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One family of `ulama claiming descent from `Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani played a prominent political role in the history of central Kurdistan during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were known as the Sâdatê Nehrî, after their village of residence, Nehri in the district of Shemdinan. Shaykh `Ubaydullah of Nehri led in 1880 what is commonly considered as the first Kurdish rebellion with nationalist overtones. His sons and grandsons also played major roles in the Kurdish movement, besides strengthening their political and economic positions.

We owe much of our information on the history and genealogy of this family to Basile Nikitine, who was the Russian consul at Urmia during the years 1915-1918, where he met among the war refugees from Turkey a learned Kurdish mulla from Nehri, Sa`id Qazi. Mulla Sa`id became Nikitine's Kurdish tutor and wrote at his request a series of texts on the social and religious life of Central Kurdistan, which Nikitine later published in translation (Nikitine and Soane 1923; Nikitine 1925a, 1925b). It is not surprising that the Sâdatê Nehrî play central parts in these narratives, for Mulla Sa`id had been a religious teacher in Nehri during the days of `Ubaydullah's son Muhammad Siddiq.

Origins

The Sâdatê Nehrî claim descent from `Abd al-Qadir's son `Abd al-`Aziz, who, according to the family tradition, settled in `Aqra (northeast of Mosul) and spread there his father's teachings. He was also buried in `Aqra, where according to Mulla Sa`id his shrine still was a place of pilgrimage in the early 2th century. `Abd al-`Aziz's son Abu Bakr settled further north, in the mountainous territory of the Herki tribe in Shemdinan. Three or four generations later, his descendant Mulla Haji resettled in another village in Shemdinan, among the neighbouring Khumaru tribe. Again several generations later, the family head Mulla Salih, together with his sons `Abdullah and Ahmad, moved to the village of Nehri. The family claimed it had been teaching the Qadiriyya in an unbroken chain from the time of `Abd al-`Aziz. The move to Nehri, however, coincided with their renouncing the

family order in favour of the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya.¹ Sayyid `Abdullah (as well as, according to some sources, his brother, Sayyid Ahmad) became a *khalîfa* of the great proselytiser of the Naqshbandiyya, Mawlana Khalid, who had himself previously been initiated into the Qadiriyya by Sayyid `Abdullah. After `Abdullah's death, he was succeeded by his nephew Sayyid Taha, who also received an *ijâza* from Mawlana Khalid (MacKenzie 1962: 162-3).

Several other branches of the Qadiriyya trace their silsila through `Abd al-`Aziz (d. 602/1205-6), but in all cases the historicity of this link is as poorly documented — as is the case for the early Qadiriyya in general. The North African Jilala, who venerate Shaykh `Abd al-Qadir, owe allegiance to a saintly family of Fez, the Shurafa' Jilala, who claim descent from `Abd al-Qadir through `Abd al-`Aziz and his brother Ibrahim (Margoliouth 1974: 382). The Qadiriyya branch that presently is dominant in Indonesia also traces its silsila through `Abd al-`Aziz and a successor named Muhammad al-Hattâk.²

There are references to `Abd al-`Aziz in early Arabic sources (dating, however, from more than a century after his death), which allow for the possibility that he continued his father's teaching — whatever its nature may have been. Al-Wasiti (d. 744/1343) affirms that `Abd al-Razzaq and `Abd al-`Aziz were the only sons who did not pursue secular careers (Trimingham 1971: 42). Margoliouth, incidentally, mentions — it is not clear on the basis of which source — the village of Jiyal in Sinjar (west of Mosul) and not `Aqra as the place where `Abd al-`Aziz died (Margoliouth 1974: 382).

The accompanying chart shows the central lineage of the family, the line to which the most prominent members belonged.³ I have not found references to the Sâdatê Nehrî predating their “conversion” to the Naqshbandiyya. They come into prominence in the mid-19th century, as a result of changes in the regional balance of power as well as due to the presence of missionaries for whom they, as the leading Muslim religious authorities of the region, obviously represented a force to be reckoned with and who therefore regularly reported on them.

¹ Nikitine 1925b: 156-7; 1956: 211-4.

² Cf. Van Bruinessen 1999. Most names in this silsila cannot be identified, which reinforces our doubts about the historicity of the links of the first centuries after Shaykh `Abd al-Qadir's lifetime. However, the names of the first seven or eight generations are identical with those in the entirely independent Qadiriyya silsila given by Burton in his *Pilgrimage*.

³ There is a similar chart in Nikitine 1925b: 156 and again 1956: 213, which shows a number of collateral branches as well. See also the charts in Bruinessen 1992: 321, 329-331 and Yalçin-Heckmann 1991: 296.

Administrative reforms in the Ottoman Empire under the sultans Mahmud II (1808-1839) and Abdulmecid (1839-1888) made an end to the autonomy of the Kurdish dynasties that had for many generations ruled the less accessible parts of Kurdistan. This included the Shembu dynasty of Hakkari (whose last ruler, Nurullah Beg, was deposed and exiled to Crete in 1849) and the `Abbasi Begzade dynasty of Shemdinan. As happened elsewhere in Kurdistan, appointed officials had neither the legitimacy nor the understanding of local conditions necessary to take the place of the deposed “feudal” rulers, and this propelled religious leaders into political roles.⁴ De facto authority in a large zone of Central Kurdistan thus devolved to Shaykh Sayyid Taha, who in fact during Nurullah Beg’s final years acted as a mediator between the latter and the Ottoman authorities.⁵

Shaykh Sayyid Taha was very much aware of the geopolitical developments in the wider region and he was especially concerned about the inexorable southward expansion of Russia and the increasing hold of the leading imperialist powers (Britain, Russia and France) over the Ottoman Empire. During the Crimean war (1854-56) he personally took part in the *jihad* against the Russians.⁶ He also corresponded with the hero of the anti-Russian resistance in Daghestan, Shaykh Shamil (d. 1871) and even appears to have sent Kurdish warriors to Daghestan to take part in the resistance movement.⁷

Shaykh `Ubaydullah

Shaykh `Ubaydullah shared his father’s concerns, and it was the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877-78, during which the Ottoman government appointed him as the commander of Kurdish tribal forces, that spurred him on to political activism. A year after the war he briefly rebelled against the Ottoman provincial administration, showing that he was capable of wielding effective authority in Central Kurdistan, and in 1880 Kurdish tribal armies loyal to the shaykh invaded the neighbouring districts of Iran, intending to replace the unpopular Persian administration with rule by Shaykh `Ubaydullah. There are grounds to consider this as the first Kurdish uprising with a clear nationalist

⁴ This development is analysed in Bruinessen 1992: 224-34.

⁵ See Yalçın-Heckmann 1991: 57-61 for an account of Nurullah’s last years, largely based on Ottoman documents published by Nazmi Sevgen.

⁶ Yalçın-Heckmann 1991: 63, after the *Yurt Ansiklopedisi*.

⁷ Gammer 1994: 251. Shaykh Shamil and various other activist `ulama of the northern Caucasus were, like Shaykh Sayyid Taha, affiliated with the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya.

aspect. In correspondence with foreigners the shaykh spoke of the Kurds as a distinct people — notably distinct from the Armenians, whose nationalism had been fanned by the Russians — and complained of the corrupt Persian and Ottoman administration. Ottoman officials and foreign missionaries and consuls in the region also believed that the shaykh intended to establish an independent Kurdish principality.

The shaykh's military role in the Russian-Ottoman war had confirmed his position (as well as his perception of himself) as the most widely respected Kurdish leader. Most of the firearms given to the tribes during that war remained in Kurdistan, further strengthening the shaykh's position. The major factor that made him rebel probably was his perception that the Armenians of Van, with international support, were preparing for the establishment of an independent state and that the Nestorians of his own district sought British protection.⁸ Another reason that he repeatedly mentioned himself, however, was misgovernment and oppression by the local administration and its failure to check depredations by the large Kurdish nomad tribes Herki and Shikak. In 1879 he briefly rebelled against the Ottoman provincial administration because of a conflict with the governor of Gewer. In spite of a Kurdish counter-attack on the Ottoman battalion that was despatched restore order, this question was settled amiably; the offending official was dismissed and the shaykh rewarded a decoration and a salary for his services in the past war.

Given the shaykh's objections to Armenian aspirations, it is remarkable that his relations with his most direct Christian neighbours, the Nestorians, remained good during the 1880 uprising; the Nestorians in fact, for whatever reasons, supported him. He also cultivated relations with the foreign missionaries working in the region, who generally held favourable opinions of him. During the invasion of Persia, his brother-in-law and *khalifa*, Shaykh Muhammad Sa'id, told the British consul-general and the American missionaries based at Urmia that 'Ubaydullah's aims were "to repress brigandage, restore order within the borders of Turkey and Persia, place Christians and Muslims on a footing of equality, favour education, and allow churches and schools to be built", and that he demanded European moral support for this project (Jwaideh 1960: 239).

⁸ Article 51 of the Treaty of Berlin, concluded between the European powers and the Ottoman Empire after the Russian-Ottoman war, obliged the Porte "to carry out, without further delay, the improvements and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by the Armenians, and to guarantee their security against the Circassians and Kurds" (Jwaideh 1960: 282n). The arrival of British military consuls in the region was perceived by many Kurds as a direct intervention. 'Ubaydullah is reported to have told a Turkish officer in 1880: "What is this I hear, that the Armenians are going to have an independent state in Van, and the Nestorians are going to hoist the British flag and declare themselves British subjects. I will never permit it, even if I have to arm the women" (thus a report by consul Clayton, quoted in Jwaideh 1960: 233).

The rebellion thus did not simply place the Kurds against the local Christians or other ethnic groups. The shaykh's troops, organised into three armies commanded by his two sons Muhammad Siddiq and `Abd al-Qadir and his brother-in-law Muhammad Sa`id, were recruited from most of the tribes of the region, showing again that his authority was capable of overcoming tribal divisions and conflicts.⁹ One stated aim of the invasion in Persia, however, was to discipline the large Kurdish Shikak tribe which often pillaged the Kurdish, Azeri and Nestorian peasants of the Urmia plain. As it was, the shaykh's men did their own bit of pillaging too, but they were welcomed by the Kurdish-inhabited towns of the district, local Kurdish tribes joined them, and the Persian officials all fled.

The movement acquired an anti-Shi`i character after the (Shi`i) Azeri inhabitants of the town of Miyanduab opposed it and killed Kurdish envoys who had come to request supplies for the shaykh's troops. A *fatwa* issued by the chief molla in Sawuj Bulaq (Mahabad), allegedly calling for *jihad* against the Shi`is, may have played a crucial role.¹⁰ Miyanduab was attacked and several thousand of its inhabitants massacred. The Kurdish troops on this front, led by Shaykh `Abd al-Qadir, then continued further into Azeri territory, ravaging the countryside as far as Maragha.

The suppression of the uprising by Persian troops was equally bloody if not more so. The army killed indiscriminately, not only Kurds but also Nestorians of the Urmia plain. What by that time remained of the shaykh's tribal forces dissolved and returned home across the border. The shaykh and his sons too returned to Shemdinan. The attitude of Shaykh `Ubaydullah towards the Ottoman government, as well as that of the government towards the shaykh, at the time of this rebellion appears to have been ambivalent. The shaykh never stopped proclaiming his loyalty towards the Sultan (whom he of course recognised as the Caliph), but some Ottoman officials as well as the missionaries believed him to strive for separation from Istanbul as well. The government remained remarkably lenient to him, and some observers believed it to be tacitly supporting his mobilisation of the Kurds as a safeguard against the greater danger of Armenian nationalism.¹¹

⁹ Estimates of the size of these forces by contemporary observers (listed meticulously in Jwaideh 1960: 260-5) vary considerably. The largest of them numbered somewhere between 10,000 and 40,000 men but in the course of the campaign dwindled to 1,500 as the men simply returned to their villages.

¹⁰ The only source mentioning this *fatwa* appears to be Wilson 1895: 111. Kurdish Sawuj Bulaq and Azeri Miyanduab are neighbour towns with a history of friction, and the background of the *fatwa* may be unrelated to Shaykh `Ubaydullah's invasion. It was however Shaykh `Abd al-Qadir, the commander of the invading Kurdish forces in the Sawuj Bulaq region, who decided to attack Miyanduab.

¹¹ Thus the British consul-general Abbott at Tabriz and, more forcefully, the former Armenian patriarch Khrimian, in letters and reports quoted in Jwaideh 1960: 239-47. They wrote of a "Kurdish League", formed by the shaykh at the instigation of the government. Another British consul-general, Trotter at Van, just as forcefully rejected the idea of Ottoman collusion. It should not be forgotten, of course, that there hardly was something as *the Ottoman*

In the aftermath of the rebellion the shaykh was summoned to Istanbul, but the hero's welcome that he was given everywhere on the way indicated that he was not treated as an ordinary rebel. After a year of enforced residence in Istanbul he made his way back to Shemdinan. Under foreign pressure, the authorities arrested him again, this time sending him into exile to Mecca, where he died in 1883.¹²

Shaykh Muhammad Siddiq (d.1911)

Muhammad Siddiq, `Ubaydullah's eldest son, was allowed to return to Nehri and to succeed to his father's position as the most influential person of Central Kurdistan — a position which he had, however, continually to defend it against rival shaykhs and tribal chieftains. Dickson (1910) gives a traveller's account of these rivalries, but by far the most fascinating source on Muhammad Siddiq's exploits is the story that Mulla Sa'id, his former secretary, wrote for Nikitine (Nikitine & Soane 1923). It is a rare eyewitness account of the manipulations by which the shaykh exploited the rivalry between the tribal chieftains Suto and Tato in order to acquire the possessions of both.

The missionary W.A. Wigram gives an interesting account of his economic enterprises and his relationship with the Ottoman authorities. "Shrewder than his father, [Shaykh Muhammad Siddiq] was content with the reality of power, and accumulated wealth by tobacco smuggling on the most magnificent scale. His caravans went down to Persia, often 100 mules strong, in open defiance of the 'Regie' officials; and a large portion of the proceeds was invested in rifles, smuggled from Russia to Urmi."¹³ The shaykh put some of his money in a savings account in a British bank (which he asked Wigram to select for him); he must have been one of the first Kurdish chieftains ever to invest money abroad. Both the *kaymakam* (district governor) and the inspector of the state tobacco monopoly (the *Régie*) lived in quarters generously provided by the shaykh, which did not put them in a position to interfere seriously in his affairs.¹⁴

government. The administration and army themselves were ridden with conflicts and the sultan was continually balancing factions against one another and against local notables (see Duguid 1973).

¹² The best study of `Ubaydullah's rebellion in its local and international context is Jwaideh 1960: 212-89, on which I have mostly relied here. For another perspective, see also Joseph 1961: 107-13.

¹³ Wigram & Wigram 1914: 163.

¹⁴ Ibid. According to Erdost's informants, the shaykh invested much of his earnings in buying land (Erdost 1971: 184-6).

Sayyid `Abd al-Qadir (d.1925)

Muhammad Siddiq's younger brother `Abd al-Qadir, exiled together with his father, stayed in Mecca until the Young Turk coup d'état of 1908 made it possible for him to settle in Istanbul. The fame of his family earned him the respect of both the Kurdish aristocrats and the Kurdish "proletariat", the porters (*hammal*). He was appointed to the *Shura-yi Devlet* (Council of State, the Ottoman Senate), of which he later even became the president. He was also made the figurehead, or one of the figureheads, of the first Kurdish association, the *Kürt Teâvün ve Terakki Cemiyeti*, that was established in Istanbul that same year. This was an ephemeral organisation, that faded away when the new regime reverted to authoritarianism, but Sayyid `Abd al-Qadir's position as the moral leader of Istanbul's Kurdish community remained unassailable. Following his brother Muhammad Siddiq's death in 1911, he briefly returned to Nehri to press his claims as the successor but had to yield to his nephew Taha II, in exchange for which a liberal allowance was henceforth periodically sent to Istanbul.

In the aftermath of the First World War, when the idea of national self-determination proclaimed by US president Wilson had strong reverberations among the elites of the various ethnic groups of the Empire, we find Sayyid `Abd al-Qadir again in the leadership of a Kurdish association, the *Kürt Teâli Cemiyeti*. This was more of a real organisation than its predecessor, and it carried out a whole range of cultural and educational activities. Its members had widely varying views of what the interests of the Kurds were that had to be defended. Some were thinking of an independent Kurdish state; Sayyid `Abd al-Qadir headed the faction that favoured a degree of decentralisation but on religious and other grounds opposed separation from the remnants of the Empire.¹⁵

Following the ultimate victory of the Kemalists, Sayyid `Abd al-Qadir did not flee abroad as did most of the separatist Kurdish faction but remained in Istanbul. The decision to stay cost him and his son Muhammad their lives. In the wake of the first large Kurdish uprising in Republican Turkey, the Shaykh Sa`id rebellion of 1925, both were hanged although they appear not to have been involved in the rebellion. The sayyid's great influence among the Kurds had made him a liability. Another son, `Abdullah, returned to Shemdinan (where the head of the family, Sayyid Taha II, then no longer resided) and, aided by warriors of the Gerdi tribe, briefly occupied the central

¹⁵ On these Kurdish associations, the various ideological tendencies in them and Sayyid `Abd al-Qadir's role, see Bruinessen 1992: 275-9; Olson 1996[1991]: 136-9.

village of Nâwchiyâ, killing six Turkish officers. Not much later he fled south to British-controlled territory.¹⁶

In 1926 the question of the border between Turkey and Iraq was finally settled; the former Ottoman province of Mosul, more or less coinciding with southern Kurdistan, came to Iraq. The district of Shemdinan remained Turkish, but the districts with which it had always been most closely linked, Bradost and Barzan, were henceforth part of Iraq. Nehri thus found itself on the frontier of three states, in each of which the Sadatê Nehrî had considerable landholdings.¹⁷ In the following decades we see members of the family engaged in political activities in Iraq as well as Turkey and Iran.

Sayyid Taha II (d.1939)

Sayyid Taha II, Muhammad Siddiq's eldest son, had inherited the political instincts of his grandfather and knew how to further his personal interests while at the same time representing those of the Kurds as a people. Before and during the First World War, he was several times in contact with the Russians, attempting to enlist their support for a Kurdish state.¹⁸ He appears to have spent a considerable time in Russian territory, for a British officer who later met him in Iraq remarked that he spoke good Russian as well as some French (Hay 1921: 353).

After the war, the Kemalists, who were intent on wresting Kurdistan from British control, contacted him and offered him a seat in the national assembly, but he believed his interests were better served with Kurdish independence. He contacted the British in Iraq in 1919 to ask their support for such a project and joined forces with the tribal chieftain Simko of the Shikâk tribe, who for a few years controlled a vast territory on the Iranian side of the border in complete defiance of the central government. After Simko's defeat by Iranian troops in August 1922, Sayyid Taha crossed into Iraq and offered the British his support against the Kemalists (who by then had a military presence in Rowanduz and were winning over various Kurdish tribes of the region to their

¹⁶ Erdost 1987: 49-61.

¹⁷ A detailed though incomplete listing of the land holdings of the Sâdatê Nehrî is given by Erdost 1971: 181-5.

¹⁸ Eagleton (1963: 7) mentions a visit to Russia as early as 1889, in the company of two other prominent Kurdish personalities, `Abd al-Razzaq Bedirkhan and Ja`far Agha of the Shikâk tribe. This must be an error, however; Sayyid Taha was only born in or around 1892, and Ja`far Agha was killed in 1905, which makes it improbable that the two ever visited Russia together. In late 1917 Sayyid Taha sent a letter to Basil Nikitine, the Russian consul in Urmia, in which he requested an interview with the Russian military staff to discuss common action against the Turkish army (Nikitine 1956: 195).

side). The British, who had a favourable impression of him and had for some time considered him as a more promising ally than the unreliable Shaykh Mahmud Barzinji of Sulaymaniyya, made him the *kaimmakam* (governor) of the Rowanduz district. After the end of the British mandate he fell out with the Iraqi authorities and in 1932 crossed back into Iran. Shah Riza kept him under forced residence in Tehran, where he died in 1939 of a mysterious disease.¹⁹

Shaykh `Abdullah Efendi and Colonel `Abd al-`Aziz

After his brief rebellion in Shemdinan, Sayyid `Abd al-Qadir's son `Abdullah lived in Iraq and sent his son `Abd al-`Aziz to military college in Baghdad, which indicates that the family did not experience political difficulties there. In 1941, however, the father crossed into Iran and settled in the Margawar district south-west of Urmia, where the family also owned extensive landholdings.²⁰ `Abd al-`Aziz, by then an Iraqi army officer, followed in 1945, together with a few other officers of Kurdish origins who had been in contact with Kurdish nationalist circles.

Both Shaykh `Abdullah and Shaykh `Abd al-`Aziz took active part in the short-lived Kurdish republic of Mahabad (1946), although not in leading roles. The tribes of the region favoured Shaykh `Abdullah as the leader, but the urban nationalists opted for Qazi Muhammad as the chairman of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and president of the republic. (Shaykh `Abdullah was considered as pro-British, which pleased neither Mahabad's young nationalists nor the Russians who were a permanent factor in the background.) Armed followers of the shaykh constituted only a small fraction of the armed forces of the republic.²¹ This aloofness made it possible for Shaykh `Abdullah to keep his position of influence after the republic was defeated by the Iranian army — unlike Qazi Muhammad, who was hanged, and the military commander Mulla Mustafa Barzani, who had to fight his way to exile in the Soviet Union. He even acted as the intermediary in negotiations between the Iranian army and the departing Barzani tribesmen.

`Abd al-`Aziz, who after all was an Iraqi army deserter, joined Mulla Mustafa and his men

¹⁹ On Sayyid Taha II, see: Wigram & Wigram 1914: 165-7; Hay 1921: 352-4; Edmonds 1957: 305-8; Eagleton 1963: 7, 18; Erdost 1987: 44-8; Bruinessen 1992: 330-1; Yalçın-Heckmann 1991: 65-7.

²⁰ Eagleton 1963: 18-20. It is not clear from Eagleton's summary account whether this move was in response to the Rashid `Ali coup in Iraq in 1941 or had other reasons.

²¹ The total forces of the republic consisted of some 2000 experienced guerrilla fighters of the Barzani tribe (from neighbouring Iraq) and over 10,000 tribal warriors on horseback. Among the latter, only 200 were the direct followers of Shaykh `Abdullah Gilani's family, commanded by a Sayyid Fahim (Eagleton 1963: 91-2). `Abd al-`Aziz supposedly served as an officer in Mahabad's army (cf. Kahn 1980: 141, where he is erroneously called Avdila).

to the Soviet Union. He spent two years in enforced residence in Siberia and worked as a factory worker but when Stalin's subsided he could study in Leningrad. Together with Barzani he returned to Iraq after Qassem's coup d'état in 1958 and became active again in Kurdish nationalist politics. As a member of the political bureau of the Kurdistan Democratic Party he sided with Ibrahim Ahmed and Jalal Talabani against Barzani in the conflict that split the movement from the early 1960s on. In 1964 Barzani had him imprisoned, and Shaykh `Abdullah had to use all his influence with the Iranian authorities to put pressure on Barzani for `Abd al-`Aziz's release. Since then he has resided alternately in Urmia (Rezaye) and in the last remaining family village in Margawar.²²

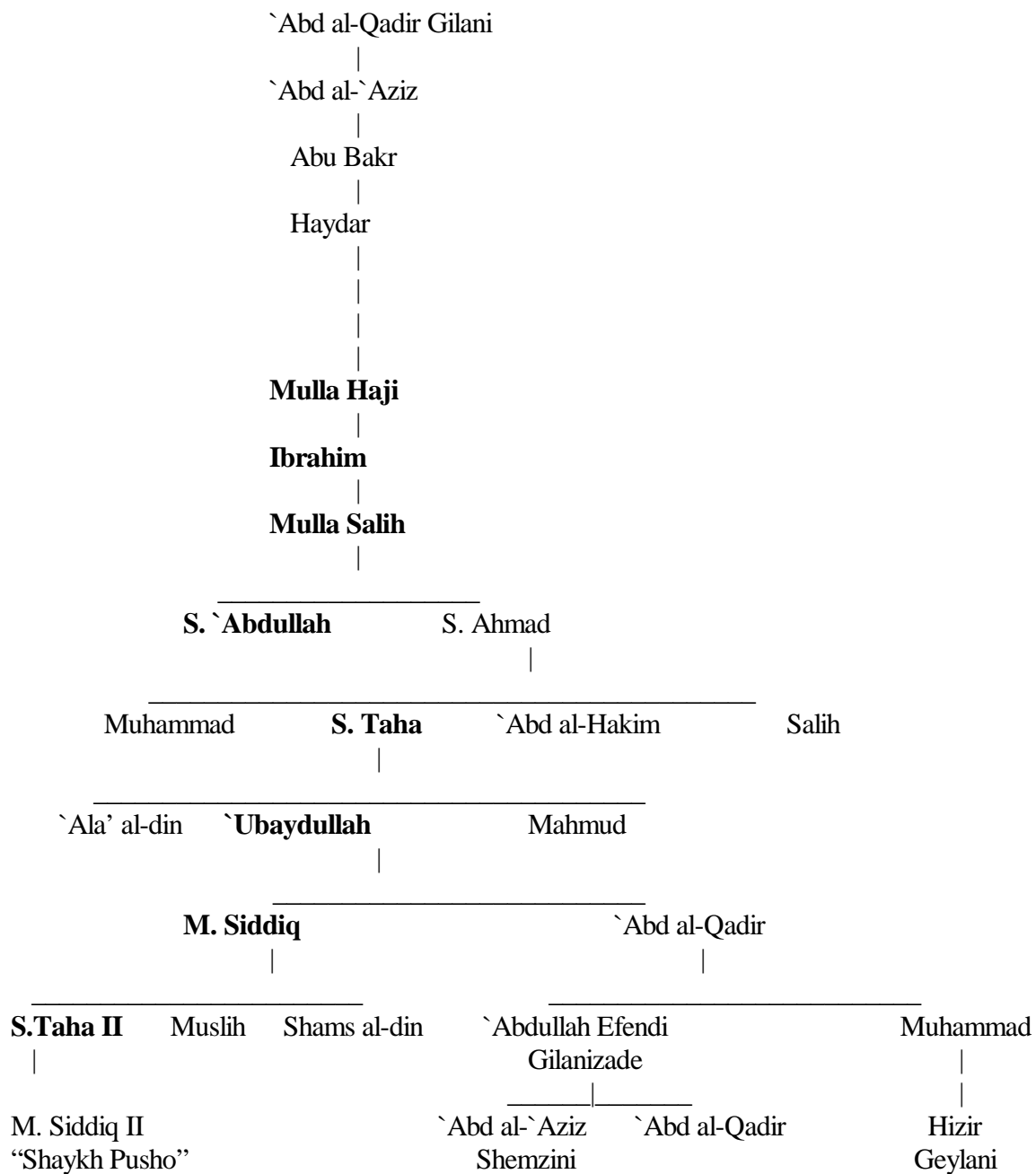
The Geylani in Turkey

Within the borders of Turkey, members of a different branch of the family have recently been prominent in local and national politics. Naim Geylani was a lawyer in Hakkari and became a member of parliament for the Motherland Party (ANAP) sometime in the 1980s. His cousin Hamit Geylani, also a lawyer, was active in the pro-Kurdish political parties of the 1990s, HEP, DEP and HADEP, initially in the Shemdinan district committee and later at the national level. Both belong to a branch of the family that branches off from the "central" line four generations above Mulla Haji, the earliest direct ancestor shown in the accompanying chart, and are therefore only distantly related to the shaykhs who led the family and controlled its economic assets.²³

²² Kahn 1980: 140-6. The family holdings were expropriated in the shah's land reform of the early 1960s but Shaykh `Abdullah succeeded in buying one entire village back.

²³ Personal communication from Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, based on a family tree copied for her by Hamit Geylani. Naim and Hamit's grandfather, Sayyid Islam Geylani, told Muzaffer Erdost that he had worked as a steward on (some of) Shaykh Muhammad Siddiq's land, supervising the profitable tobacco cultivation, in exchange for some 8 per cent of the monetary yield (Erdost 1971: 183).

The “central” branch of the family tree of the Sâdatê Nehrî



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