

A DEEP INSIGHT INTO ZAHID AL-KAWTHARI AND HIS SCHOLARLY ACTIVITY

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Abstract

This article explores the life and scholarly contributions of Zahid al-Kawthari, a prominent figure of Islamic scholarship in the last century. A significant portion of al-Kawthari's intellectual legacy is dedicated to writing refutations against the rising trend of anti-madhab (non-school-based) ideologies that were gradually spreading in certain regions during his time. In addition to this, the scholar was also actively engaged in various other branches of Islamic sciences, leaving a lasting impact through his multifaceted academic work.

Keywords: Düzce, Hasan Hilmi, Rushdiyya, Hojihasan, Hashawiyya.

Introduction

Muhammad Zahid al-Kawthari was born on September 16, 1879, in the village of Hojihasan, Düzce Province, Turkey. His family belonged to Circassian origin. His father, Hasan Hilmi Efendi, was born in Shabzar, in the Caucasus, in 1831 and worked as a teacher (mudarris). In 1863, following the occupation of the Caucasus by the Russian Empire, he migrated with his family and students to Düzce Province, where they settled in the village later named Hojihasan after him.

There, he pledged allegiance to Shaykh Dawlat, one of the deputies (khalifas) of the Naqshbandiyya order, and in 1865 he himself attained the rank of khalifa. Beginning in 1867, he started teaching in the madrasa of Hojihasan village. In 1870, he traveled to Istanbul, where he attended the lessons of Ahmad Ziyā'uddīn al-Kumushkhānawī and received an ijaza (authorization) from him in the study of the work *Dalā'il al-Khayrāt*. The following year, he journeyed to the Hijaz, where he met Musa Makki, a Naqshbandi shaykh, and was granted an ijaza of succession (khilāfa) from him.

Upon returning to Düzce, Hasan Hilmi Efendi continued teaching in the madrasa until his death in 1926, at nearly one hundred years old.

METHODS

In the process of presenting this research and in shaping its methodological foundation and conceptual framework, modern historical research methods were adopted as the primary criteria. In particular, the principles of gradual development (tadrijiyya) and scientific substantiation were followed in the scholarly approach to historical phenomena. These principles not only ensured the academic reliability of the study but also served as an important tool in establishing the logical sequence of historical processes.

Throughout the research, a wide range of written sources from different periods as well as previously published academic literature were utilized. In examining and introducing these materials into scientific discourse, their role in the historical context, thematic direction, and



scholarly value were deeply analyzed and systematized. As a result, generalized conclusions were drawn on the basis of available data, and new scholarly perspectives on the research topic were proposed.

This approach not only secured the methodological rigor of the study but also contributed to comprehensively illuminating the historical events under investigation through their complex analysis.

RESULTS

Among Uzbek researchers, approaches to the scholarly legacy of Muhammad Zahid al-Kawthari are primarily aimed at identifying his place within Islamic intellectual heritage, highlighting his loyalty to the Hanafi-Maturidi school of thought, and evaluating religious and cultural heritage as a methodological foundation for contemporary Uzbek society. In particular, in publications such as *"The Role of Religious and Spiritual Heritage in the Development of New Uzbekistan"*, his scholarly views, his contribution to preserving madhhab stability, and his writings during the period of decline in Islamic sciences have been the focus of attention.

Research has examined in detail the main directions of al-Kawthari's works, including theological consolidation, the method of refutation, rigorous scholarly debates against innovations (bid'a), and detailed juridical (fiqh) commentaries. Through these approaches, he is interpreted not only as a historical figure but also as a scholar who laid the methodological foundations of modern Muslim social thought.

In national information platforms such as *Muslim.uz*, *Oliymahad.uz*, and *Aniq.uz*, articles have been published about al-Kawthari's life, his scholarly journeys, and the hardships he endured due to political persecution and exile.

Such research on Muhammad Zahid al-Kawthari, along with its content and methodological analysis, demonstrates that he was not merely a historical jurist, but a mujaddid (reviver) who provided academically grounded responses to the religious disputes of his time and devotedly served the renewal of Islamic thought. Studies on his life, scholarly stance, and works should be valued not only for historical knowledge but also as a necessary academic source in today's religious studies, particularly in ensuring doctrinal stability and theological clarity.

DISCUSSION

According to Shaykh Abu Ghudda, Zahid al-Kawthari once narrowly escaped death in his youth. In 1336 AH (1918 CE), while intending to return from Kastamonu to Istanbul, heavy snowfall forced him to travel by sea instead of land. He reached Ereğli (Konya Province), transferred to another ship, and sailed towards the port of Akçakoca (in northwestern Turkey, near Düzce). As the ship neared Akçakoca's shore, strong waves overturned the vessel. The scholar, along with his books, fell into the water. Two young men on the shore witnessed the event and rushed to help, throwing ropes and rescuing the drowning passengers. Among them was Zahid al-Kawthari, who was unconscious. It took several days for him to recover.

Shaykh Abu Ghudda reports that Imam al-Kawthari deeply grieved the loss of his books, which included manuscripts dating back to the 6th–7th centuries AH. These sources were always carried with him during his scholarly travels. Among them were a manuscript by Ibn Hajar al-Haytami on the virtues of Imam Abu Hanifa, an annotated copy of *al-'Aqida al-Tahawiyya*, and



a beautifully handwritten version transcribed by the renowned scholar Ibn al-‘Adim. Many other rare manuscripts and valuable items were also lost in the sea.

Imam al-Kawthari studied fiqh under his father, as well as under the muhaddith Ibrahim Haqqi (d. 1345 AH) and Shaykh Zayn al-‘Abidin al-‘Alsunī (d. 1336 AH). His father had received fiqh knowledge from the muhaddith Ahmad Diyā’uddīn al-Kumushkhānawī al-Naqshbandī (d. 1311 AH), and from the compiler of *Ramūz al-Aḥādīth*. This chain of transmission traces back to the Tābi‘īn al-Qama ibn Qays and Abu Rahman ibn al-Aswad, to the Companion Abdullah ibn Mas‘ud, and through al-Sulami to Ali ibn Abi Talib.

Zahid al-Kawthari also received his first education from his father. Later, he studied at the Rushdiyya school in Düzce under Mufti Husayn Wajih Efendi. In 1893, he traveled to Istanbul, where he studied at the Dār al-Hadith Madrasa under Qadiasker Hasan Efendi. He actively participated in numerous scholarly gatherings held in madrasas and in the Fatih Mosque. According to al-Kawthari himself, the greatest influence on the formation of his scholarly views came from Ali Zayn al-‘Abidin Efendi and Ibrahim Haqqi Efendi. He studied in Istanbul for ten years, graduated in 1904, and was awarded the title of *darsi‘am* in 1906.

During his teaching career at the Fatih Mosque, al-Kawthari was appointed as a member of a commission tasked with reforming the madrasa system. He also served for three years in a newly established madrasa in Kastamonu. After World War I, he was appointed as a professor at the *Madrasa al-Mutakhassisīn* in Sulaymaniye. In 1919, he was promoted to the office of *dars waqālati* (deputy of Shaykh al-Islam), but was later dismissed from this position.

Throughout his life, Zahid al-Kawthari remained in opposition to the state, politics, and ideologues associated with the Committee of Union and Progress (Ittihad wa Taraqqi). In 1922, upon hearing that he was sentenced to imprisonment, he fled to Egypt. He first arrived in Alexandria, then moved to Cairo. From Alexandria he traveled to Beirut, and then to Damascus, where he conducted research on manuscripts at the famous Dār al-Kutub al-Zāhiriyya library. In 1926, he returned to Cairo and resided in the *Taqiyyat al-Atrak Abu al-Zahab* lodge, where Turkish students studying at al-Azhar lived. In 1928, he traveled once again to Damascus in pursuit of scholarly endeavors, but finding no suitable scholarly circle there, he returned to Cairo the following year. In Cairo, he obtained ijāzas in Islamic sciences from notable scholars such as al-Dijwī, Muhammad ibn Ja‘far al-Kattānī, and Ahmad Rafī‘ al-Tahtawī.

Despite lacking any source of income and facing material hardships, he refused the assistance that was offered to him. He successfully passed the examination held by the Dor al-Muhafazat al-Misriyya office for the translation of Turkish documents into Arabic and began working with a salary. In the meantime, he brought his family from Istanbul. While still in Istanbul, his son and one daughter had passed away, so his wife and two daughters came with him to Cairo. Among his daughters, Saniha died in Cairo in 1934, and Maliha in 1947.

While living in Cairo, al-Kawtharī turned his home into a madrasa, training students on the one hand, and on the other hand, he engaged in the scholarly publication of numerous works on Islamic sciences. He granted ijāzas (licenses) mainly to students coming from Egypt, Yemen, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. Among his disciples were ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Kutubī al-Miṣrī, Aḥmad Awang Ḥusayn, Jamāl Oğut from Alasonya, ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, Aḥmad Khayrī Pasha, Muḥammad Rashād ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Abū al-Faḍl ibn Ṣiddīq, ‘Alī ‘Ulwī Kurujū, Meḥmed İhsān Efendi, Muṣṭafā Runyun, and Muḥammad Ḥusayn.



During this period, because of his opposition to the reformist movements in Egypt, there were attempts to expel him from the country; however, he was saved through the intervention of Shaykh 'Abd al-Majīd Sindunī and the Shaykh of al-Azhar, Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Razzāq, who for a time had also been Minister of Awqāf. Through his academic activities and publications, al-Kawtharī gained great prestige and attained a distinguished status among the scholars of Egypt. Through his students at al-Azhar, he established connections with scholars in India and Pakistan, thereby creating a wide scholarly network. With the rise of the Democratic Party to power in 1950, he hoped to return to Turkey, but he became preoccupied with various illnesses.

Zāhid al-Kawtharī began his career as a professor at the Fātiḥ Mosque and was appointed to a commission formed to improve madrasas. Although he opposed the Committee of Union and Progress, he enabled new decisions to be made regarding education. In 1913, he passed the Istanbul professorship examination. Although he successfully passed the examination for a teaching post in fiqh at the Dār al-Funūn, his appointment was blocked by the Unionists, and instead, he was tasked with organizing a newly established madrasa in Kastamonu. He remained there for three years, and on his way back to Istanbul by sea, he survived a near-death experience when his boat capsized. After World War I, he taught for a month at Dār al-Shafaqa and was then appointed as a professor at the Medreset al-Mutaḥassishīn in Süleymaniye. During this time, he became a member of the "Majlis" and was elected as a representative of the Süleymaniye madrasa. On August 15, 1919, he was appointed deputy to the Shaykh al-Islām, tasked with delivering official lectures.

A short time later, he opposed the demolition of a madrasa built by Sultan Mustafa, which was carried out by a society led by Minister Aḥmad Tawfīq Pasha, and because of his connection with these madrasas and his lawsuit against the demolition, he was dismissed from his teaching duties.

Throughout his life, Zāhid al-Kawtharī opposed the state, politics, and the intellectuals affiliated with the Committee of Union and Progress. At the end of 1922, after a friend warned him in the street that an arrest warrant had been issued against him, he secretly left within a few days, heading first to Alexandria and then by sea to Egypt without informing even his family. From Alexandria, he traveled to Beirut, and from there to Damascus (1923). In Damascus, he studied the manuscripts in the Dār al-Kutub al-Zāhiriyya. In 1926, he returned to Cairo and settled in the lodge called Tekiyyat al-Atrāk Ebū al-Zahab, where Turkish students studying at al-Azhar resided. In 1928, he traveled once more to Damascus for scholarly purposes, but, finding the environment unsuitable, he returned to Cairo the following year. His wife and two daughters joined him in Cairo, as his son and another daughter had died while he was in Istanbul. One of his daughters, Saniha, died in Cairo in 1934, and Meliha in 1947.

In the field of ḥadīth, Zāhid al-Kawtharī studied nearly twenty works under his teachers and received the right of transmission (ijāza). His works, *Ta'nīb al-Khaṭīb* and *al-Nukat al-Ṭarīfa*, written in response to criticisms against Abū Ḥanīfa's understanding of ḥadīth, created significant controversy, prompting rebuttals, to which he sometimes responded.

Despite such hardships and hunger, al-Kawtharī continued to devote himself to the sciences of manuscripts. To forget the pangs of hunger, he would set out in the morning for the Zāhiriyya library, stay there until evening, then return home at night in the same state, spending his nights immersed in study. On one such day, he received money through the post from a friend who had



returned to Turkey to earn a living. He often recalled these difficult days of his scholarly pursuit and would tell his students about them.

When his friends urged him to move to the Levant, praising its favorable climate, he replied that the intellectual environment of Cairo was more valuable to him, and thus he chose to remain there. He remained committed to the pursuit of knowledge in Cairo until the end of his life. While defending Ḥanafī scholars against various criticisms, he also highlighted their biographies in his books and articles. For example, he wrote biographical accounts of two Ḥanafī imams, Ḥasan ibn Ziyād and Muḥammad ibn Shujā'. The main motivation for writing his book *Imtinā' bi-Sīrat al-Imāmayn Ḥasan ibn Ziyād wa Muḥammad ibn Shujā'* was to defend these two great Ḥanafī scholars against accusations mentioned in *Tārīkh al-Khaṭīb* and *Lisān Ibn Ḥajar*, demonstrating that they were free of such disparagements. In his work *Husn al-Taḳāḍī fī Sīrat al-Imām Abī Yūsuf*, al-Kawtharī states: "Abū Ḥafṣ al-Kabīr and Abū Sulaymān al-Jūzjānī are considered foundational in the transmission of the works of Imām Muḥammad."

Conclusion

Zahid al-Kawtharī, as one of the prominent scholars of his time, distinguished himself not only by his rich scholarly legacy but also by his contributions to religious and spiritual renewal. It is not without reason that scholars acknowledged him as a *mujaddid* (religious renewer). This recognition is directly related to the very essence of the concept of *tajdīd* (renewal). In Islamic thought, *tajdīd* encompasses the task of re-examining religious life on the basis of its original sources, resolving misunderstandings that arose under the influence of historical processes, and presenting faith in its original, pure, and unaltered form.

These very principles occupy a central place in the activities of the great scholar. He authored significant works in the fields of Islamic creed (*ʿaqīda*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and hadith, striving to reinterpret traditional religious knowledge in the context of his contemporary environment. In particular, his efforts to implement the Sunnah into daily life, to live in accordance with it, and to establish an Islamic lifestyle free from innovations (*bidʿa*) were among the main factors confirming his status as a *mujaddid*.

Thus, Zahid al-Kawtharī's scholarly and intellectual legacy remains highly significant even today. His works serve not only as historical sources but also as essential methodological foundations for awakening religious consciousness, reviving Islamic thought, and restoring pure doctrinal values in contemporary Muslim societies. Indeed, *tajdīd* is not about inventing something new but about persistently reviving the original truth through scholarly and spiritual endeavor. Zahid al-Kawtharī, as a steadfast and accomplished representative of this path, has left a worthy mark in history as a great scholar.

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