CHAPTER SIX

THE IRAQI AFGHANIS AND ‘ABDUHS:
DEBATE OVER REFORM AMONG SHI’ITE AND
SUNNI ‘ULAMA’ IN INTERWAR IRAQ

Orit Bashkin

In 1923, Iraqi intellectual Ibrahim Salih Shukr (b. 1893) harshly attacked the Pan-Islamist policies of Rashid Rida (1865–1935). Rida was a “mentally-ill” writer, “an egoist, motivated by desires,” who had long abandoned his initially correct scholarship.1 Shukr, however, emphasized that his critique of Rida should be distinguished from his admiration for Rida’s mentor, Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905), “the greatest man of the East.” Shukr, moreover, provided lists of Arab reformers and thinkers whom he greatly appreciated, a roster that included, among others, Shibli Shumayl (1850–1917), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897) and Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi (1857–1924). In 1932, almost a decade later, the newspaper of the social-democratic group al-Ahali reported on the Islamic conference in Jerusalem. This conference, the daily boasted, included not only such famed intellectuals as Rashid Rida and Khayr al-Din al-Zirkili, but also Iraqi representatives.2

These two items are important, as they reflect the fact that debates concerning the Salafiyya and Islamic reform were conducted in the Iraqi press of the 1920s.3 The theories of the Salafiyya movement, of Muhammad ‘Abduh and of Rashid Rida, were known to Iraqi readers. The Iraqi religious field was typified by local and regional trends. On the one hand, the Sunni-Shi’i divide and the need to respond to Wahhabi challenges had produced a unique Iraqi religious debate. On the

---

2 Al-Ahali no. 19 (29 January 1932), pp. 1, 4.
other hand, the constant conversations among Muslim reformers on questions relating to modernity, science, reform, women’s rights and the relationship between nationalism and Islam, generated a regional, Middle Eastern conversation in which Iraqis took part. The dominance of Egyptian and Syrian thinkers in the Iraqi print market was partly due to the poor state of the Iraqi printing industry at the beginning of the twentieth century. Consequently, many Iraqi intellectuals printed their books outside Iraq, while books written in Egypt and Syria were read in Iraq. In addition, Iraqi Sunnis studied in Cairo, Damascus and Istanbul, places where the meaning of Islamic reform was debated and negotiated. These two facts likewise illustrate that in the pluralistic atmosphere created by the budding Iraqi press, the views of the secularist Shibli Shumayl and of Muhammad ʿAbduh could inspire the same intellectual, while socialist and secular writers, such as the members of al-Ahali, could sometimes sympathize with certain Islamic causes whose national meanings went beyond the Islamist camp.

This essay analyzes the writings of two Iraqi reformers, the Shiʿi Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani (1883–1967) and the Sunni Muhammad al-Hashimi (1898–1973). Their views about science, modernity and religiosity, I argue, mirror the vitality of the Iraqi intellectual milieu during the first decades of the twentieth century. In the Shiʿi context, scholars like Yitzhak Nakash, Juan Cole, Meir Litvak and more recently Tamara Chalabi, emphasized that trans-regional intellectual and commercial networks linked Najaf, Iran, India and Lebanon. Works on the Alusi family emphasized the importance of both the Salafiyya and the Wahhabiyya to the Sunni-Iraqi context. Other scholars likewise underscored the ways in which the theories of the Salafiyya movement

---