

# Scholars, Chroniclers, and Jerusalem Archivists

A History of the Khalidis



By Tarif Khalidi



he history of families is a notoriously difficult subject. In the Arabic-Islamic world, in particular, the attachment to genealogy has been so deep that it has overcome the strictures of the Qur'an and

Prophetic Hadith. In numerous Arab homes from Morocco to Iraq, one will find a prominently displayed family tree that allegedly traces descent from some eponymous hero of the Golden Age. But why is the subject notoriously difficult? Because the stronger a family's attachment to a time and a place, the more determined it is to construct and, by constructing, to invent a history of belonging. The family tree is, of course, the most common way to display such belonging, but it can in no way be regarded as certain proof of lineage unless each branch of that tree and each bird on that branch are attested elsewhere in histories, biographies, or court documents. The tree by itself is no proof. This must be posited as a caveat before we begin this step-by-step sketch of the Khalidi family history.

The Khalidis assert that they are descendants of Khalid ibn al-Walid, a towering conqueror of early Islam, a Meccan aristocrat, and an eleventh-hour Muslim who retained in many of his character traits something of the rebelliousness of the pre-Islamic period, its attachment to freedom, its epic spirit. Did he die childless, as many early and modern accounts claim? Well, not quite. Al-Qaysarani al-Khalidi, a poet from Aleppo who died in 1153, traced his ancestry back to Khalid. This is mentioned in a famous biographical dictionary of the thirteenth century. All we can say at this point is that the claim to descent from Khalid was alive and well in the twelfth century.

What is the earliest attested mention of someone called al-Khalidi in Jerusalem? It occurs in a manuscript on jurisprudence in the Khalidiyya

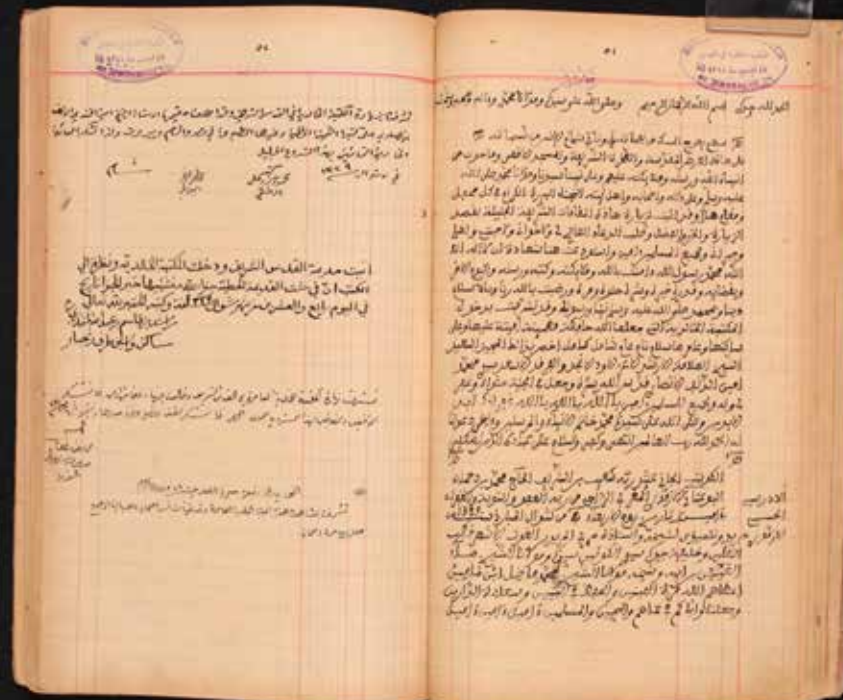
Library (no. 963 in the catalogue) written by a certain Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Rahman ibn `Abd al-`Aziz al-Khalidi who, as we can deduce from internal evidence, lived in the mid-eleventh century, and most probably before the Crusader occupation of the city in 1099. We know that this occupation caused a mass exodus from Jerusalem, scattering its families in all directions. A family tradition has it that the Khalidis sought refuge in the village of Dayr `Uthman, in the province of Nablus and returned to Jerusalem after Saladin recaptured the city on October 2, 1187. When they came back, they were known as Dayris or Dayri/Khalidis, but this remains a mere possibility because it is unattested in the sources.

The third stage in the premodern period is best attested in the

sources, and its members may be put forth confidently as the direct ancestors of the modern family. The series begins with Shams al-Din Muhammad ibn `Abdullah al-`Absi al-Dayri al-Maqdisi who was born in Jerusalem around 1343 and died there on November 2, 1424. His father was a merchant, originally from a Nablus district called al-Dayr. Encouraged by his father, Muhammad studied in Jerusalem, Damascus, and Cairo and then became a Hanafite mufti of Jerusalem and a distinguished scholar and teacher.

Two of Muhammad's five sons achieved the same renown as their father: Sa`d al-Din Sa`d who was born in Jerusalem in 1367 and died in Cairo in 1463 and succeeded his father both as chief judge of the empire and as rector

Arabic manuscript.





*S. Sarawani*  
Photographer  
JAFFA  
Palestine

■ Hajj Raghib Khalidi, founder of the library, here photographed later in his life as judge.

of the Khaniqah. The second son, Burhan al-Din Ibrahim, was born in Jerusalem in 1407 and died in Cairo in 1471. This father and two sons were the first in a long line of notables in a scholarly Jerusalem dynasty that has remained unbroken and well attested in the biographical dictionaries and court records until the present day. Their lineage back to the Khalidis of the eleventh century is unattested, but their connection with the long line of judges, muftis, and scholars who followed is richly documented. Many of these descendants had careers in both Cairo and Jerusalem, and when the Ottomans replaced the Mamluks as overlords of Syria and Egypt, the

Dayris continued to fulfill the same functions both in Jerusalem and elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire.

It is almost certain that the Dayris became Dayri-Khalidis in the mid-seventeenth century, at a time when many families of notables throughout the Arab world stretched their lineages back to distinguished ancestors. The reasons are not entirely clear but may have been related to a surge of Arab proto-national sentiments among these city notables that need further investigation, feelings that in any case were never entirely absent from consciousness and explain the later appeal of Arab nationalism.

From the sixteenth until the eighteenth century, the family supplied all rectors of the Madrasa Farisiyya in Jerusalem, appointed by an edict issued by the sultan in Istanbul. They also seem to have monopolized the offices of chief clerk of the Shari`a Court in Jerusalem and deputy judge of the city right until the end of the nineteenth century. The family was Ottoman in sentiment until the very end of Ottoman rule in 1917.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were particularly rich in prominent sons and daughters of the family, now numbering perhaps a few hundred. Among them, two women played crucial roles, the first in establishing the core collection of manuscripts (MSS) and the second in housing that collection in the Mamluk mausoleum, the site of the Khalidi Library since 1900: Tarafanda Khanum joined her husband, Muhammad Sun`allah, in establishing around 260 MSS as a pious endowment or waqf, dated February 4, 1787. About a hundred years later, Khadijah Khanum left a considerable sum of money in her will to refurbish the mausoleum and house its collection, a task accomplished by her son, Hajj Raghib, in 1900.

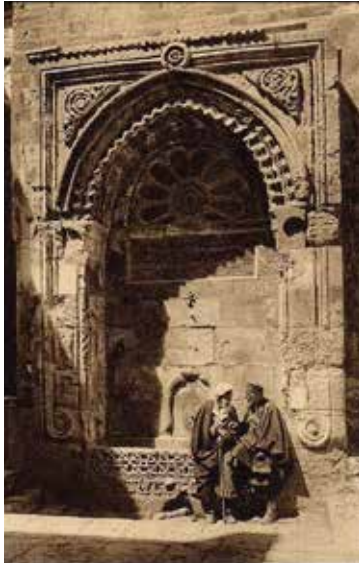
Scholars do not generally lead “exciting” lives. Hence, in selecting to highlight the following four nineteenth-century biographies, I chose

judges, jurists, and scholars whose lives impacted the political life of their age.

The first was Musa Shafiq (d. 1831), grandson of Sun`allah mentioned above. Musa Shafiq rose in the judiciary ranks of the Ottoman Empire until he became Judge of Medina, a prestigious appointment, given the city’s sanctity in Muslim culture. He then became Kaziasker, a chief military judge of Anatolia and the second-highest judiciary post in the empire, and ex officio member of the Imperial Council. On July 17, 1798, he addressed an open letter to the notables of Palestine, informing them of the fall of Alexandria to Napoleon and warning them that the ultimate goal of those “accursed French” was the conquest of Jerusalem. Musa Shafiq must, of course, have seen Napoleon’s expedition as a latter-day crusade. Exactly one hundred years later, other Khalidis publicly warned of the dangers of Zionism.



■ A page from one of the rarest and oldest Khalidiyya manuscripts, depicting the battle of Hittin and celebrating Salahuddin Ayyoubi’s victory over the Crusaders.



■ Bab al-Silsila.

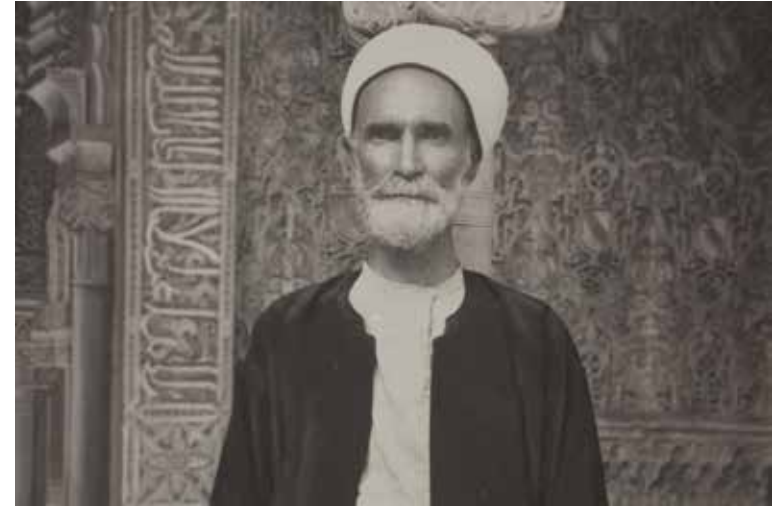
Musa Shafiq's other intervention in politics came 28 years later when as Kaziasker of Anatolia he issued a legal opinion (*fatwa*) which permitted the Sultan Mahmud II to abolish the Janissary Corps and form a modern army in 1826.

■ The original tombstone of one of the fourteenth-century Mamluk princes buried in the library courtyard.



The second Khalidi in this list is Muhammad-`Ali (d. 1864), a nephew of Musa Shafiq, who succeeded his father as chief clerk of the Shari`a Court and deputy judge of Jerusalem. During the Russian-Ottoman war of 1828–29, an edict arrived from Istanbul ordering the execution of the Greek Orthodox patriarch and his clergy. Relations between the family and the Christian communities had always been cordial, so, at a great risk to himself, Muhammad-`Ali disobeyed the imperial order and hid the patriarch and his clergy in a cave near the Bab al-`Amud (Gate of the Column, also known as Damascus Gate). When the war ended, everyone applauded his action. In appreciation, a large portrait in oil still hangs outside the office of the patriarch of Jerusalem.

The third is Yusuf Dia Pasha Khalidi (d. 1906), son of Muhammad-`Ali. He was probably the first in the family to receive both a traditional Islamic and a European education. Joining the Ottoman civil service, he rose to become governor of Anatolian Kurdistan (*qaimaqam* of a



■ The scholar, chronicler, and traveler Sheikh Khalil Khalidi.

*qada* in the Bitlis region, and later of other *qadas*), where he composed the very first Kurdish-Arabic dictionary. He was the first mayor of Jerusalem (1867–1873) and the deputy for Jerusalem in the first Ottoman Parliament (1876–1878). Yusuf Dia was a reformer and constitutionalist and a friend of the celebrated Muslim reformer Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. He also taught for some years as a lecturer at the University of Vienna, where he edited the *Diwan* by Labid, a major pre-Islamic poet. His correspondence with Theodor Herzl and his warnings against Zionist colonization in Palestine are well-known to modern historians of Palestine.

The fourth Khalidi in this list is Ruhi (1864–1913), a nephew of Yusuf Dia and in many ways his disciple. Like his uncle, he received his elementary religious education in Jerusalem and supplemented this with a more “modern” education; he studied in Tripoli, Beirut, and finally at the prestigious Sultani College (Mekteb

Sultani) in Istanbul. Having graduated with flying colors, he immediately was offered judicial posts in Palestine – which he adamantly refused, insisting against strong parental objections (especially those of his doting mother) on completing his education in Europe. So he finally ended up in what was to become Sciences Po (the Paris Institute of Political Studies) where as an impoverished student, he studied European history and international relations. Ruhi was also active in Orientalist circles, and his critique of Orientalist discourse in several of his writings is arguably among the earliest attempts by an Arab writer to come to grips with the Orientalists. He was appointed consul general of the Ottoman Empire in Bordeaux (1898–1908), returned to Jerusalem after the 1908 Revolution, was elected deputy for Jerusalem in the Ottoman Parliament, and eventually became its deputy speaker.

Ruhi was a prolific author on an astonishingly wide spectrum of

topics: comparative literature, international relations, history, chemistry, linguistics, and the geography and ethnography of the Muslim world. His work entitled *Zionism* is the first field study of Zionist colonization in Palestine. His collected works, presently (2021) being edited, will help establish him as a leading light of the Arab *Nahda*, or Awakening, of the nineteenth century.

century. These yearbooks provide social, economic, and agricultural information about the provinces, including the names of Ottoman officials.

eighteenth- to nineteenth-century Ottoman era for visiting scholars. All these buildings are part of the Khalidi family endowment (*waqf dhurri*) in the Old City.

After 1967, *Al-Khalidiyya*, like so many other Arab/Muslim properties, was threatened with confiscation by the Israeli authorities and surrounding settlers. The prolonged and relentless attempts to take it over continued for many years but were resisted strenuously by local family members and other family members in the diaspora.

For more information on *Al-Khalidiyya*, please visit [www.khalidilibrary.org/en](http://www.khalidilibrary.org/en).

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■ Khalidi Library façade. Photo courtesy of Jack Persekian.

### The Khalidi Library

The Khalidi Library (*Al-Khalidiyya*), established in Jerusalem in 1900 by Haj Raghīb al-Khalidi (d. 1951), is the first Arab public library established by a private initiative in Palestine. It is located in the Old City of Jerusalem on Tariq (Street) Bab al-Silsilah, around 150 yards away from Bab al-Silsilah, one of the main gates to Al-Haram al-Sharif. *Al-Khalidiyya* contains the largest private collection of Arabic manuscripts in Palestine and one of the world's largest such collections.

The *Khalidiyya* MS holdings consist of approximately 1,200 titles, the oldest of which is about 1,000 years old, whereas its printed collection includes around 5,500 volumes of mostly of nineteenth-century vintage books. In addition, there is a massive archival corpus of family papers going back to the early eighteenth century.

The library also contains the annual yearbooks from the Ottoman Empire provinces (known as *Salname*) that were published in the last half of the nineteenth and early twentieth

The *Khalidiyya* is a complex of three buildings on both sides of Tariq Bab al-Silsilah. Its principal building is a thirteenth-century Mamluk building – the second-oldest Mamluk building in Jerusalem – that contains a *mihrab* (prayer niche) and the remains of Khawarizmian emir warriors who in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries participated in the recovery of Jerusalem from the Crusaders. In addition, it has a fifteenth-century Mamluk annex that contains the library's printed holdings and quarters from the



■ Exhibition about the Khalidi Library. Photo by Aline Khoury.