

Fahs. Hani, *Mādī lā yamḍī*. Damascus: Dār al-Madā lil-Thaqāfah wa-al-Nashr, 2008 (pp. 216-222). Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.¹

Al-Wasatiyyah: as Memory and Conduct

I lived in the Najaf and al-Hawza for nine years, where I was drawn to Modernism and the people who espoused it, most of whom were rejected in al-Hawza. Nevertheless, I did not sever my ties with tradition, and I remained friends with some of its most prominent symbols, whom I admired and who admired me in return. They trusted me, but at times opposed me and openly criticised my associations, my intellectual activities, and my political interests: from Guevara to Surrealism, to Adonis and Kafka...etc. I was not fanatical about any of the scholars of the Najaf. I had one disagreement that ended in an understanding and cordiality with some of the sons of my favourite religious authority: Sayyid Muhsin al-Hakim, whose famous son Sayyid ‘abd al-Sahib was my teacher, and whose prominent relative Sayyid Muhammad Taqi was my teacher and my spiritual father, and whose sons were like brothers to me.

With this attitude of *wasatiyya* (moderation), which accompanied me to the Najaf and was reinforced in al-Hawza - where it overcame great obstacles that came about from grave mistakes - I returned to my country, my village and my mosque, my people, my discourse and my relations haunted by an over concern similar to that which haunted Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who was able to reconcile his Shiism with his Sunnism, his modernism with his traditionalism, [216] his Iranian identity with his Afghan identity, and whose Islam was open to Christianity, which made him a teacher for some of the most prominent Christian figures, especially in Egypt.

I have written a lengthy study about al-Afghani - I believe it is the best work I have ever written – in which I explored his relationship with the Ottoman state in various aspects, and his uncertainties which drove him to develop a profound connection with Sultan Abdul Hamid whom he loved, but with whom he ended up falling out with due to those very uncertainties. Just as a principled scholar clashes with the thought mechanism of a pragmatic ruler, I found in al-Afghani’s *wasatiyyah* an example to follow. I found my objective in Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin; the religious authority of the Shia in the Levant, who became the religious, intellectual and political guide for the people of Damascus, without distinction between their sects, parties and classes, even

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² Al-Wasatiyyah (Moderation) is a concept in Muslim theology. [Translator’s note]

though the number of Shiites until his death in 1952 did not exceed 3000 people.

I returned from the Najaf with the hope that committed religious young men would be organised in an inclusive non-party group, for fear of the fanaticism which could be divisive and fatal. This was similar to al-Afghani's ambition, which, in his case, led him to join the Masonic Lodge in Cairo, before the great revelations in the history of Masonry (such as its connections to Zionism) were made. When al-Afghani discovered the real essence of masonry, which was different from its outward image, he gave a speech in the masonic congregation condemning the English occupation. The speech made all other members turn against him. As a result, al-Afghani withdrew, deriding the fact that the congregation would be confined to being a charitable organisation that refused political thought and discourse.

The movement of tobacco famers enabled me to realise the contradictions of the leftist parties in Lebanon. Thus, I was no longer drawn to their model. Where was I to go then? At the time, Palestine was urgently sending out its calls for help after the *Naksa* (June 1967 War). [217]

We had to get involved in something in order to alleviate the feelings of defeat; a defeat which seemed to be only acknowledged by us. Arab regime and the Arab liberation movement bypassed it and dealt with it as if it were a victory – perhaps on each other! They were like lazy students who, to satisfy their idleness and justify it, would look for whoever scored even less than them on a school exam. I heard the calling in Najaf, and I responded according to my ability and paid the price. Then I returned to Lebanon as if I were going to Palestine. This felt so especially because the new progressive national coup of 1968 seemed to be punishing us for having a different view on Palestine from the one it advocated. To us Palestine was an end, whereas to the coup's leaders it was a means and a pretext. I found Palestine behind me in the mosque, and in front of me in al-Husainiyyah, and on my right in the literary forum, and on my left in my house before my books and notebooks. Therefore, I undisputedly chose Palestine and rearranged most of my life and preoccupations around that choice, without, however, joining a party. It was as if non-partisanship was in my genes. I found in *Fatah* [the Palestinian National Liberation movement] a solution, and met no objection. Everyone around me were waiting for Palestine. Their only fear was that of the temptations of life and politics on rebels. My village and my sect stood behind the resistance movement, especially with *Fatah*; Imam Musa al-Sadr hurried up in reinforcing the profound links with Palestinians by reading the heritage of Jabal 'Amil in Lebanon and its organic and principled relationship

with the Galilee in Palestine. In this sense, I was not against the mainstream views in my context as had been often claimed. I did not arrive at my choice, however, through sectarianism. Instead, my own Shiism, Islamism, Arabism, Lebanonism and humanity were the determinants that shaped my path and choice.

What made me even more comfortable about my non-binding association with *Fatah* was that I was not expected to disown any part of my ideological make up. In addition, circulated political and organizational notes [218] were not obligatory. We very rarely got them and when we did, we rarely read them. No punishments were imposed upon any stance or idea, which at times seemed to be a form of freedom and flexibility, while at others was seen as a form of carelessness.

I had always been aware of the importance of this open space, whether in the field of politics, religion, organisation, sect, or interrelationships. Sometime in the early 1990s, I was in a discussion on the negligence of the Orthodox Church of religious holy sites in Jerusalem and the West Bank, to the benefit of Israel. My *Fatah* contender answered me in detail, using numbers and information, stressing the necessity to differentiate between the Arab and Greek Clergy on that issue. As I was generalising, I was taken by his insistence on the importance of differentiation, so I asked him: "Where did you get this detailed information from?" He smiled, his face blushed and he said: "I am an Orthodox myself Sir." That was my friend Nabil Saleh, a tall dark man, whom only after twenty years of friendship did I learn that he was an Orthodox! I also had a friend whom I always proudly identified as my Muslim Turkish friend. But after a few debates with him on Islamic unity, he burst out and said: "You have puzzled me and worn me out Sir. Sometimes I leave a meeting convinced that you are a Shiite, and in the following meeting I am certain you are a Sunni! I am afraid you might be a Christian!" I wonder whatever happened to my Turkish friend Salah al-Din Aysh?

I was able to welcome the birth of the Amal Movement or The Movement of the Deprived,³ when it was founded as I knew very well of the conditions that accompanied its foundation and reassured me of its principles. Furthermore, I knew I could intermingle with the Amal Movement without worrying about it negatively impacting my relationship with a number of religious figures who were not on good terms with Imam al-Sadr because their differences with the Imam did not concern me. [219] I did not intermingle more with the Amal Movement, however, due to the Lebanese Civil War which prevented

³ The Movement of the Deprived is how the Amal Movement was known when it was first established. [Translator's note]

Imam al-Sadr from finishing his work of making the movement stand out from the political, sectarian, rightist and leftist formations, especially after he founded the well-known Committee of the Seventy.⁴ The Civil War and the disappearance of the Imam pushed the Amal Movement to its sectarian framework, although it did not neglect the patriotic discourse of Imam al-Sadr, even as the political and public attitude fluctuated between adhering to this discourse and breaking with it.

I was not in any association with a *Fatah* member who would transform the framework of that association into a prison cell. *Fatah* was my non-binding passageway to the Palestinian cause; one which permitted me to disavow the disadvantages and claim to be part of the advantages alone, whether closely or from a distance. This was combined with the usual denial of every inviolable drop of blood, and pride in *halal* (lawful) blood, on which, due to concern and thought, I put more conditions than before, to the extent that I doubted the sanity of transforming the *Intifada* from a civil disobedience to an armed uprising, given that a weapon would eventually drive its owner rather than being driven by its owner. This is my opinion, and those who hold a different opinion are not my enemy. The question is: Would they accept me the way I am? I understand their position. I am a moderate who may reject an idea, without rejecting the person who holds it.

Wasatiyya in 'Ain Trak

The pious and kind father Sheikh Zuhair al-Shawish, insisted once on introducing me to a forum I was invited to in the Club of the Beloved Friends (Bayan) in Beirut. I was honoured when he said:

I used to read the works of Hani Fahs, and I was later surprised to learn that he was a Muslim; then I was surprised to know that he was a Shiite; then surprised by the fact that he was a Sayyid, then that he was a religious scholar; again I was surprised to find out that some of his daughters had the same names as mine. [220] I was surprised to find a religious scholar who talked about his wife and daughters without hesitation.

He then asked me to present a moderate speech, for which I chose a flexible, moderate language which spared the audience - all of whom were moderate Islamists - and my partner in the forum, the moderate member of the Muslim Brotherhood Dr Issam al-Aryan, any embarrassment and annoyance that may

⁴ The Committee of the 70 was composed at the start of the Lebanese Civil War of seventy prominent figures of various sects to play an active consulting role in the Amal movement and the Supreme Shiite Council. [Translator's note]

be caused by my speech, which was an introduction to a rich discussion on the basis of my opposition to the proposal of an Islamic or a religious state in general.

My *wasatiyyah* accompanied me throughout my life and was manifested in all my discussions. Whenever I forgot it and became fanatical, I felt that I was contradicting myself, and as a result of my fanaticism big losses ensued, leaving me in a state of regret. I was a moderate, or at least tried to be so with everyone. I failed, however, in my quest of being a moderate when it came to the Shah's Iran and Saddam's Iraq, although my relationship with the original *Ba'athists* was founded on considerable cordiality and respect, unlike my relationship with the neo-*Ba'athists* who were blinded by ideology and idol worship. As for Zionism, I was so arrogant that I would not let anyone even try to lecture me about it.

To make the picture complete, I recall that in Paris, during the reign of Khomeini, I enjoyed living with old friends who decided to cut down their expenses in order to be able to finish their studies. Of these I recall people like Suhail al-Zayn, Su'ud al-Mawla and Talal Tu'ma. Talal used to keep me warm during the cold Paris winter with his beautiful voice when he performed songs by Sheikh Imam. This is how we used to cross the long distance between the bus stop and his small room in Antony. [221] Talal's heart was as big as his laughter; he used to joke all the time. One morning, as I drank tea, I found out that Talal was Sunni and not Shia as I had originally thought. Neither of us regretted anything; because even before we knew each other's sects, we had only said good things about all sects and their followers.

This *wasatiyyah* and tolerance led me as I followed my mind, heart, faith and memory, to go to the funeral of the brother of my friend Kamal Risha, son of Zaher Risha, in Jdabra. I entered the church and I was pleased that the priest paused his recital to welcome me by name. I stood with the family, reciting prayers with them without any hesitation or feelings of awkwardness. Kamal wrote about this uninsulated incident in my life. I owe the beauty of this incident and other similar ones to my Abrahamic faith and monotheism, and to the societal culture, shaped and endorsed by Lebanese Pluralism, which needed it as a guarantee and protection against probable disintegration during the country's bloody interludes. [222]