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FUNCTION OF HADITH IN POLITICS: ANALYSING YŪSUF AL-NABHĀNĪ'S *FORTY HADITHS ON THE OBLIGATION TO OBEY THE RULER*

Salahudheen Kozhithodi,¹ Arshad Korangattil²

ABSTRACT

This study examines the political theology of Ḥadīth in the writings of the Palestinian-Ottoman scholar Yūsuf al-Nabhānī (1849–1932), focusing on his tract *al-Aḥādīth al-Arbaʿīn fī Wujūb Ṭāʿat Amīr al-Muʿminīn* (Forty Hadiths on the Obligation to Obey the Ruler), composed in 1312/1895. Situated in the political turbulence of the late Ottoman Caliphate, the work reasserts traditional Sunni doctrines of obedience and political unity at a time when reformist, Salafī, and colonial forces threatened both the caliphate and its moral authority. Through a close reading of the collection, this article argues that al-Nabhānī deployed the Prophetic tradition as a medium of political legitimacy, constructing a theological defense of Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd II's rule and the Ottoman Caliphate as divinely sanctioned institutions. His work also represents a religious counter-discourse to modernist reinterpretations of Islam and to secular nationalism advanced by the Young Turks. The analysis reveals how Hadith—beyond its devotional and legal dimensions—functioned as a living source of political thought, moral order, and social cohesion in the late nineteenth-century Muslim world.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between prophetic authority and political power has long occupied a central place in Islamic thought. The Qur’ānic command, “Obey God, the Messenger, and those in authority among you” (Q. 4:59), forms the scriptural cornerstone of Islamic political ethics, while the Hadith corpus elaborates the conditions of legitimate rule, the moral limits of obedience, and the dangers of rebellion. Across Muslim history, scholars and rulers have invoked Hadith not merely as a source of spiritual instruction but as a framework for legitimizing power and preserving social order.

During the late nineteenth century, the Ottoman Caliphate—the last representative of the Islamic caliphate—was beset by crises that tested both its political structure and its religious legitimacy. Reformist and anti-Sufi currents, including Wahhabism and the emerging Salafī trend, challenged the mystical and juristic traditions that had long sustained the Ottoman rule. At the same time, European colonial expansion and nationalist movements threatened the Caliphate’s unity and sovereignty. Within this turbulent landscape, the figure of the Sultan—particularly ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd II (r. 1876–1909)—became the focal point of debates on obedience, legitimacy, and divine authority.

It was in this milieu that Yūsuf al-Nabhānī (1849–1932), a Palestinian-Ottoman jurist, Sufi, and prolific author, sought to defend traditional Sunni orthodoxy and the Ottoman political order through the Prophetic tradition. His tract, *al-Aḥādīth al-Arba‘īn fī Wujūb Ṭā‘at Amīr al-Mu‘minīn*, completed in 1312/1895,³ stands as a remarkable example of how Hadith was mobilized as political theology. Through a carefully curated

³Yūsuf Al-Nabhānī, *Al-Aḥādīth Al-Arba‘īn Fī Wujūb Ṭā‘at Amīr Al-Mu‘minīn*, *Al-Maṭba‘a Al-Adabiyya* (Beirut, 1312H), 14.

selection of reports on obedience, justice, and governance, al-Nabhānī articulated a vision of Muslim unity grounded in loyalty to the Caliph and rooted in the moral authority of the Prophet's words.

This article examines the political function of Hadith in al-Nabhānī's work. By situating his collection within the broader Ottoman intellectual context and the shifting currents of reform and colonialism, it argues that al-Aḥādīth al-Arbaʿīn was more than a compilation of traditions—it was a conscious intervention in the theological and political struggles of his age. Al-Nabhānī's effort to sanctify obedience to the ruler through Prophetic authority reveals the enduring power of Hadith as both a moral discourse and an instrument of legitimacy in late Ottoman Islam.

YŪSUF AL-NABHĀNĪ: LIFE AND CONTEXT

Yūsuf al-Nabhānī was born in 1849 in the village of Ijzim, near Haifa, Palestine, into a respected scholarly family. His father, Ismāʿīl al-Nabhānī, was both his first teacher and a local scholar, from whom he received his early instruction in Qurʾān, Arabic, and religious sciences. Having memorized the Qurʾān at a young age, he traveled to Cairo in 1283/1866 to pursue advanced studies at al-Azhar, where he remained for several years. There, he studied jurisprudence, theology, Hadith, and Arabic literature under leading scholars, absorbing a traditionalist and Sufi intellectual orientation that would define his career.

After completing his studies, al-Nabhānī returned to Palestine in 1289/1872 and began his service in the Ottoman judiciary, holding appointments in Jerusalem, Beirut, and Mosul. His judicial career placed him at the intersection of law, administration, and religion within a multi-ethnic Caliphate confronting modernizing reforms and colonial intrusion. These experiences exposed him to the ideological challenges of his age—from Christian missionary education to emerging reformist movements in Islam.

A devout Sufi and ardent supporter of Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd II, al-Nabhānī regarded the Ottoman Caliphate as the last bastion of Sunni orthodoxy and Muslim unity. His writings consistently defend the Ḥamīdian regime against European influence and internal reformist agitation. Following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the Sultan’s deposition in 1909, al-Nabhānī was removed from his judicial post in Beirut, likely due to his loyalty to ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd II and opposition to the new secular-nationalist order. He rejected accusations of administrative impropriety in his later work *al-Dalālāt al-Wāḍiḥah: Ḥāshiya Mukhtaṣarah ‘alā Dalā’il al-Khayrāt*, asserting that he had “never issued a judgment contrary to the sharī‘ah or for any personal purpose.” A visionary dream in which his court appeared beside that of Caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb symbolically affirmed his commitment to justice and divine guidance.⁴ After his dismissal, al-Nabhānī devoted himself to writing across multiple genres—Hadith, poetry, theology, and polemics—aiming to preserve traditional Islam amid political and intellectual upheaval until his death in 1932.⁵

MAJOR WORKS AND INTELLECTUAL CONTRIBUTION

Yūsuf al-Nabhānī’s intellectual legacy reflects the synthesis of devotion, politics, and polemics characteristic of late Ottoman religious scholarship. As Ghazal observes, his writings can be classified into three interrelated strands: Prophetic eulogy, political advocacy, and anti-reform polemics. These categories intersect throughout his corpus, revealing a sustained effort to

⁴Yūsuf Al-Nabhānī, *Al-Dalālāt Al-Wāḍiḥah: Ḥāshiya Mukhtaṣarah ‘alā Dalā’il al-Khayrāt* (Makkah al-Mukarramah, 2007), 37–38.

⁵See his biographical details in Abd al-Razzāq Al-Biṭār, *Hilyat Al-Bashar Fī Tārīkh Al-Qarn Al-Thālith ‘Ashar, Dār Al-Šādir*, vol. 3 (Beirut, 1993), 3:1612-16; ‘Umar Ibn Riḍā ibn Muḥammad Rāghib ibn ‘Abd al-Ghanī Kaḥḥālāh, *Mu‘jam Al-Mu‘allifīn, Maṭba‘at Al-Tarāqqī*, vol. 13 (Damascus, 1961), 13:275-76; also see his autobiography Yūsuf Al-Nabhānī, *Hādī Al-Murīd Ilā Ṭuruq Al-Asānīd* (Dār al-Kutub, n.d.), 56–58, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2505515.2507827>.

defend Sunni orthodoxy and Ottoman religious authority against modernist and colonial challenges.⁶

His devotional works, such as *al-Majmū'āt al-Nabhānīyyah fī al-Madā'ih al-Nabawīyyah*, demonstrate his Sufi temperament and literary artistry, blending poetry, rhetoric, and mystical reverence.⁷ In *al-Aḥādīth al-Arba'īn fī Wujūb Tā'at Amīr al-Mu'minīn*, he framed obedience to the ruler as a divinely mandated duty essential for Muslim unity. In *Irshād al-Ḥayārah fī Taḥdhīr al-Muslimīn min Madāris al-Naṣārā*,⁸ he warned against missionary schools and Western cultural penetration, while *Kitāb al-Taḥdhīr min Ittikhādh al-Ṣuwar wa-al-Taṣwīr*, condemned photography and image-making as symptoms of moral decline. Similarly, *Tamyīz al-Ḥaqq min al-Bāṭil idhā Akhadha al-'Ulūm al-Kuffār* attributed the weakening of Islam not to intrinsic deficiency but to Muslims' abandonment of traditional learning.

Al-Nabhānī's anti-reform writings targeted modernist theologians such as al-Afghānī, Muḥammad 'Abduh, and Rashīd Riḍā, whom he accused of undermining classical jurisprudence and Sufi spirituality. Works such as *Ḥujjat Allāh 'alā al-'Ālamīn fī Mu'jizāt Sayyid al-Mursalīn*⁹ and *al-Sihām*

⁶Amal Ghazal, "Sufism, Ijtihad and Modernity: Yusuf Al-Nabhani in the Age of 'Abd Al-Hamid II," *Archivum Ottomanicum* 19 (2001): 244.

⁷Yūsuf Al-Nabhānī, *Al-Majmū'ah al-Nabhānīyah Fī al-Madā'ih al-Nabawīyah, Al-Matba'ah al-Ḥamīdīyah* (Beirut, 1996) Shaykh Yūsuf al-Nabhānī's *al-Majmū'ah al-Nabhānīyah fī al-Madā'ih al-Nabawīyah* is both a collection and a contribution. While Nabhānī composed several original *madā'ih*, he primarily acted as a meticulous compiler, gathering classical and contemporary poetry and prose that praise the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. The anthology spans four volumes, each organized thematically: virtues and moral excellence, prophetic miracles, historical incidents, and devotional reflections. It includes celebrated poems such as the eulogies of al-Būṣṭrī (al-Burda) and the works of Ibn Hajar al-Haytamī, alongside Nabhānī's own compositions. This dual role as author and curator underscores his devotion and literary vision, preserving centuries of Islamic praise literature.

⁸Yūsuf Al-Nabhānī, *Irshād al-Ḥayārah Fī Taḥdhīr al-Muslimīn Min Madāris al-Naṣārā, Al-Matba'ah al-Ḥamīdīyah* (Cairo, 1904).

⁹Yūsuf Al-Nabhānī, *Ḥujjat Allāh 'alā al-'Ālamīn Fī Mu'jizāt Sayyid al-Mursalīn, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah* (Beirut, 1996).

*al-Sā'ibah li-Aṣḥāb al-Da'āwā al-Kādhībah*¹⁰ reject unrestricted ijtihād, defending inherited scholarly consensus. His polemical poem *al-Ra'īyah al-Ṣughrā fī Dhamm al-Bid'ah wa-Madh al-Sunnah al-Ghurrā* castigates Wahhabi and Salafi tendencies, reaffirming attachment to Sufi orthodoxy and prophetic tradition.

From a Hadith and Sīrah perspective, al-Nabhānī's contribution is particularly notable. His *al-Aḥādīth al-Arba'īn fī Wujūb Ṭā'at Amīr al-Mu'minīn* forms as part of *al-Arba'ūna Arba'īn min Aḥādīth Sayyid al-Mursalīn*, comprising forty collections of forty Hadiths each on worship, ethics, and governance. It even incorporates abridged reproductions of earlier works, such as Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī's *Arba'īn fī Ta'zīm al-Muslim* and al-'Ajlūnī's forty-hadith selections, often stripped of isnād for ease of memorization. His interest in sīrah and shamā'il studies produced works such as *al-Anwār al-Muḥammadiyyah*,¹¹ *Wasā'il al-Wuṣūl ilā Shamā'il al-*

¹⁰See more details in Ghazal, "Sufism, Ijtihad and Modernity: Yusuf Al-Nabhani in the Age of 'Abd Al-Hamid II," 256.

¹¹Yūsuf al-Nabhānī's *al-Anwār al-Muḥammadiyyah min al-Mawāhib al-Laduniyyah* is an abridged and reworked version of al-Qaṣṭallānī's celebrated *al-Mawāhib al-Laduniyyah*. In this devotional compendium, al-Nabhānī presents a vivid portrayal of the Prophet Muḥammad's □ life, virtues, miracles, physical description, and noble character, drawing extensively from classical sources of sīrah and ḥadīth. The work also underscores the obligation of loving and venerating the Prophet, his family, and companions. Yūsuf Al-Nabhānī, *Al-Anwār Al-Muḥammadiyyah*, *Dār Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyyah* (Beirut, 1997).

Rasūl,¹² and the encyclopedic compilations *Jawāhir al-Bihār fī Faḍā'il al-Nabī al-Mukhtār*¹³ and *Jāmi' Karāmāt al-Awliyā'*.¹⁴

Taken together, al-Nabhānī's oeuvre demonstrates a unified intellectual project: the preservation of prophetic devotion, juristic orthodoxy, and imperial unity. Through poetry, Hadith, and polemic, he sought to defend the spiritual and political foundations of the Ottoman order against the encroachment of secularism, reformism, and Western

¹²While al-Anwār al-Muḥammadiyyah serves as an abridged rendering of al-Qastallānī's al-Mawāhib al-Laduniyyah, emphasizing the Prophet's □ virtues, miracles, and the believer's devotional love, Wasā'il al-Wuṣūl ilā Shamā'il al-Rasūl represents al-Nabhānī's original and more systematic attempt to delineate the Prophet's noble attributes and character (shamā'il). Compiled thematically, it draws from the canonical Shamā'il and Sīrah traditions to illustrate the Prophet's physical and moral perfection. Yūsuf Al-Nabhānī, *Wasā'il Al-Wuṣūl Ilā Shamā'il Al-Rasūl, Dār Al-Minhāj* (Jeddah, 2004).

¹³Jawāhir al-Bihār, by contrast, is an encyclopedic compilation of reports, traditions, and anecdotes concerning the Prophet's virtues, miracles, and spiritual perfections, presented with exhaustive citation and theological reflection. It thus stands as al-Nabhānī's most expansive celebration of the Prophet, combining biography, miracle literature, and panegyric in one monumental corpus. Yūsuf Al-Nabhānī, *Jawāhir Al-Bihār Fī Faḍā'il Al-Nabī Al-Mukhtār, Dār Al-Kutub Al-'Ilmiyyah* (Beirut, n.d.).

¹⁴Jāmi' Karāmāt al-Awliyā' (The Compendium of the Miracles of the Saints) is one of al-Nabhānī's most extensive and influential works, comprising two large volumes that document the miraculous deeds (karāmāt) of Muslim saints from the earliest generations through the later centuries. Drawing on classical Sufi hagiographies and historical chronicles, al-Nabhānī aimed to demonstrate the ongoing vitality of divine grace (barakah) and the spiritual hierarchy (ṭarīq al-wilāyah) within Islam. The book presents both well-known figures such as al-Junayd, al-Ghazālī, and 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, as well as lesser-known regional saints, often including brief biographical sketches and accounts of their miracles. In contrast to his prophetic works—such as al-Anwār al-Muḥammadiyyah and Jawāhir al-Bihār, which focus on the person of the Prophet Muḥammad □—Jāmi' Karāmāt al-Awliyā' reflects al-Nabhānī's Sufi orientation and his defense of saintly veneration against modernist critiques. The work serves both as a devotional anthology and a theological statement affirming the legitimacy of karāmāt as signs of divine favor and evidence of the saints' nearness to God. Yūsuf Al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi' Karāmāt Al-Awliyā'*, *Markaze Ahle Sunnah*, vol. 1 (Porbandar, Gujarat, 2001).

modernity. His corpus thus stands as a late Ottoman articulation of Sunni-Sufi political theology, where loyalty to the Prophet and obedience to the Sultan were inseparable acts of faith.

FORTY HADITHS ON OBEDIENCE

Among al-Nabhānī's forty Hadith collections, *al-Aḥādīth al-Arbaʿīn fī Wujūb Ṭāʿat Amīr al-Muʾminīn* (Forty Hadiths on the Obligation to Obey the Ruler) holds particular significance. Composed during the final years of his judicial career, al-Nabhānī reproduced the work as a separate tract, prefaced by a lengthy *qaṣīda* praising Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd II and the Ottoman dynasty. Completed in Dhū al-Ḥijja 1312/1895, the collection begins with the Qurʾānic injunction: “O you who believe, obey God, the Prophet, and those in authority among you” (Q. 4:59), drawing on al-Nawawī's commentary that the rulers (*ulī al-amr*) are those to whom obedience is obligatory, reflecting the consensus of Sunni jurists from the earliest generations onward.¹⁵ It is written on the coverpage that the author himself financed the printing of ten thousand copies of this book to be distributed free of charge, as a sincere counsel to the Ummah of the Prophet Muḥammad and as an expression of love for the Ottoman Caliphate—about which some people of spiritual insight have said that no dynasty after the era of the Companions has surpassed it in virtue.

Al-Nabhānī justifies the forty-Hadith format by invoking the oft-cited report: “Whoever preserves forty Hadiths for my ummah, Allah will resurrect him on the Day of Judgment among the jurists or the scholars.” Although the *isnād* of this report is weak, he asserts its authenticity via Ibn Najjar's

¹⁵ Al-Nabhānī, *Al-Aḥādīth Al-Arbaʿīn Fī Wujūb Ṭāʿat Amīr Al-Muʾminīn*, 3; Abū Zakariyyā Muḥyī al-Dīn Yahyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Al-Minhāj Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim Ibn Al-Ḥajjāj* (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1392), 12:223.

transmission from Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī, situating the collection within a recognized devotional and pedagogical tradition. The majority of scholars, however, have classified the ḥadīth as weak despite its transmission through various companions. Nevertheless, they have observed that numerous scholars acted upon it by compiling their own collections of forty ḥadīths, intending to partake in this virtuous practice. There is little doubt that such efforts fall under the broader prophetic exhortations that praise the study, preservation, and transmission of the Prophet's legacy—a position upheld by the majority of scholars, to the best of the researcher's knowledge.¹⁶

Theme and Outline

In terms of the theme of the hadiths in the tract, a quarter of the entire collection emphasizes the religious duty of obedience to legitimate rulers, even in cases of injustice or oppression. Rebellion and armed resistance are illegitimate actions according to the Prophet's repeated prohibition because political unity of the Islamic state is a paramount objective. Thus, allegiance to the state and the Sulthan was religious obligation. One of the Good example of this category is the sixth Hadith which reads:

¹⁶See for example the comments of al-Nawai in Abū Zakariyyā' Muḥyī al-Dīn Yaḥyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Al-Arbaʿūn Al-Nawawiyyah* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Minhāj, 2009), 37–44; also see the author and annotator's comment in Abū Zakariyyā' Muḥyī al-Dīn Yaḥyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Fatāwā Al-Imām Al-Nawawī Al-Musammāh Bi-Al-Masā'il Al-Manthūrah*, ed. Muḥammad Al-Ḥajjār, *Dār Al-Bashā'ir Al-Islāmiyyah* (Beirut, 1996), 248.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) stated: “The best of your rulers are those whom you love and who love you, who invoke God’s blessings upon you and you invoke His blessings upon them. The worst of your rulers are those whom you hate and who hate you, whom you curse and who curse you.” When asked whether they should overthrow such rulers by force, he replied: “No, as long as they establish *ṣalāh* among you. If you find anything detestable in them, hate their actions but do not withdraw obedience”¹⁷

Al-Nabhānī attributed this ḥadīth to Imām Muslim, and it is found in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, in the *Kitāb al-Imārah* (Book of Leadership/Governance).¹⁸ These Hadiths articulate a vision in which political unity is paramount and rebellion is categorically prohibited, framing obedience as a divine command rather than a pragmatic choice.

Beyond the general obligation, another quarter of the entire collection is the Hadiths, which elevate the ruler’s moral and spiritual status. For example, in Hadith 17, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “The Sultan is the shade of Allah on earth, to whom all oppressed among His servants seek refuge. If he is just, he will be rewarded and thanked among the people. If he is oppressive, he will be sinful, but the people must remain patient”.¹⁹ Al-Nabhānī further stated that it is recorded in *Shu‘ab al-Īmān* of al-Bayhaqī, and that it appears in *Kitāb Tā‘at Uli al-Amr* (The Book on Obedience to Those in Authority), in the chapter *faḍl al-imām al-‘ādil, wa-mā jā’a fī jawr al-wulāt* (on the virtue of the just ruler and what has been reported concerning the tyranny of governors) and he noted along with the chapter title that “We have already mentioned in the *Kitāb al-Sunan* what suffices from repetition here, yet I shall mention

¹⁷ Al-Nabhānī, *Al-Aḥādīth Al-Arba‘in Fī Wujūb Tā‘at Amīr Al-Mu‘minīn*, 5.

¹⁸ Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim ibn Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī Al-Naysābūrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Al-Qāhirah: Matba‘at al-‘Isā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1955), 5:181.

¹⁹ Al-Nabhānī, *Al-Aḥādīth Al-Arba‘in Fī Wujūb Tā‘at Amīr Al-Mu‘minīn*, 8.

here, if Allah wills, whatever occurs to me (on this topic)”, and then bearing the above hadith.²⁰ By portraying the ruler as God’s shadow on earth, al-Nabhānī sanctifies the Sultan’s role, emphasizing that obedience and patience are both political and devotional acts.

Later ḥadīths, particularly numbers 31 through 40, focus on justice and the spiritual rewards of righteous governance. One such ḥadīth states: “Three rights are belittled by no one except a hypocrite in his hypocrisy: the elderly in Islam, the just (*muqsiṭ*) Imam, and the teacher of good.” The author further noted that it is recorded by Abū al-Shaykh on the authority of Jābir ibn ‘Abd Allāh, the well-known Companion. He also explained that here the term *Imām* refers to the Caliph as *muqsiṭ*, the just ruler, while the “teacher of good” refers to the scholar—highlighting the intertwined religious and political responsibilities of leadership. However, the researcher was unable to trace this ḥadīth to the extant works of Abū al-Shaykh. It is, however, included in *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaghīr* of al-Suyūṭī—one of al-Nabhānī’s principal sources for this compilation—where al-Suyūṭī attributes the report to Abū al-Shaykh, stating that he recorded it in his work *al-Tawbīkh*.²¹

The collection concludes with Hadith 40, narrated by Abū Hurayra, which reads:

²⁰ Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn Al-Bayhaqī, *Shu‘ab Al-Īmān* (Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2003), 9:468.

²¹ Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Fath Al-Kabīr Fī Ḍamm Al-Ziyādah Ilā Al-Jāmi‘ Al-Ṣaghīr*, ed. Yūsuf Al-Nabhānī, *Dār Al-Fikr* (Beirut, 2003), 1:465.

“Seven shall be shaded by Allah under His Shade on a day when there is no shade except His: a just Imam; a young person raised upon worshipping Allah; a person whose heart is attached to the Mosque from when he leaves until he returns; two men who love each other for Allah’s sake and come together and part on that basis; a man who remembers Allah in private and his eyes swell with tears; a man invited by a woman of status and beauty, but he says: ‘I fear Allah’; and a man who conceals the charity he gives so that his left hand does not know what his right hand has spent”

The author attributed the ḥadīth to al-Bukhārī and Muslim. Al-Bukhārī includes it in four different places in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, the first of which appears in *Kitāb al-Adhān* (“The Book of the Call to Prayer”), *Bāb man jalasa fī al-masjid yantaẓiru al-ṣalāh wa-faḍl al-masājid* (“Chapter: One Who Sits in the Mosque Waiting for the Prayer, and on the Virtue of Mosques”).²² Muslim records it in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* under *Kitāb al-Zakāh* (“The Book of Almsgiving”).²³ Through these narrations, al-Nabhānī weaves the themes of obedience, justice, and moral accountability into a unified theological and political framework.

He further augmented the Hadiths with a *qaṣīda* and prose commentary praising Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd II, emphasizing his religious legitimacy, patronage of scholars and institutions, military preparedness, and illustrious Ottoman lineage. By combining Hadith, poetry, and commentary, the collection conveys not only the legal and moral duty to obey but also frames the Sultan’s authority as divinely sanctioned, reinforcing the broader Sunni position on obedience while responding directly to contemporary political challenges, including reformist critiques and rising nationalist sentiments.

²²Abū ‘Abd Alla Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘il al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī* (Bayrūt: Dār Tawq al-Najāt, 1422), 1:132.

²³Al-Naysābūrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 2:715.

Sources and Authenticity

From the outset, al-Nabhānī emphasizes that most of the Hadiths included in this collection are either *ṣaḥīḥ* or *ḥasan*. He explicitly notes: “I have compiled forty narrations regarding the obligation of obeying the ruler and their official representatives, where most of the narrations are authentic and good.” While he does not claim that every report is fully authentic, he reassures the reader that even weaker narrations are corroborated in meaning by multiple reliable reports, ensuring the overall credibility of the message. Al-Nabhānī also provides guidance on understanding difficult terms, drawing on authoritative works such as Ibn al-Athīr’s *al-Nihāya fī Gharīb al-Ḥadīth*, commentaries on Bukhārī and Muslim, and *Mishkāṭ al-Maṣābīḥ*.²⁴

In the concluding notes of the tract, he identifies three principal sources from which the forty Hadiths were drawn: al-Khaṭīb al-Ṭabrīzī’s *Mishkāṭ al-Maṣābīḥ*, al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Mundhirī’s *al-Targhīb wa al-Tarhīb*, and al-Suyūṭī’s *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaghīr*. Additionally, he consulted the canonical collections of Bukhārī and Muslim, though many narrations also derive from works beyond the six major compilations, including al-Bayhaqī’s *Shu‘ab al-Īmān*, the *Musnad* of Aḥmad, and the *Ṣaḥīḥs* of Ibn Ḥibbān and Ibn Khuzaymah. In some cases, he references secondary sources such as *Musnad al-Firdaws* (al-Daylami) or Ibn Najjar, tracing the Hadith back to their original chains when possible. Al-Nabhānī’s careful citation strategy demonstrates both scholarly rigor and methodological flexibility: he prioritizes the authenticity of meaning, even if the chain of transmission is not always complete, thereby reinforcing the doctrinal and pedagogical authority of his collection.

²⁴ Al-Nabhānī, *Al-Aḥādīth Al-Arba‘in Fī Wujūb Ṭā‘at Amīr Al-Mu‘minīn*, 2.

Juristic Implication

Beyond merely compiling narrations, al-Nabhānī engages in interpretive commentary, situating the Hadiths within the framework of classical Sunni jurisprudence and theological discourse. After citing the second Hadith, for example, “Hear and obey even if an Abyssinian slave whose hair is like a raisin is placed in authority over you”, he clarifies that obedience is obligatory for the appointed ruler, not that a slave could attain supreme authority. Drawing on al-Ḥafiz Ibn Ḥajar and al-Khattabī, he interprets the phrase as hyperbolic, emphasizing that the command to obey transcends the ruler’s personal qualities and applies universally within the bounds of legitimate authority. However, the hadith does not mean that the Abyssinian slave can become the supreme leader because a slave cannot in reality do so.²⁵ Similarly, in discussing the third Hadith on the pledge of allegiance, al-Nabhānī underscores that rebellion or the killing of rulers is prohibited except in cases of manifest disbelief (*kufrbawāḥ*), affirming the binding nature of obedience even under unjust governance.

Al-Nabhānī extends his commentary to ḥadīths related to ‘*aqīdah* (creed/belief). For example, after narrating Ḥadīth 31, reported on the authority of ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

²⁵Here Ibn Hajar quotes al-Khattabi and explains his position. Abū al-Faḍl Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Ḥajar. Al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath Al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī, Dār Al-Ma‘rifah* (Beirut, 1379), 13:122.

“Verily, the dispensers of justice will be seated on the pulpits of light beside Allah, on the right side of the Merciful, Mighty and Exalted. Either side of Him is the right side, both being equally meritorious. [They] are those who are just in their judgments, in matters relating to their families, and in all that they undertake to do.”²⁶

Al-Nabhānī explains that “*on the right side of the Merciful*” refers to proximity to Allah’s Throne (‘*arsh*), following the Salaf in avoiding figurative interpretations (*ta’wīl*) and affirming the transcendence of divine attributes (*tanzīh*). This commentary illustrates his meticulous approach to both legal and theological issues, blending ḥadīth interpretation with jurisprudential reasoning.

Through these explanations, al-Nabhānī transforms his collection from a catalog of prophetic sayings into a systematic guide for political and religious conduct. Obedience to the ruler is framed as a moral and legal obligation grounded in juristic consensus, while the limits of dissent are carefully delineated. His juristic framing not only reinforces Sunni orthodoxy but also projects these principles directly onto the Ottoman Sultan, linking religious duty with political loyalty and providing a coherent theological justification for allegiance amid the turbulence of late nineteenth-century Ottoman politics.

Political Function

Completed in Dhū al-Ḥijja 1312/1895, *al-Aḥādīth al-Arba ‘īn fī Wujūb Ṭā‘at Amīr al-Mu‘minīn* emerged amid one of the most turbulent periods in Ottoman history. Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd II’s reign (1876–1909) coincided with both internal fragmentation and unprecedented colonial pressure. The Caliphate’s political legitimacy was challenged by reformist and anti-Sufi currents—

²⁶The author attributed this ḥadīth to Imam Muslim. Al-Nabhānī, *Al-Aḥādīth Al-Arba ‘īn Fī Wujūb Ṭā‘at Amīr Al-Mu‘minīn*, 11.

such as the Kadızadelis and the Wahhabi movement—which condemned mystical practices and undermined the spiritual order long integral to Ottoman rule. The Wahhabi seizure of Mecca and Medina in the early nineteenth century, their desecration of shrines, and the disruption of pilgrimage routes struck directly at the Sultan’s sacral role as *Khādim al-Ḥaramayn al-Sharīfayn* (Protector of the Two Holy Sanctuaries).²⁷ Coupled with European encroachment and nationalist ferment, these challenges compelled Ottoman scholars and loyalists, such as al-Nabhānī, to defend both the Caliphate’s religious legitimacy and its symbolic unity.

Ottoman religiosity, deeply intertwined with Sufism and the metaphysics of Ibn al-‘Arabi, furnished a theological foundation for that defense. The state’s patronage of Sufi orders—the Mevlevi, Naqshbandi, and Qadiriyya, among others—functioned as a moral infrastructure binding diverse Muslim communities to the caliphate.²⁸ Al-Nabhānī’s thought was firmly rooted in this tradition. Al-Nabhānī’s thought was firmly rooted in this tradition, as evident in the *qaṣīda* and prose commentary praising Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd II, which was published together with the *Forty Ḥadīths* in a single volume. The present work itself celebrated the mystical conception of the Sultan as *ẓill Allāh fī al-ard* (“God’s shade on earth”) and upheld Sufism as the spiritual heart of the Caliphate. By invoking Hadiths extolling obedience to rulers and the virtues of justice, he sacralized political loyalty as an act of piety and a safeguard of divine order.

However, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 disrupted this synthesis. The restoration of the 1876 Constitution and the subsequent deposition of ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd II in 1909 displaced religious loyalists from power. The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) championed Turkish nationalism and secular

²⁷Bruce Masters, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516–1918*, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516–1918*, 2013, 182–93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139521970>.

²⁸See for example, Masters, 10–14, 120–23.

centralization, alienating Sufi-oriented conservatives. Al-Nabhānī, dismissed from his Beirut post, interpreted these events as signs of moral decay and divine testing. His Forty Hadiths thus served as both a theological rejoinder to reformist and nationalist ideologies and a call to preserve the traditional nexus between ruler, religion, and revelation.²⁹

Ultimately, the collection illustrates how Hadith could operate as political theology: a means to translate divine command into social obedience. In reaffirming that unity and justice must coexist—the ruler governing by the sharī‘a, the subjects obeying with patience—al-Nabhānī reimagined prophetic guidance as the last bulwark against the disintegration of the Muslim polity.

CONCLUSION

Yūsuf al-Nabhānī’s *al-Aḥādīth al-Arba‘īn fī Wujūb Ṭā‘at Amīr al-Mu‘minīn* demonstrates the profound intersection of Hadith scholarship, Sunni jurisprudence, and political theology in the late Ottoman period. By compiling and commenting on forty Hadiths centered on obedience to rulers, al-Nabhānī articulated a vision in which political loyalty, moral responsibility, and spiritual devotion were inseparable. His careful selection of authentic and reliable narrations, coupled with interpretive commentary grounded in classical legal and theological sources, reinforced the obligation to obey the ruler while delineating the limits of dissent. Beyond its legal and devotional dimensions, the tract served a strategic political function, defending the legitimacy of Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd II and the Ottoman Caliphate amid internal reformist challenges, nationalist movements, and colonial encroachment.

²⁹See for example, Masters, 212–22.

Ultimately, al-Nabhānī's collection exemplifies how Hadith could function as a living source of political thought: codifying moral duties, legitimizing authority, and fostering social cohesion. It highlights the enduring capacity of the Prophetic tradition to shape public ethics and political behavior, demonstrating that the transmission of Hadith was not solely a matter of personal piety but also a vehicle for sustaining communal order and safeguarding the continuity of Islamic governance. In an era of profound upheaval, al-Nabhānī's Forty Hadiths remain a testament to the scholarly engagement of late Ottoman jurists with the ethical, legal, and political challenges facing the Muslim world.

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