CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the summer of 2007 while the rest of Baghdad was engulfed under the oppression of daily car bombings and unyielding sectarian violence, there was an area of the city where the pervasive ferocity of the aggressive mood seemed all but absent. This was an area where the local residents felt safe enough to venture out and about, relax at the local cafes, and mingle with other people, regardless of their sect or religious persuasion. The centrepiece of this area, the Gaylani Mosque, has stood in the same location for more than nine hundred years and houses the shrine of its patron, Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, after whose epithet the entire area takes its name. Many of the residents of Bāb al-Shaykh put down this incredible blessing as a clear manifestation of the baraka of who, for them, was their pride and local saint. Their belief was further confirmed for them by the scores of pilgrims who arrived daily to visit this shrine, despite the dire political situation. For the visitors, as for the residents, the feeling of safety in the protection of their destiny was provided by their celebrated benefactor, the Ghawth al-Aʿẓam.1

The importance of Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī to the Muslim world is unquestionable; not only is he esteemed and revered as the founder of the largest Sufi order in the world today, the Qādiriyya, but he is also hailed as a pious scholar and formidable preacher even by those not concerned with the Qādiri order or Sufism in general. While the average Muslim individual might not be familiar with a well-known Muslim scholar from the past such as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), they are likely to be aware of Jīlānī. He is certainly better known in some regions than others, but the familiarity of his name may be compared to a figure such as St. Paul or St. Patrick in Europe. Furthermore, for many Muslims, Jīlānī is not just a historical personality but rather a figure of living importance whose spirit continues to provide spiritual sustenance and aid to those who request and require it. He is

1 See the article that highlights this phenomenon, Sabrina Tavernise and Karim Hilmi, ‘In Mixed Slice of Baghdad, Old Bonds Defy War’, New York Times, November 13 2007. Also see the online video by Karim Hilmi, http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/world/20071112_BABALSHIEKH_FEATURE/index.html last accessed 2 November 2017. The Ghawth al-Aʿẓam or ‘the greatest helper’ is a title given to Jīlānī by those who revere him. It is not meant to signify that he is the greatest helper there in existence—for that would be reserved for God—but rather to indicate that he is the greatest person to have been a ghawth and continues to be so. On the ghawth see chapter seven below.
known by a variety of names and titles including, Sulṭān al-Awliyā’ (King of the Saints), Muḥiyyiddīn (Reviver of the Faith), and Bāz al-Ashhab (The Grey Falcon).  

ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī was a famous personality in Baghdad during his lifetime, as is clear from the chronicles of the era, and his fame had most likely spread outside the city too. Some of his sons after him continued in his work of guiding and teaching students and disciples, and moved beyond Baghdad. For example his son ʿĪsā moved to Egypt and taught there, while his son ʿAbd al-Wahhāb seems to have been at work in Damascus for a while. His mosque-complex where he was buried continued as a place of teaching and instruction, and his descendants (aside from some brief interruptions) continued through the centuries to hold possession of this sanctuary, and continue to do so until the present day. As can be seen by the reports of Sībṭ Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Yūnus, Jīlānī’s progeny were well known and well regarded in Baghdad a generation or two after him, and it seems that they, along with certain disciples of his, were pivotal in establishing and spreading the Qādirī order by spreading Sufism through his name. The figure and person of Jīlānī constitutes a central aspect of the order and this is highlighted by the important role of the Baghdad mosque-complex as the spiritual headquarters of the order. Over time, branches of the order established varying practices, but all gave and continue to give their professed allegiance to Baghdad.

With all of this in mind, it is not surprising to find a countless number of works on Jīlānī in virtually every traditional Muslim language. It is however surprising to find a complete lack of comparative academic work in Western languages on this same person, a lack that can be considered a lacuna in the study of Islamic Spirituality, Sufism and Islam in general. His name certainly turns up in many books and articles, especially on Sufism, yet he is usually mentioned only as the apparent founder of an order, and often with a remark about the fact that we have very limited accurate information on this particular individual.

This present work on Jīlānī does not claim to fill this hole, for that would certainly require more than a single study, but it nevertheless attempts to clarify certain basic facts concerning Jīlānī, as well as attempting to open up discus-

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2 This latter name (sometimes Bāz Allāh al-Ashhab) is said to derive from the fact that the falcon is a loyal bird that does the bidding of its master without question, always faithfully returning to the master’s hand, and that Jīlānī holds such a position with God. He is quoted as having said: “All the other birds talk and do not act, whereas the falcon acts without talking, and this is how the glove of kings came to be its perch.” Muhammad Ibn Yaḥyā al-Ṭādīfī, *Qalāʾīd al-Jawāḥir* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2005) 29.