
A Genealogy of Levantine Defiance

For twelve centuries a Sunni tradition of the Levant made defiance of central power its first principle, suppressed in every age and refuted in none.

By Adrien Tantaoui

The Sunni Levantine theological school of thought could be comprehended as a continuous, structural resistance against the central authority and ruling class, whether it be under an Islamic empire (the Abbasids), a European colonial mandate (the French), or a sectarian ruling elite (modern Lebanon). This school of thought shared a unified vision of governance rooted in decentralization, the conditional legitimacy of power, constitutional supremacy, and organic pluralism. In each historical phase, this Levantine project was systematically dismantled by overwhelming, often external, counter-forces that required centralization and monopolized power to survive. This school of thought forged a distinct “Levantine political DNA” that ensures the region remains inherently hostile to absolute dictatorships and singular ideological narratives.

Throughout the history of the region, there exists a lineage of Sunni Levantine scholars who have created a distinct and local doctrine of political thought and moral values, all embedded in the reading of the Qur’an and *ijtihād* (intellectual reasoning). The core values of this doctrine are characterised by the defiance of central authority and authoritarianism, genuine pluralism and human law, respect of the Law by the Authority, embedded in the early international human rights law or the constitution that rules the monarch through the *Shura*, and portraying Islam as a religion favoring social justice and human dignity. These scholars have all contributed to a distinct Levantine vision and doctrine of Sunnism that still marks the intellectual foundation of civil society in the Levant. This article highlights the writings and doctrines of three thinkers whose work has structured this school of thought, as such it will unravel the minds and doctrine of Imam Al Awza’i under the Omeyyads and the Abbassids in Beirut, Muhamad Rashid Rida from 1922 to his last work of 1934 and finally, Abdallah Al Aylali under the steady transition between the French Mandate in Lebanon and the independence days.

I. Al-Awza’i and the Resistance to Abbasid Centralization

Abdallah Al-Awza’i’s (707–774) localized, decentralized legal framework was initially the main school of thought during the Omeyyad era. When the Abbasid empire took over in 750, it needed a unified, rigid legal code to govern a vast territory stretching from Central Asia to North Africa. Historians of the *madhhab* formation have suggested that the decentralized, pragmatic nature of Levantine jurisprudence sat awkwardly with the administrative logic of a centralized empire centered in Baghdad. On a methodological perspective, Al Awza’i warns of the danger of corrupting the Hadiths when they are passed from the oral tradition to written text.

The Syrian “Living Tradition” vs. Iraqi Opinion

Al-Awzā’ī’s jurisprudence rests on the continuous, inherited practice (*‘amal*, *sunna ma’mūl bihā*) of the Muslim community in Syria, what Joseph Schacht named the “living tradition” of the Syrians in contrast with the more rigid interpretations of the Iraqis. For al-Awzā’ī, this transmitted communal practice, whose lineage could be traced through the Syrian Successors (*Makḥūl*, al-Zuhri, Yaḥyā b. Abī Kathīr) and the Companions and the Prophet, simply *was* the Sunna. His clash with Abū Yūsuf and the Kūfan Ḥanafis is precisely the clash between this ‘living tradition’ and the systematizing *ra’y* or the “opinion” of Iraq.¹ He says that “Whoever takes up the anomalous opinions of the scholars departs from Islam.” Therefore, the *living tradition* that Al Awza’i is

referring to could be put in perspective with the *ijtihād*, the reasoning that should take place from the Sunna basis. Instead, he emphasized the necessity to embrace a common knowledge of the Sunna without abandoning it to a caste of scholars. Law is meant to be the disciplined and codified communal *sunna*, not the caliph's or the clever jurist's preference. He says then: *"This knowledge was noble; men would receive it from one another. But once it entered books, those who were not its rightful people entered it."*² This reasoning can also be read as a precedent to his defiance against scholars' authority and codification taking place in the centers of power, demonstrating the intellectual framework which would permit Al Awza'i to confront the Abbasid Caliphate. Thus, this is the doctrinal face of independence.

Resisting the Empire: Decentralization in Levantine Thought

After the Abbasid victory, al-Saffāh's uncle 'Abd Allāh b. 'Alī, governor of Syria, massacred the Umayyad house. He summoned al-Awzā'ī, who braced for death and spoke truth to this new, tyrannical power. Al-Dhahabī closes the episode with his own verdict: *"'Abd Allāh b. 'Alī was a tyrannical king, a shedder of blood, hard to handle, yet the Imam al-Awzā'ī, as you see, strikes him with the bitter truth, unlike the throng of evil scholars who dress up for princes the oppression and violence they plunge into..."*³ Al Awza'i stood up and took great risk by confronting the new governor of Syria. Instead of backing down or endorsing the new ruler for the sake of his scholar statute, he chose to tell the truth, preferring to place himself in a dire situation than turn a blind eye towards injustice.

Al Awza'i always defended a position of legal anti-dynasticism. It was only natural that he would have thoroughly opposed the Ummeyyad Caliphate's inheritance scheme. He refused to let conquest or dynastic claims launder itself as prophetic legitimacy. His contemporaries reported his famous words of defiance: *"Is the caliphate not a bequest from the Messenger of God, for which 'Alī fought at Šiffīn?"* I said: *"Had it been a [designated] bequest, 'Alī would never have let anyone precede him"*. Al-Awza'i continued: *"...He would not have consented to the two arbitrators."*⁴

Binding the Ruler: The "Siyar" as an Early Constitution

Al Awza'i forces the ruler to be bound by a supreme, divine law. Every position of rule and kinship comes with a responsibility. Unlike the modern constitution, the Siyar is a corpus of islamic principles that relies on the Sunna, the proximity to sacred authority increases the ruler's legal burden. He added *"...Fear God... and know that your kinship to the Messenger of God will only make God's claim upon you greater, and obedience to Him only more obligatory."*⁵ The Caliph needs to act according to justice, according to the Sunna because he carries a divine mandate to guide the Umma.

'Ahd (pledge of security) is the operative siyar concept. It is a granted safety that cannot be voided by the ruler's will. Violating this pledge to commit murder is *ghadr* (treachery), the cardinal prohibition. When asked about the preeminence of the Umayyads, Al-Awza'i answered: *"What do you say about the blood of the Umayyads?"* ... I said: *"They had a covenant ['ahd] upon you."* He said: *"Set me and them aside as if there were no covenant; what do you say about their blood?"* I said: *"Forbidden, because of the Messenger's words: 'The blood of a Muslim is licit only in one of three*

cases...”⁶ Here, Al Awza'i emphasizes the covenant, the pact that binds the Caliph to the Muslims, responsibility, security and justice bind him. In the 8th century, Al Awza'i was already arguing for a supreme rule that binds the ruler and protects the population from his potential tyrannical rule. Even though the Umayyad family was defeated, the Abbasid have a security covenant upon them, not because of the particular sanctity of the Umayyad blood but because of the sacred authority and justice that now relies on the Abbasid Caliphs.

This pact of security and justice between the Caliph and the Muslims predates by nearly nine centuries the Natural Law concept advanced by the English philosopher John Locke. Locke theorized that the sovereign's power must be bound by a law preceding him, a law grounded in both reason and divine origin. In the Enlightenment tradition that followed Locke, however, reason gradually overshadowed divine revelation as the primary source of that law. Al-Awzā'ī, by contrast, grounds this same limiting principle exclusively in the ruler's proximity to sacred, prophetic authority, a particular rather than universal source of restraint.

In a related but distinct doctrinal tradition, this ethic of binding restraint governs the conduct of soldiers in Muslim armies: al-Awza'i argues that *amān* is broadly obligatory, such that safe-conduct granted even by a single fighter binds the whole army, and includes the protected person's family and transportable property within its scope. Enemy women and children may not be killed while they take no part in the fighting and if captured, not to be put to death. On the treatment of prisoners of war, al-Awzā'ī stands with the majority of jurists who grant the ruler four lawful options: execution, enslavement, free release, or ransom/exchange. This stands in contrast to the Ḥanafī school, which restricts the ruler's choices to execution or enslavement alone. It forms a restraint doctrine, it re-legitimizes clemency the Iraqi position had closed off.

ICRC scholars⁷ demonstrate the preeminent commitment to human dignity which in part characterises the Levantine doctrine of sunnism: al-Awzā'ī reads the law of war as protections of the non-combatant, the pledged, the captive binding the Muslim state regardless of the enemy's conduct.

II. Rashid Rida's Shift: From Liberal Reform to Conservative Sunnism

Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865/1935) was an Islamic scholar, political reformer, theologian and revivalist. As Muhammad Abduh *de facto* successor, he was set to become a leading Sunni theologian of the Nahda movement, considering his attraction to modern western values of democracy, constitutionalism that he tried to implement through his knowledge of the Sunna. Observing the old Islamic world falling around him, he shifted towards a more scriptural and conservative reading of Islam that would later become known as Salafism.

The Foundations of Rida's Liberal Islamic Thought

Rida favored *Ijtihād* over *taqlid*, particularly in matters of worldly and political law (*mu'āmalāt*, *siyāsa*), which he regarded as the domain of reason and independent reasoning and subject to change depending on geographical and historical context. He sharply criticized the “frozen literalist jurists” (*ḥashwiyyat al-fuqahā' al-jāmidīn*) for treating the inherited *madhhab* as absolute

and immutable. This stance reflected the broader Nahda-era shift away from rigid tradition toward reasoned political renewal. As Rida himself put it: “As for social-civil politics, Islam laid down its foundations and general rules, and legislated for the community opinion and *ijtihād* within it, because it varies with the variance of time and place and rises with the advance of civilization.”⁸

In this framework, Rida insists that the electors acquire “knowledge” (*‘ilm*), a term that he equates with *ijtihād*, but whose substantive content is historically contingent. What counted as knowledge in the past is not sufficient for the present. As he explains: “When they use [the term ‘knowledge’] absolutely, what is meant is independent knowledge, expressed as *ijtihād* ... and today the imam and the consultative body (*ahl al-ḥall wa-l-‘aqd*) must possess knowledge of international law and general treaties, and of the conditions of neighboring nations and states.”⁹

The 1922 Islamic Liberal: Rida’s Endogenous Constitutionalism

Muhammad Rashid Rida had negative views of autocratic rule and particularly when it is practiced by Muslim rulers. This disdain greatly guided the influence he exerted on the writing of the Constitution of the Arab Kingdom of Syria in 1918. For example, he advocated taking the concept of the Shura, the collective assembly of the time of the Rashidun Caliphate, and applying it to the modern nation state. He linked the Qur’anic concept of *ūlū al-amr* (“those in authority,” *al-Nisā’* 4:59) with the *ahl al-ḥall wa-l-‘aqd*, a representative consultative body, and explicitly equates that body with a modern elected parliament (*majlis al-nuwwāb*). “It is confirmed by *al-Rāzī’s* exegesis of *ūlū al-amr* in His words ﴿Obey God, obey the Messenger, and those in authority among you﴾ (*al-Nisā’* 4:59): he established that what is meant by *ūlū al-amr* is the *ahl al-ḥall wa-l-‘aqd* who represent the authority of the community.”¹⁰

Creating the modern iteration of the Shura was at the core of his political vision and remained the guiding standard of his intellectual contributions. Understandably, he found the European model of governance and its sovereign elected parliament representing their entire electorates to be an attractive idea. In the case of these parliaments, however, it is the nation’s citizens that they represent; for Rida, the Shura must represent all of the Umma.

According to him, modern parliaments (*majālis al-nuwwāb*) are the closest contemporary equivalent to the classical *ahl al-ḥall wa-l-‘aqd*, but with one crucial difference. He insists that Muslim parliaments require a form of knowledge and virtue that Europeans and those influenced by them lack. As he writes: “Then the Turks and the Egyptians rose demanding the authority of the community through parliaments (*majālis al-nuwwāb*); and these assemblies are in the very sense of the body of *ahl al-ḥall wa-l-‘aqd* in Islam, except that Islam requires of them a knowledge and virtue that the Europeans and their imitators in this age do not.”¹¹

He argues that sovereignty belongs to the umma, not the ruler. The caliph is not a sacral autocrat but an *executor* (*munaffidh*) of the law and of the community’s will. The government is “a kind of republic.” According to Rida’s thought, it is conceivable that a reformed caliphate could have existed under the form of a Republic. The ruler would have acquired his legitimacy from the sovereignty of the Umma and not merely from his title: “Among its principles is that the authority of the community belongs to it, that its affair is [decided by] consultation among them, that its

government is a kind of republic, and that the Messenger's successor within it enjoys no privilege in its rulings over the weakest of the subjects; he is only an executor of the ruling of the Law and the opinion of the community."¹²

Rida defends the idea of a ruler who is appointed, legally accountable *and* deposable. He goes further, citing Imām al-Ḥaramayn to justify the deposition of a tyrannical imam, by force if necessary: "concerning an imam who has acted unjustly, whose oppression and tyranny are manifest, and who is not restrained by any deterrent from his evil conduct: the ahl al-ḥall wa-l-'aqd may agree to curb him, even by drawing weapons and waging war. ... And whoever holds the power to appoint holds the power to depose." In this reading, the ahl al-ḥall wa-l-'aqd exercise authority not only over rulers but over religious figures as well, making the consultative body and the Umma as a whole the true sovereign.

Rida wrote *al-Khilāfa wa al-Imama al 'Uzma* (The Caliphate and the Great Imamate) in 1922–23, published in *Al Manar*, at the height of the caliphate crisis: the Grand National Assembly in Ankara had abolished the Ottoman sultanate in November 1922 and would abolish the caliphate itself on 3 March 1924. He proposed comprehensive pan-Islamism and called upon Muslims to come together under their shared Islamic faith. He stressed the importance of Arab leadership in unifying Muslim ranks. Among the most important parts of his agenda was to thwart British imperial designs in the Arabian Peninsula. Writing in the aftermath of World War I, which had shattered the old order, Rida addressed his text to "the Turkish people" ("ayyuhā al-sha'b al-turkī"), urging them to seize the moment and rebuild a reformed, consultative caliphate rather than a hollow "spiritual" caliphate or even none at all. He wrote against three foils simultaneously: the Kemalist secularizers (*mutafarnijūn*), the rigid 'ulamā' (*hashwiyya*), and the despotic legacy of Sultan 'Abd al-Ḥamīd II. The book distilled decades of *al-Manār* argument into a constitutional theory of the imamate, but his vision did not gain political traction. Faced with this failure and his existential fear for the Muslim community, Rida turned towards the only Muslim fortress he saw as being free of both colonial rule and secularist thoughts, the House of Ibn Saud. Rida considered him the best available Muslim statesman and believed his kingdom offered the best prospect of becoming the political arm of the balanced Islahi movement. At this point, based on past experiences, Rida had come to understand that reform required money as well as political support.¹³

Reordering Priorities: The Late Rida's Conservative Shift

In his final contribution to *al-Manār*, the reformist newspaper he had founded and steered for nearly four decades, Rashid Rida seemed to distance himself from his earlier liberal and progressive positions. Indeed, Rida would even praise Ibn Saud's newly formed kingdom, despite its autocratic and conservative Islamic rule. This was not a conversion from liberalism to reaction, but a reordering of priorities under catastrophic pressure. Rida watched as the European colonial powers in the Levant imposed their colonial rule and their dismemberment of ethnic communities in Syria and Lebanon. Between 1918 and 1926, the two external roadmaps for Rida's early program, a *reformable caliphate* and a *liberal Europe worth emulating*, were destroyed almost simultaneously; the Kemalist abolition of the caliphate on March 3rd, 1924 and the predation of

“liberal” Europe in the Mandates, Palestine, and Syria. What remained was the one element of his thought that could still operate in a world of colonial dismemberment and secular dissolution: the demand for Islamic unity and scriptural authenticity as the *precondition* for everything else. The constitutional apparatus (*shūrā*, *ahl al-ḥall wa-l-‘aqd*) was not repudiated, it was subordinated. Unity had to come first; and after 1924 the only vessel capable of delivering unity was no longer a reformed parliamentary caliphate but Ibn Sa‘ūd’s Saudi state.

Several events forced this reordering of Rida’s priorities. The death of ‘Abduh in 1905 removed the moderating rationalist pole from his intellectual orbit. The abolition of the sultanate (November 1922) and the caliphate (3 March 1924) destroyed the very institution that al-Khilāfa had sought to reform. ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq’s *al-Islām wa uṣūl al-ḥukm* (1925) provoked Rida’s rebuttal, hardening the caliphate from a prudential institution into a religious obligation (*farḍ*). The Saudi conquest of the Hijaz (1924–25) drew Rida into alignment with Ibn Sa‘ūd, as reflected in his tract *al-Wahhābiyyūn wa-l-Ḥijāz* and in al-Manār’s gradual transformation into a Najdī mouthpiece. The failed Caliphate Congresses in Cairo (May 1926) and Mecca (1926) proved that no consensus caliph was achievable. Lastly, the colonial betrayals of Sykes–Picot (1916), Balfour (1917), Maysalūn (1920), and the Mandates discredited liberal Europe in Rida’s eyes.

This chain of events pushed Rida toward Salafism, as he considered that the Umma’s existential need for leadership had become vital. He decided to prioritize unity above all else, setting aside his constitutional reform and liberal commitments for a future time when “the shadows of freedom” might return. Rida’s legacy remains controversial. His writings in the early 1920s on constitutional, democratic, and social principles in Islam are of considerable importance, yet his mentorship of Hasan al-Bannā, the future founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, complicates his intellectual inheritance.¹⁴

Nonetheless, a reconciling thread persists, as particularly confirmed in the 1934 volume of al-Manar. Even in his final years, Rida continued to theorize the caliphate as bound by *shūrā*, *ijtihād*, and the *ahl al-ḥall wa-l-‘aqd*. He did not embrace naked autocracy. What changed was the ordering of priorities: unity and authenticity became the preconditions to be secured first, in an era of colonial dismemberment and secular abolition, while the constitutional apparatus was deferred to a future “shade of freedom” once statehood was achieved.

The ambivalent legacy of Rida is striking. He decentralizes doctrinally, embracing *ijtihād*, *umma-sovereignty*, the accountable ruler, while trying to reconstitute a single reformed caliphate. The anti-centralist is also a would-be re-centralizer. His legacy consequently splits into two directions: the liberal-constitutional *Riḍā* feeds Arab constitutionalism while the late-Salafī *Riḍā* feeds the Brotherhood and revivalism.

III. Abdallah Al-Alayli: The Legacy of the “Red Sheikh”

Abdallah al-Alayli (1914–1966) was a Beirut born scholar, specializing in linguistics and theology, and a prominent intellectual of Arab nationalism. A heavy critic of the French mandate over Lebanon, he sought to become the Grand Mufti of the Independent Republic of Lebanon in 1952 but ultimately failed because of his reformist and progressive views. Al-Alayli’s failure must be understood within Lebanon’s wider political structure. Scholars of Lebanese consociationalism (Salloukh et al., 2015; Leenders, 2012) have documented how the post-independence and post-Taëf sectarian elite bargain, reinforced by external patronage networks, has structurally constrained attempts at civil-state reform. This dynamic arguably precluded the kind of transformative politics that al-Alayli and his ally Kamal Jumblatt had once envisioned. Nevertheless, al-Alayli remained intellectually prolific, continuing to articulate a modernized, contextually grounded vision of Sunni Islam.

Ijtihad Without Limits: Refusing Intellectual Enclosure

Al-Alayli combines ijtihād with a direct challenge to the madhhab-establishment and clerical monopoly, invoking a correction of tradition that he believes achieves true intellectual advancement for Islamic law. In *Ayna al-Khaṭaʾ*?, he argues: “To imitate tradition while in error is not [true] conservation; and correction that achieves knowledge is not deviation.”¹⁵ Indeed, the “Red Sheikh” positions himself in direct opposition to the classical theory of clerical scholars. He adds: “I do not believe in walls,”¹⁶ a statement glossed as a revolt against “the stagnant and the static and everything that impedes the human being’s intellectual and social advance.” His principal conviction is a refusal of enclosure, from which follows a militant doctrine of ijtihād without ceiling: the *sharīʿa*, “by the logic of the Prophet and the logic of science,” remains permanently open to renewal, and “every halt to renewal is a halt to life”.

Al-Alayli’s linguistic-reform project pursues the same politics by other means: in *Muqaddima li-dars lughat al-ʿArab* (1938) he founded a “school of expansion” (*madhhab al-tawassuʿ*) and defended analogical coinage. For al-Alayli, a petrified lexicon and a petrified fiqh are the same disease. He rejected the science/religion antinomy, insisting that Islam “recognizes no clergy and no classes,” and grounded rights in the Qurʾānic honouring of *banī Ādam* and in *fiṭra*. This can be read as indirect borrowing of the Marxist doctrine that the perfect society recognizes no classes and no authority. His most daring fatwas (bank interest is not the prohibited *ribā*; insurance is licit; the crescent fixed by calculation; the *ḥudūd* as deterrents, not literal mutilations) all apply one method: read revelation for its purposes (*maqāṣid*), not its received juristic interpretations.

Championing Social Arabism: The Struggle of Al-Alayli

Al-ʿAlāyilī wrote across the arc of the French Mandate to independence and the confessional Republic. Born in Beirut in 1914, schooled at the Maqāṣid, he followed his brother Shaykh Mukhtār to al-Azhar (c. 1924–1935) and pursued a law degree from the Egyptian University. While there, al-Alayli absorbed many influences from reformist Cairo, such as Amīn al-Khulī, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and al-Afghānī. He returned to Beirut in 1940 to preach at the Grand ʿUmarī Mosque and sat on

the Supreme Sharia Council, having now become an insider of the very establishment he spent his life goading.

Al-Alayli's early career was marked by a string of pan-Arabist publications: *Muqaddima li-dars lughat al-ʿArab* (Cairo, 1938); *Tārīkh al-Ḥusayn* (1940); the *Innī Uttahim* series (1940); *Dustūr al-ʿArab al-qawmī* ("The National Constitution of the Arabs," Sidon, 1941). His political engagement was equally active. He co-founded nationalist formations and sat on the founding committee of Kamāl Junblāṭ's Progressive Socialist Party (1949), though he resigned after roughly 18 months, finding party framework to be too constraining. He also produced a steady stream of lexicographical work, including the unfinished *al-Muʿjam al-Kabīr*, the *al-Marjaʿ* (1963), and a ~40,000-term military dictionary which was later widely adopted by the Arab League.

Al Aylali constitutionalism is national rather than narrowly juridical. His 1941 book is literally a *dustūr*/constitution for the Arabs, theorizing the nation as a secular, civic bond, not a confessional one. He wrote: "Nationalism must be purely social, founded on unity of language, of homeland, of time-in-interest (present or future), and of the ideals that spring from common interests, common letters, and common aims."¹⁷

His public life was defined by establishment backlash. Nominated for Muftī of the Republic (c. 1952/1954), he was blocked by conservative reaction. He was given the epithet "al-Shaykh al-Aḥmar" ("the Red Sheikh") for reading Darwin, Marx, and Le Bon. The clearest instance of censure concerns *Ayna al-Khaṭaʿ? Taṣḥīḥ mafāhīm wa-naḡra tajdīd* ("Where Is the Error?"), a set of ten bold fatwas (first ed. Dār al-ʿIlm li-l-Malāyīn, 1978; reissued Dār al-Jadīd, 1992), was reportedly pulled from the market under Saudi pressure and circulated only as *mamnūʿ min al-tadāwul* (banned from circulation). This censorship echoes the earlier erasure of the *Awzāʿī* madhhab from Abbasid patronage. The Sunni Levantine reformer is repeatedly repressed without ever being refuted. Thus, the intellectual genealogy is a history of suppression as much as it is a history of ideas.

Islam as a Force for Social Justice and Civic Duty

For al-Alayli, Arabism is explicitly social and embedded in justice and human dignity. He "stood with the human being, especially the oppressed, crushed, and wronged," fighting "for that human being's elevation and the preservation of his dignity and freedom," grounded in the conviction that there exists in every human "something of the light of God."¹⁸

His thought is best described as Islamic-liberal: it emphasizes human dignity and the universality of values across all humanity. As he put it: "If practical Islam is a source of creativity, the Prophetic *ḥadīth* captured it most fully: 'Islam began as a stranger and will return as it began' but not as the ancients understood it, thinking *gharīban* derived from *ghurba* (estrangement); rather it is from *gharāba*, i.e. astonishment... For Islam honours the human being in himself, simply [for being] human... Islam believes in the whole, universal human being."¹⁹

Al-Alayli is buried at the shrine of al-Awzāʿī. The root and the final branch of this Levantine reform tradition thus lie in the same ground, in the southern suburb that still bears al-Awzāʿī's name.

IV. The Levantine Doctrine: A History Awaiting Revival

All the scholars examined here have fought foreign attempts to impose an illegitimate centralization onto the Levant, even if authors like Rida, under overwhelming circumstances, call for a legitimate defensive centralisation and unicity against imperialism and exogenic centralisation. Al Awza'i and al-Alayli, buried together in the same shrine in Beirut, remind us that the Levant has produced brilliant scholars, relying primarily on justice, reasoning and defiance over erasure. A distinct school of thought emerged in the Levant, particularly in Beirut, challenging the madhhab-establishment backed by centers of power and defending against censorship, not merely through simple contradiction but genuine intellectual innovation and advocacy. This Sunni Levantine school of thought cannot be dissociated from the Levantine context in which it evolved: a pluralistic society, with different communities living alongside each other, leading to overlapping cultural influences and religious dialogue. It comes as no surprise that this atmosphere would inspire a distinct decentralized way of governance and thinking which was at odds with the centralizing impulses of external powers. It forged not only a rich corpus of literature but a genuine method of thinking that spanned centuries and resisted different political upheavals: a tradition embraced by each scholar in turn, though rarely acknowledged as a shared inheritance. Regrettably, their distinct voice finds fewer contemporary heirs in the Levant. Nonetheless, their intellectual contribution to Levantine Sunnism was the very engine of Levantine particularism.

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NOTES

1. « من أخذ بنوادر العلماء خرج من الإسلام » (al-Dhahabī, *Siyar* 7 — a rejection of opinion-shopping and unmoored *ra'y*.)
2. « كان هذا العلم كريماً يتلاقاه الرجال بينهم، فلما دخل في الكتب دخل فيه غير أهله » (via Ibn al-Mubārak / al-Walīd b. Muslim, al-Dhahabī, *Siyar* 7.)
3. « قد كان عبد الله بن علي ملكاً جباراً، سفاكاً للدماء، صعب المراس، ومع هذا فالإمام الأوزاعي يصدّعه بمز الحق كما ترى، لا كخلفي من علماء السوء الذين يُحسنون للأمراء » (al-Dhahabī, *Siyar* 7:125.) « ما يقتحمون به من الظلم والعسف... »
4. al-Dhahabī, *Siyar* 7:124, caliphate-as-inheritance denied. « لو كانت وصية ما ترك عليّ أحدًا يتقدمه » وفي رواية: « ما رضي بالحكمين. »
5. the ruler bound, to al-Manṣūr, al-Dhahabī, *Siyar* 7:125. « أما بعد، فعليك بتقوى الله... واعلم أنّ قرابتك من رسول الله ﷺ لن تزيد حقّ الله عليك إلا عظماً، ولا طاعته إلا وجوباً. »
6. فقال: « ما تقول في دماء بني أمية؟ »... فقلت: « كان لهم عليك عهد. » قال: « فاجعلني وإياهم ولا عهد، ما تقول في دمايتهم؟ » قلت: « حرام، لقول رسول الله ﷺ: al-Dhahabī, *Siyar* 7:123, the *amān*/covenant challenge. « لا يحلّ دم امرئ مسلم إلا بإحدى ثلاث... »

7. Dr. Ameer Zemmali (a former legal adviser and Islamic World Affairs Advisor at the International Committee of the Red Cross) regarding Islamic Law and International Humanitarian Law (IHL).
8. The Khilafah and the Great Imamate, Muhammad Rashid Rida, 1924. «وأما السياسة الاجتماعية المدنية فقد وضع الإسلام أساسها وقواعدها، وشرع للأمة الرأي والاجتهاد فيها؛ لأنها تختلف باختلاف الزمان والمكان، وترتقي بارتقاء العمران.»
9. The Khilafah and the Great Imamate, Muhammad Rashid Rida, 1924. «وإذا أطلقوه كان المراد به العلم الاستقلالي المعتر عنه بالاجتهاد... ولا بد الآن للإمام وجماعة الشورى (أهل الحل والعقد) ... من العلم بالقوانين الدولية والمعاهدات العامة، وبأحوال الأمم والدول المجاورة.»
10. The Khilafah and the Great Imamate, Muhammad Rashid Rida, 1924. *Ūlū al-amr* = the representative consultative body (ahl al-ḥall wa-l-ʿaql), following al-Rāzī, al-Nīsābūrī and “the Master Imam” [ʿAbduh]; cross-referenced to *Tafsīr al-Manār* vol. 5, pp. 180-222: «ويؤيدها تفسير الرازي لأولي الأمر في قوله تعالى: ﴿أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ﴾ (النساء: ٥٩)، فقد حقق أن المراد بأولي الأمر أهل الحل والعقد الذين يمثلون سلطة الأمة، وقد تابعه على هذا النيسابوري واختاره الأستاذ الإمام... بل أهل الشورى من زعماء المسلمين.»
11. The Khilafah and the Great Imamate, Muhammad Rashid Rida, 1924 (§ on where they are found today). «ثم هبَّ الترك والمصريون يطلبون سلطة الأمة بمجالس النواب، وهذه المجالس بمعنى جماعة أهل الحل والعقد في الإسلام، إلا أن الإسلام يشترط فيهم من العلم والفضل ما لا يشترطه الإفريغ ومقلداتهم في هذا العصر.»
12. The Khilafah and the Great Imamate, Muhammad Rashid Rida, 1924. «ومن قواعده فيها أن سلطة الأمة لها، وأمرها شوري بينها، وأن حكومتها ضرب من الجمهورية، وخليفة الرسول فيها لا يمتاز في أحكامها على أضعف أفراد الرعية، وإنما هو منفذ لحكم الشرع ورأي الأمة.»
13. Lauzière, Henri (2016). *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 92.
14. The scholarship splits Rida's shift. The “decline” reading: Albert Hourani (*Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 1962), Malcolm Kerr (*Islamic Reform*, 1966), Elie Kedourie (*Afghani and ʿAbduh*, 1966): Riḍā narrows from ʿAbduh's open modernism into Ḥanbalī scripturalism and points toward the Brotherhood, a genuine fall from liberalism to reaction, its modernist surface concealing an illiberal core. The “continuity / always-ambivalent” reading, Mahmoud Haddad (“Arab Religious Nationalism in the Colonial Era: Rereading Rashīd Riḍā's Ideas on the Caliphate,” *JAOS* 117, 1997): Riḍā's caliphate thought was consistently an anti-colonial religious nationalism searching for a viable independent Muslim center (Ottoman → Sharīfian → Saudi), not a swing from liberal to reactionary. Henri Lauzière (*The Making of Salafism*, 2016): the very category “Salafī turn” is partly a retrospective analytic construction; distinguishing modernist from purist Salafism should stop us treating “Riḍā became a Salafī” as self-evident. Umar Ryad (*Islamic Reformism and Christianity*, 2009) and Simon Wood (*Christian Criticisms, Islamic Proofs*, 2008): the late al-Manār is still making sophisticated modernist arguments, not mere reaction. Ana Belén Soage, Eliezer Tauber, Emad Eldin Shahin (*Through Muslim Eyes*, 1993): a transitional but coherent bridge, not a man broken with himself.
15. *Ayna al-Khaṭaʾ?* (1978). «ليس محافظةً التقليد مع الخطأ، وليس خروجاً التصحيح الذي يُحقق المعرفة.»
16. *Ayna al-Khaṭaʾ?* (1978). «أنا لا أؤمن بالأسوار»
17. «فالقومية يجب أن تكون اجتماعية محضة، أي قائمة على وحدة اللغة ووحدة الوطن ووحدة الزمن في المصلحة حاضراً أو مستقبلاً، ووحدة المثل التي تنبع من المصالح المشتركة» *Dustūr al-ʿArab al-qawmī* (Ṣaydā, 1941).
18. (Qurʾānic allusion). «وَلِلَّهِ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ»
19. *Ayna al-Khaṭaʾ?* (1978); Goodreads transcription, which preserves the book's Qurʾānic anchors: Q 49:13, Q 30:30 (*fiṭra*), Q 7:156, Q 2:256 (*lā ikrāha fī l-dīn*), Q 17:70 (*wa-laqaḍ karramnā banī ʿĀdam*). «وإذا كان الإسلام العملي مصدراً إبداعاً، فقد صوّره الحديث النبوي بما هو أجمع وأكمل: بدأ الإسلام غريباً وسيعود كما بدأ — ولكن لا كما فهمه القدماء بظنهم أن كلمة ﴿غريباً﴾ من الغربة، بل هي من الغربة أي الإدهاش... فالإسلام يحترم الإنسان بذاته، أي من حيث كونه إنساناً... بينما الإسلام يؤمن بالإنسان الشامل ككل.»



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ABOUT CORE GROUP

Core Group is a Beirut-based strategic foresight house. We produce decision-ready analysis and advisory for governments, diplomatic institutions, and strategic investors navigating Middle Eastern complexity. Our work integrates structured analytical products, applied strategic advisory, and analysis-informed mediation; delivered on daily and weekly cycles calibrated to the speed at which the situation changes.

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