydī. These range from communities that clearly embrace a classical formulation of Hādawī Zaydism to others that reduce the term to a tribal or geographic affiliation with little doctrinal commitment (essentially Sunnified traditionalist Zaydīs).<sup>21</sup> Gabriele vom Bruck offers a similar categorization, differentiating between those Hādawī Zaydīs who retain the activist bent of their tradition and those who consciously choose to compromise for political ends.<sup>22</sup>

A significant number of Zaydī scholars (primarily centered in Sana'a) are wary of the potential consequences of a resurgent Hādawī Zaydism. Many of them come from Sayyid families who suffered the brunt of government persecution through the 1970s and 1980s. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Sharaf al-Dīn, for example, argues that Sayyid persecution in Republican Yemen stems from the political claims of activist Zaydī voices.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, he accuses the Sayyids of manipulating the people's love of the family of the Prophet for personal political gain. Sharaf al-Dīn then offers four principles to reduce conflict between the Republican government and Hādawī Zaydīs:

- (i) There shall be no coercion in religion or *madhhab*. There is no way after today to spread what is called Zaydī or Shī'ī beliefs.
- (ii) The Hashimites [Sayyids] have no special status nor are they superior to others. People are equal as the teeth of a comb. There is no preference for an Arab over a non-Arab.
- (iii) The term "Imāmate" as it has been used by the Zaydīs should be frozen for five hundred years. If after this period forthcoming generations want to review this issue, it is left to them and their specific conditions.
- (iv) Any Hashimite [Sayyid]—whether Shī'ī, Wahhābī, Salafī, or Shāfi'ī—should be refused any position above that of deputy minister in any government for five hundred years.<sup>24</sup>

These conditions constitute a clear rejection of core Hādawī Zaydī principles. They transform Sayyids from a repository of candidates for political leadership to symbolic objects of public adulation. In effect, this is a doctrinal surrender in exchange for political acceptance by the Republican state.

### 6.1 *Cultural and Educational Revival*

Although Sharaf al-Dīn's views certainly find support in some Yemeni Zaydī communities (particularly in Sana'a among a certain class of Sayyids), they

<sup>21</sup> King, "Zaydī Revival," 406.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, vom Bruck, "Regimes of Piety," 185–223.

<sup>23</sup> For the discussion that follows, see vom Bruck, "Regimes of Piety," 204–21.

<sup>24</sup> These conditions are taken from vom Bruck, "Regimes of Piety," 211.



clash with an activist Hādawī Zaydism embodied by a growing network of public institutions. This resurgence is most evident in the cultural and educational spheres. The 2000s and early 2010s have witnessed the public celebration of Shīʿī festivals such as ʿĪd al-Ghadīr, the distribution of cassettes and brochures explaining Hādawī Zaydī beliefs, and the establishment of a club of “Believing Youth” (*al-shabāb al-muʿmin*) that runs educational programs and study circles.<sup>25</sup>

The most important symbol of this brand of activism is the Imām Zayd b. ʿAlī Cultural Foundation (IZBACF), which was founded in Sanaʿa in 1994. The foundation’s goals and challenges are described by King as follows:

With activities ranging from publishing Zaydī books to organizing lectures on the *madhhab*, Foundation scholars and technicians have also catalogued, edited and digitized thousands of seminal Zaydī manuscripts. [IZBACF’s] efforts to preserve these texts demonstrate the challenges Zaydī activists face in a Republic whose state-building project sought to undermine Zaydī thought, transform (or even erase) the collective reading of Zaydī history and supplant Zaydī collective identity. In this context, some Yemenis, including government officials, deem the preservation and distribution of Zaydī manuscripts a subversive act. While these texts are an extant product and legacy of Yemeni history, they also represent the ideology that undergirded the Imāmate and that which the state superseded and replaced.<sup>26</sup>

By editing and publishing important Zaydī texts, the foundation effectively counters the traditionist narrative of Zaydism and reiterates the activist Muʿtazilī writings of Hādawī Zaydī scholars. It also works to alleviate the community’s underlying fears of the loss of identity and the inability to transfer knowledge and beliefs to the next generation. As one scholar in Sanaʿa reports, “What interests us is our thought remaining with our children. I don’t accept my son returning from school with non-Zaydī thought and telling me: ‘Father, they taught me such and such, and you told me the opposite at home.’ ... Whoever rules, rules. I must take my thought with me, my children and family. This problem keeps me awake at night.”<sup>27</sup>

The IZBACF’s mission is largely directed toward ensuring the preservation of Hādawī Zaydism in both the Yemeni and the global context. It has won the

25 King, “Zaydī Revival,” 413.

26 King, “Zaydī Revival,” 422.

27 King, “Zayd Revival,” 414.

support of European and American academic institutions, which provided the necessary resources for launching the Yemen Manuscript Digitation Initiative in 2012.<sup>28</sup> Overall, the IZBACF has been successful in overcoming governmental opposition and weathering the storms of political instability. The extent to which it can maintain this success in the future remains an open question.

## 6.2 *Political Revival*

The political dimensions of the Hādawī Zaydī resurgence go back to the 1990 founding of the Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq (the Party of Truth). The new party was meant to defend Hādawī Zaydī interests against the incursions of Saudi Arabia and the Republican Yemeni government through political participation.<sup>29</sup> The initial results of this strategy were disappointing, with the party winning only two seats in the 1993 national elections. This was likely a result of the lingering association of Hādawī Zaydism with the oppressive Ḥamid al-Dīn Imāmate in the minds of many Yemenis.

The party's early setbacks produced significant disenchantment in Hādawī Zaydī scholarly circles. Specifically, it enabled the rise of activist voices such as that of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, a former Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq representative to the Yemeni government, who publicly criticized the government's discriminatory policies. There were also accusations (with some credence) that the Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq had sacrificed key Hādawī Zaydī positions in the interests of political expediency. Tensions were further aggravated by an increase in US military aid to Yemen in the aftermath of 9/11.<sup>30</sup> The situation exploded in 2004 with the outbreak of hostilities in the Ṣa'da governate between a group of Hādawī Zaydīs (known as the Believing Youth, discussed earlier) and the Yemeni army. Ḥusayn was killed in September 2004 and succeeded at the head of the movement by his father Badr al-Dīn (d. 2010). As of 2013, the conflict had claimed thousands of lives and reportedly displaced nearly 250,000 people in northern Yemen.<sup>31</sup>

The media and popular response to the Ḥūthī conflict unequivocally backed the position of the Republican government. It was alleged that the Hādawī Zaydīs were interested in the reestablishment of an elitist Sayyid Imāmate (the Ḥūthīs are a Sayyid family). President Saleh described the insurgency not as an expression of Zaydī discontent at discriminatory government policies but rather as an uprising typical of past Hādawī Zaydī revolutions. This rhetoric was widespread despite repeated disavowals from both Ḥusayn and

28 See their website: <http://ymdi.uoregon.edu/>.

29 Haykel, "Zaydi Revival," 227.

30 For a comprehensive history of the conflict, see Salmoni et al., *Regime and Periphery*.

31 King, "Zaydi Revival," 439.

Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī of any political aspirations.<sup>32</sup> The press repeatedly characterized Ḥādawī Zaydism as a radical form of Shī'ism and connected it to Hezbollah and the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the process, it was cast as a foreign accretion attempting to subvert the state as opposed to an indigenous tradition rooted in the history of Yemen itself.

The popular reaction to the Ḥūthī conflict epitomizes the central challenge faced by Ḥādawī Zaydīs in contemporary Yemen. Their religious tradition has been demonized by a Republican Yemeni state that favors a Zaydism flavored by Sunnī traditionism. This severely limits the options available to the indigenous Ḥādawī Zaydī population. If they condemn the Ḥūthīs as rebels, they effectively accept their status as second-class citizens. If they sympathize with the Ḥūthīs for challenging the government's persecution of their religious community, they are suspect and subject to imprisonment or persecution as traitors. The current atmosphere in Yemen does not permit an individual to be both a Yemeni citizen and a Ḥādawī Zaydī.

### 6.3 *Interpretive Revival*

Reinterpretive efforts offer a potential avenue for allaying popular concerns about particularly controversial aspects of Ḥādawī Zaydism such as the elevated status of Sayyids, the activist template of summons (*da'wa*) and uprising (*khurūj*), and the autocratic nature of the Imāmate. A number of Ḥādawī Zaydī scholars from both Sayyid and non-Sayyid backgrounds have disavowed the notion of Sayyid superiority by expanding the definition of the family of the Prophet. This is a striking break from classical doctrine, and it remains unclear whether it will win acceptance in the larger Ḥādawī Zaydī scholarly community.

Other scholars have offered a modern reinterpretation of the Zaydī concept of uprising (*khurūj*) traditionally associated with the founding of a new Imāmate. Recall that a qualified candidate establishes a new Imāmate by summoning his followers to overthrow an oppressive state. In the new formulation, democracy allows a candidate to demonstrate his credentials and topple a repressive regime through a political campaign (*da'wa*) rather than military action. Electoral mechanisms in the contemporary Yemeni state thus play the role previously ascribed to rebellion.

Ḥādawī Zaydī scholars also connect their tradition to representative government through the concept of consultation. When multiple contenders claimed the Imāmate after the death of a sitting Imām, a council of scholars

32 It is worth noting that as a Sayyid scholar of the highest rank, Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī was certainly qualified to claim the Imāmate had he been so inclined.

and tribal leaders would evaluate each candidate's credentials to determine who was most qualified to rule. Democratic elections serve the function of consultation, with the general population taking the place of the scholars and tribal leaders.

Finally, many Hādawī Zaydīs deny the legitimacy of any rebellion against a leader who comes to power through the electoral process. In an effort to ease the anxieties of the larger Yemeni populace, they stress that revolution (i) is not legitimate against a ruler simply because of lineage (citing, e.g., the case of the legitimate but non-Sayyid Umayyad caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz, r. 717–20) and (ii) is permissible only against an overt tyrant. They further emphasize that Zaydī revolutions were not designed to empower Sayyids but rather to fight injustice. Some even ascribe the revolution of 1962 to the Zaydī tradition's deep commitment to the principle of justice. Inverting the logic of state propaganda, they describe the Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāms as oppressive monarchs deservedly toppled by a population committed to just rule.<sup>33</sup>

These efforts at reinterpretation are meant to highlight the compatibility of Hādawī Zaydism with the institutions of the modern Yemeni state. At the same time, they represent an attempt to preserve a connection to the tradition's past. In the words of one commentator, "as this scholarly community [Hādawī Zaydīs] applies classical concepts like [*khurūj*] for dramatically-altered discourses and contexts, they always seek precedent within Zaydī history and the rich body of Zaydī scholarship."<sup>34</sup>

Parallel to the movement for reinterpretation, there remain those committed to the classical forms of Hādawī Zaydism. Since the establishment of a ceasefire in northern Yemen in 2010, a number of scholars in the tradition of Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī and the Believing Youth have issued public statements that restate the fundamental theological tenets of Hādawī Zaydism, including its historical interpretation of the institution of the Imāmate. The persistence of these views suggests deep enduring fissures within the larger Yemeni Zaydī community.

## 7 Final Thoughts

The Zaydīs emerged in the eighth century from a proto-Sunnī milieu but increasingly adopted Shī'ī positions in the wake of a series of failed rebellions.

33 King, "Zaydī Revival," 434.

34 King, "Zaydī Revival," 429.

After establishing states in Yemen and the southern Caspian coast, they confronted the practical realities of political rule. How could a stable state be predicated on the idea that any ‘Alid might rise up in rebellion to forward his own claim to the Imāmate? How could Zaydism account for an Imām who did not meet all the requirements of the office but enforced his rule purely through military power? Zaydī scholars also had to contend with Sunnī networks with deep roots in southern Yemen. The influence of these networks grew over time and eventually won a significant following in traditional Zaydī communities.

By the twelfth century, Zaydism had achieved its classical form, which combined Mu‘tazilī theology with a set of beliefs best characterized as Jārūdī. After the collapse of the Caspian Zaydī states, Yemen became the geographic and intellectual center of Hādawī Zaydism, with the northern highlands governed by a succession of Sayyid Imāmates. The fifteenth century saw the beginnings of a Sunnī traditionist movement that challenged the power of the Hādawī Zaydī establishment. It was aided by the rise of a new Zaydī dynasty, the Qāsimī Imāms, that undercut the authority of Hādawī Zaydism for a number of reasons. First, the Qāsimī state was increasingly dependent on revenues generated from Sunnī agricultural regions. This meant it was highly invested in maintaining the loyalty of its Sunnī subjects. Second, the later Qāsimī Imāms lacked the scholarly qualifications required of Hādawī Zaydī Imāms and sought a new basis for political legitimacy. Third, Yemen was connected to the larger Sunnī Muslim world, and many Zaydī scholars yearned for acceptance in this global community.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these forces led to the appointment of the Sunnī traditionist scholar Muḥammad al-Shawkānī to the post of chief judge under the Qāsimī Imāms. Over the course of four decades, al-Shawkānī fundamentally altered the power dynamics in northern Yemen. He began a marginalization of Hādawī Zaydī scholars that persisted into the twentieth century and accelerated after the revolution of 1962. Over the past three centuries, Zaydism has increasingly been characterized as a variation of Sunnism by scholars who have abandoned key Hādawī theological and legal principles. This process of “Sunnification” has had a marked effect on the public perception of Zaydism both in Yemen and around the world. Since 1990, however, Hādawī Zaydis have begun reasserting themselves in the cultural and political spheres and reinterpreting some of their seminal doctrines. It is unclear which vision for Zaydism will triumph, but—for the first time in many decades—the larger Hādawī Zaydī community appears invigorated by the search for a modern voice.

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