



Shaikh Ali al-Tantawi

Judge, broadcaster, author, editor, teacher, orator, Shaikh Ali al-Tantawi, 91, died on 19 June 1999 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, the country that has been his home since 1963. Born in Damascus in 1908, he belonged to a family distinguished by scholarship and high social standing. His father held the position of *ameen al-fatwa*, which in today's terms may be described as coordinator and member of the Council of Religious Rulings. Such a position required the holder to be a distinguished scholar, which his father certainly was. His maternal uncle Shaikh Muhibbuddin al-Khateeb was a famous Islamic writer.

Ali al-Tantawi was educated in Damascus. In his memoirs he gives a vivid description of his school days at the then prestigious school of Maktab Anbar. He graduated from the University of Damascus in 1933, obtaining two degrees in law and Arabic literature.

He started his career as a teacher in Syria, teaching not just the set curriculum. He also taught his students the meaning of jihad, knowing that the best method of teaching is by example. As Syria was under French rule at the time, jihad took the form of fighting the colonial power and working to make sure that its stay in Syria was both unwelcome and costly.

He led his students in demonstrations demanding independence for Syria. His call echoed the feelings of the population, and Damascus, his home town and capital of the country, responded to his appeals and staged a total strike lasting two months paralysing the country and got the colonial authorities in a quandary. All shops and services shut down, except for a few

bakeries and essential food services that worked part time to give the population the bare essentials of life. He then had to travel to Iraq, where he also worked as a teacher and inculcated in his Iraqi students a love for jihad against the British rule.

That clear commitment to the independence and sovereignty of Muslim people, wherever they happened to be, was clear in al-Tantawi's mind throughout his life. In the late 1940s, he played a leading part in mobilising volunteers to defend Palestine against the coming Zionist take over. In the early 1950s, he was in the forefront, mobilising support for the struggle of independence in the North African countries of Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, calling on all Muslims to boycott French goods and services until these Muslim countries gained independence.

In the late 1950s, he appealed for donations to equip the Syrian army with suitable armament to stand up to Israeli aggression. He rejoiced at the fall of any dictatorship anywhere in the Muslim world, and was saddened whenever a new regime revealed its dictatorial nature. He stood out for freedom as a God-given human right.

After the creation of Israel in 1948, the loss of Palestine was a very painful event for al-Tantawi, as indeed for many scholars and advocates of Islam. He took part in the Islamic Conference on Palestine which was held soon afterwards. It was attended by a large number of Muslim scholars and prominent figures from all over the Muslim world. Together with Shaikh Amjad al-Zahawi, a well known scholar from Iraq, al-Tantawi travelled on a mission from the Conference to most Muslim countries to raise funds for Palestine. The funds were utilised, among other things, to build a wall to separate the old city of Al-Quds (Jerusalem) - which remained in Muslim hands - from the modern part of the city occupied by the Jews. That gave the Islamic areas good protection from clashes that the Israelis might have provoked.

Shaikh al-Tantawi's travels had a profound effect on him. He wrote about it and spoke in his weekly radio programme, bringing home to his audience images of the life of other Muslim nations and a splendid description of the countries he visited. His description of the scenery of Indonesia is perhaps as breathtaking as the scenery. He included many of his impressions in his memoirs.

His personal career took a different course when he became a judge on his return to Syria. He moved up the judicial system reaching the top position of Justice of the High Islamic Appeals Court. He continued to hold that position until he was forced out in 1963 by a revolutionary decree which dismissed a large number of judges for the express purpose of 'making the judicial system subservient to the revolution'. That was the time when he had to leave Syria, never to return. He always had a longing to return to Damascus, the city of his upbringing, but it was a dream not to be fulfilled.

Al-Tantawi excelled in literature as well as Islamic law which he studied at the university. He often joked about being disowned by the 'experts' in both. He said that when he attended a literary circle or wrote on a literary issue, there were always those who said that he belonged to religious scholarship, while some Islamic scholars tried to dismiss his views on grounds that he was a man of letters, not a religious scholar. The fact is that he was master of both disciplines, and a superior one at that. No one could dispute it.

As an Islamic scholar, Shaikh Ali al-Tantawi was among the top figures in this century. In his early life, he followed mostly on the Hanafi school of thought, but later did not commit himself to any school, taking whatever view he thought to be better supported by the Qur'an and Sunnah.

As a legal authority, he was in home territory. In the late 1940s, he was instrumental in the formulation of the family laws in Syria, and took an important part in the drafting of Islamic laws in Egypt.

As a literary figure, his style was inimitable: simple but powerful, with clarity of purpose and full of imagery, appealing both to layman and specialist. When he wrote biographical notes on political personalities or scholars of old, their characters came alive. His short stories reflected his rare talent of character delineation.

Ali al-Tantawi was a man of strong convictions and immense personal courage. The 1930s and 1940s witnessed famous literary disputes. Al-Tantawi joined them with great enthusiasm, supporting the stand of Mustafa Saqiq al-Rafi'e (1880-1937), who represented the more Islamically committed front, against 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad (1889-1964).

In politics, he contested the elections to the first post-independence Syrian parliament in 1947. Despite his strong

appeal, he did not win a seat. There was evident interference with the elections and al-Tantawi's name was high on the list of candidates who were out of favour with the government. It was so because his courage, his determined stand for the people, his Islamic outlook and his utter refusal to compromise on matters of principle made him a difficult character to deal with in political matters.

That was the only time he stood for parliamentary elections, but he was always concerned with political developments. He spoke out on any issue of importance to the people, or touching on Islamic principles. Whenever free elections were held, he spoke out in favour of returning an Islamically oriented parliament. In 1954 he issued a statement calling on the people to elect only suitable candidates; he stated unequivocally that it was forbidden in Islam to elect a member of parliament who belonged to the Communist, Ba'ath, or Syrian Nationalist parties. That made him a target of all three parties and their papers, but he stood up with the courage of a firm believer.

His courage in matters encroaching on Islamic values and principles was phenomenal. He would not hesitate to criticise in the clearest of terms any action that was in conflict with Islamic values.

In the early 1950s, a girls school organised a dance which was attended by the then prime minister, Khaled al-'Azm, who was ruling under the patronage of Adeb Shishakli, the army general who wielded real power. That party was to crown the efforts of the school to revive folklore dancing. That same week al-Tantawi delivered the Friday *khutbah* which was carried by the Syrian radio. He launched a scathing attack on the organisers of the party and those in government who gave them their support, describing the latter as morally corrupt.

As it was a personal attack on the prime minister himself, there was a furore. The announcer who was at the mosque and the studio announcer, monitoring the prayer, were reprimanded and penalised for not stopping the transmission. Al-Tantawi stood his ground and was unrepentant. The government wanted to punish him, but dared not for fear of provoking a popular uprising.

Courage of that kind was a distinct trait of al-Tantawi's character. When he moved to Saudi Arabia, he stood his ground giving his rulings on matters put

to him, that were often in conflict with the strict views of the more conservative Saudi scholars. At first Saudi radio realised that they had in him a speaker of wide appeal, as his fame preceded him; he was a regular speaker on Syrian radio.

When Saudi television started broadcasting, al-Tantawi was among the first to have a regular programme. In fact, he had two programmes, one known as 'Questions and Issues', and the other, 'Light and Guidance', which was a weekly programme that ran for over 25 years. In Ramadan he added a daily ten-minute programme.

As a speaker on radio and television, he realised that his audience was mixed, so he made his talk simple, direct, candid, but most importantly, full of Islamic knowledge. His appeal was wide indeed. His regular viewers included people from all strata of society. His postbag was always full. Viewers wrote to him for advice on all sorts of problems, seeking an enlightened religious view, which he was always ready to give.

In fact, the late King Faisal regularly watched his Friday programme. Once he noticed that as al-Tantawi was seen to continue speaking, there was an interruption in the sound. When he inquired the reason, he was told that apparently the Shaikh had said something that someone felt should be cut off. The King expressed his amazement, saying: 'Do we have in Saudi Arabia anyone who is qualified to be a censor to Shaikh Ali al-Tantawi?' He then ordered that the Shaikh be allowed to say whatever he wanted at any time without censorship of any kind. This order continued to be observed for many years even after King Faisal had passed away.

After leaving Syria in 1963, al-Tantawi spent the rest of his life in Saudi Arabia. He first stayed in Riyadh for a couple of years before moving to Makkah al-Mukarramah where he lived for nearly 30 years. He then moved to Jeddah to stay nearer to his daughters. He was granted Saudi nationality. In 1990, he was awarded King Faisal International Prize for service to the cause of Islam.

Personal tragedy was to hit him when his daughter, Banan, was assassinated in her flat in Aachen, Germany, in the early 1980s. She was married to 'Issam al-Attar, who was the second leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. The German security authorities considered the crime a political assassination. The Shaikh was deeply hurt and in profound grief at her loss. Four years later, he had to refer to her in an article and he wrote

that it was the first time he could write down her name or speak about her. Like all her sisters, she was highly educated. She inherited from her father clarity of expression and a clear literary talent.

Al-Tantawi wrote many books on a wide variety of subjects. The book which was dearest to his heart is entitled in Arabic, 'A Brief Introduction to the Islamic Faith'. It was translated into English and published as 'The Faith'. Now there is a new translation for publication.

Al-Tantawi serialised his memoirs in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, a daily newspaper published among others from London. These were published in eight volumes. The memoirs do not follow a set pattern or a clearly defined plan, but they contain a wealth of information. It is about life in the early and mid 20th century and about a large number of personalities who played a part in shaping events and thought in Syria.

Adil Salahi



Abd al-Wahab al-Bayati

Iraqi poet, Abd al-Wahab al-Bayati, 73, died in Damascus, 3 August 1999. Born in Baghdad and an Arabic language and

literature graduate from the University of Baghdad, al-Bayati's intermittent exile started following his dismissal as a teacher for taking part in a leftist demonstration. After the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy, he returned home in 1958, but fled to Cairo in 1964. He had to quit Cairo as well after he had written his poem (*Lament for the June Sun*) about the debacle of June 1967. However, his criticism of **Nasir** got him a job back home in the ministry of culture. Iraq had now come under the sway of **Saddam Husain**. By 1990, he was again on his feet. He was serving as cultural attaché in Madrid when he resigned in protest at the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. He lived in Saudi Arabia and Jordan before finally arriving in Damascus.

Abd al-Wahab al-Bayati's forte, lay in his poetry, not politics. He had sought exile in his poetry and in free verse instead of the classical rhyme and meter form. An English translation of his poems (1969-89) was published by the Georgetown University Press under the title, *Love, Death and Exile*.