1. The making of an image

Abū l-Hudā was born in 1850 in a small village in Northern Syria into a beduin family. In spite of his initially low social background he set out on one of the most astonishing careers in the late Ottoman Empire. At the strikingly young age of 24 he had managed to establish contacts among the Ottoman administration that earned him the complete control of his home village as well as the post of naqīb al-aṣrāf in Aleppo. In the following years he became one of the leading religious advisors of Sultan ʿAbdulḥamīd II. in Istanbul, where he stayed from 1879 until his death in 1909. What he really did in all these years is far from clear.

Much clearer is the image of Abū l-Hudā in the existing literature. He is usually classified within the framework of several common paradigms of modern Middle Eastern historiography. The first paradigm is that of Nationalism vs. Ottomanism. Nationalism as an ideology, being based on territorial or ethnic principles, and Ottomanism, being based on the principle of religion, were understood as two ideologies completely in juxtaposition to each other. Therefore, Ottomanists and Arab Nationalists were for a long time interpreted as two opposing pressure groups fighting against each other.\(^2\)

\(^1\) The present article sums up parts of my Dissertation Abū l-Hudā as-Sayyādī. Eine Studie zur Instrumentalisierung sufischer Netzwerke und genealogischer Kontroversen im späotosmanischen Reich. Berlin (Klaus Schwarz Verlag) 2003. I want to thank the Volkswagen foundation for financing the research for this study.

Abū l-Hudā was always seen within this framework as a spokesman of Ottomanism, i.e. as a sworn enemy of all Arabists.³

The second paradigm, relevant to the construction of the image of Abū l-Hudā, was of sufi ṭuruq as being instrumental for ʿAbdul-ḥamīds pan-Islamic policy. It was said that there were four sufi leaders (šuyūḥ) at the Sultan’s court, responsible for organizing and carrying out this policy in clearly distinguished areas inside as well as outside the Ottoman Empire. This notion of a mysterious cabinet in Istanbul which had the Sultan almost under its complete psychological, and therefore political control has gained wide acceptance. Abū l-Hudā was said to have been one of those šuyūḥ.⁴ Recent research has shown, that this mysterious cabinet of šuyūḥ actually never existed and that the role of these šuyūḥ in ʿAbdulhamīds pan-Islamic policy is far from clear.⁵

The third paradigm places salafīya in opposition to obscurantist sufis. The salafīya is commonly understood as a movement among Arab ʿulama which gained momentum in the late 1890s and after 1900. One of their main goals was to purge Islam from unislamic innovations (bīdaʾ), be it the veneration of shrines or the ecstatic practices of certain ṭuruq during the ḍikr. The Rifāʿiya is probably the most famous among those ecstatic orders, because Rifāʿis were said to walk over burning coals during the ḍikr, eat glass or pierce parts of their bodies with iron bars without appearing to be harmed. Abū l-Hudā was a leading figure of the Rifāʿiya in the late Ottoman

---

