



# Druze Studies Journal

## Book Forum

“The Office of Shaykh al-‘Aql of the Druze in Lebanon,” book forum of **Abou Zaki, Said**. 2021. *Mashyakhat ‘Aql al-Duruz fi Lubnan: Bahthun fi Usulihā wa-Ma‘naha wa-Tatanmuriha [The Office of Shaykh al-‘Aql of the Druze in Lebanon: An Investigation into Its Origins, Meaning and Development]*. Beirut: Dar el-Machreq.

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Received: 16 August 2024  
Revised: 16 September 2024  
Accepted: 16 September 2024

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Founding Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Rami Zeedan.



***Cite this book forum*** (The *Chicago* Manual of Style 17th Edition):

Chamseddine, M. Abdul Rahman, Yusri Hazran, Akram Khater, Tuba Yildiz, and Said Abou Zaki, 2024. "The Office of Shaykh al-'Aql of the Druze in Lebanon," book forum of *Mashyakhbat 'Aql al-Duruḡ fi Lubnan: Bahthun fi Usuliba wa-Ma'naha wa-Tatanwuriha* [*The Office of Shaykh al-'Aql of the Druze in Lebanon: An Investigation into Its Origins, Meaning and Development*], by Abou Zaki, Said. *Druze Studies Journal* 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17161/druze.2024.21816>

**Abstract**

This book forum centers on Said Abou Zaki's Arabic book, "The Office of Shaykh al-'Aql of the Druze in Lebanon." It includes contributions from various scholars, each offering a unique perspective on the historical and institutional analysis of Druze religious leadership in Lebanon: Tuba Yildiz, Yusri Hazran, Akram Khater, and Abdul Rahman M. Chamseddine. Yildiz acknowledges the lack of historical readings and erroneous information in early 20th-century works on the Druze. She appreciates Abou Zaki's comprehensive study of Lebanese and Ottoman perspectives, offering a broader understanding of the Druze religious institution's development and its connection with the Ottoman Empire's socio-religious policies. Hazran commends the book for providing a comprehensive historical study of the Druze community's religious and spiritual leadership, shedding light on its evolution from the 11th century through to the Ottoman Empire's fall. Although the book excels in its research methods and historical insights, Hazran suggests strengthening it by addressing specific methodological and historical issues, such as placing the discussion on existing narratives and substantiating Emir Bashir Shihab II's role in the schism. Khater highlights the internal tensions in Abou Zaki's book arising from its threefold goals: serving as a historiographical essay, an origins story, and a history of Mashyakhbat al-'Aql. Khater commends the work's critical review of existing literature and acknowledges the book's significant contribution to understanding the position of Shaykh al-'Aql amidst political crises. Chamseddine praised Abou Zaki's critical historiographical approach and genealogical method. Chamseddine highlights the importance of integrating oral histories and local traditions into academic research. He notes that Abou Zaki's work sheds light on the Druze community's religious evolution, although he critiques the book's occasional lack of coherence due to abrupt transitions and unexplained terminology. The reviewers concluded that the book constitutes a significant contribution to Druze Studies.

**Keywords:** *Druze; Religious leadership; Shaykh al-'Aql; Ottoman Empire; History of Lebanon; Oral Tradition; Oral History.*

## DEBATE

### **“Reevaluating Druze Historiography through a Critical Analysis of Religious Leadership and Community Evolution in Lebanon,” by Abdul Rahman M. Chamseddine**

Said Abou Zaki's book on the history of the Druze community and its religious leadership in Lebanon offers a meticulous examination that challenges prevailing narratives. Abou Zaki, a lecturer in history and ethics at the Lebanese American University with a master's degree in history from the American University of Beirut, employs a critical historiographical approach to interrogate the epistemological foundations of previous Druze historiography. His genealogical method deconstructs traditional narratives and recontextualizes the evolution of the Shaykh al-'Aql within the socio-political milieu of Mount Lebanon.

The book significantly contributes to understanding the religious organization and development of the Druze over the past five centuries, making it a valuable resource for scholars employing qualitative research methodologies, particularly in the study of minority religious communities where primary sources are scarce. The critical examination of oral histories and familial artifacts provides a model for interdisciplinary research that bridges anthropology, history, and religious studies and sheds light on a somewhat mysterious and secretive aspect of religious thought, opening possibilities for comparative and interdisciplinary research.

About Zaki's methodology involves engaging with Druze communities, integrating into their culture, building connections, gathering oral histories, and interpreting familial artifacts and religious documents such as wills, which hold religious significance in Druze culture. This demonstrates the importance of integrating oral histories, familial artifacts, and local traditions into academic research, encouraging scholars to question existing narratives and seek a deeper understanding of the socio-political dynamics that shape minority communities. This framework could apply to the study of other religious minority groups, such as the Yazidis and Alawites, who also have limited written records.

While the book is clear and well-organized, making it simple for readers to follow the author's ideas and analysis, it occasionally suffers from long-winded explanations and abrupt transitions between ideas, detracting from its overall coherence. Additionally, using terms like "Junblatis," "Yazbekis," and others without adequate explanation assumes familiarity that not all readers may have. More introductory context on these terms and the nature of Lebanese/Druze society would benefit those unfamiliar with Druze culture, especially at the beginning.

The book's structure unfolds in four distinct parts, each contributing uniquely to understanding the Druze community and serving as a meticulous critique of prevailing assumptions in Druze historiography. Abou Zaki identifies these assumptions as originating from three influential books from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: Abu-Shaqra (1952), Salman (1963), and Talih (1971) criticizing them for their speculative nature and lack of empirical basis despite their prominence. They collectively constructed a narrative that directly links the contemporary Shaykh al-ʿAql to the foundational Imama of the eleventh century, portraying him not just as a moral heir but also as a functional successor to the Fatimid Caliphs. Abou Zaki's critique dismantles this narrative, prompting a reevaluation of the historical foundations of Druze leadership. However, a more detailed examination of the sources critiqued in previous historiography, providing concrete examples of inaccuracies, would strengthen Abou Zaki's arguments and offer a clearer understanding of the historiographical evolution of Druze Studies.

Abou Zaki's employment of verses from the Qur'an to elucidate Druze terminology and its origins within the Qur'anic text is impressive. Abou Zaki references terms found in Druze communities, such as *al-mansha* and *majalis al-tidhkar*, demonstrating the Qur'anic origins of these terms and the profound connections the Druze community has with the Qur'an while simultaneously developing their unique culture and traditions. This approach highlights the intricate relationship between Druze teachings and the Qur'an, showing the adaptation and integration of foundational Islamic principles into Druze beliefs. The use of Qur'anic references serves not only to authenticate Druze terminology but also to emphasize the spiritual and doctrinal links between Druze practices and broader Islamic traditions. While this method undeniably adds a layer of authenticity and intellectual rigor to Druze's teachings, it may pose challenges regarding selective interpretation.

Overall, the book is valuable for anyone interested in gaining a deep understanding of the history and society of the Druze, particularly those in Lebanon. Researchers and academics in religious and historical studies, as well as readers interested in the history of Lebanese sects and their role in society and those studying social transformations in Lebanon, will find the book beneficial. While the book is only available in Arabic, even non-native readers should find its style clear and concise. Abou Zaki's work is not only a significant contribution to Druze studies but also a testament to the importance of innovative research methodologies in uncovering the complexities of religious and social institutions. By integrat-

ing various primary sources, such as oral histories, the book provides a comprehensive framework for future research on minority religious communities. Despite areas where further detail and contemporary relevance could enhance the study, it remains an impressive work for scholars and researchers in the fields of Middle Eastern studies, religious studies, and anthropology.

**“Between Faith and Authority: Tracing the History of Druze Religious Leadership in Lebanon,” by Yusri Hazran**

This book is an adaptation of a master's thesis submitted in 2008 to the history department at the American University of Beirut. The book's subject is the historical development of the religious and spiritual leadership of the Druze community (Shaykh al-'Aql) from the 11<sup>th</sup> century until the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The book is divided into four main chapters. The book's first chapter reviews the variety of research and secondary sources written on the subject. In the second chapter, the author reviews archival sources, literature, oral tradition, biographical books, and more. The third chapter of the book has two parts. The first part discusses the conceptual and philological aspects of the concepts "Aql" and "Shaykh" as well as the combination of the two concepts. The second part initiates a significant historical discussion by addressing the lack of records on the history of the Druze community in the period between the separation of Druze from the Ismaili Imamate in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the time of the greatest Druze religious reformer and scholar, Al-Amir al-Sayyid. Beyond that, the author points to the start of Mashyakhat al-'Aql's religious leadership since at least the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, the Druze sources mention the institution since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that is, since the period of al-Mutasarrifiyyat (1861 – 1916). The fourth chapter of the work is a significant contribution because it examines the structural developments of this institution from the 15<sup>th</sup> century until the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the second decade of the past century.

Abou Zaki's research excels in several ways, both from a research and historical standpoint. First, this book presents a comprehensive historical study of the development of one of the most important religious institutions in the history of the Druze in Lebanon while they were, for hundreds of years, the political and intellectual center of gravity of the Druze in the region. Second, the book presents historical research based on various sources, including manuscripts, literature, biographical books, oral tradition, and more. The use of manuscripts gives this research a distinctly authentic dimension since these are primary sources used here

for the first time. The third advantage of historical research here is that it touches on the historical development of the institution of religious and spiritual authority among the Druze community. The research shows that since the death of al-Amir al-Sayyid in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the religious leadership of the Druze community has been vested with two combined authorities: one as the authority over religious matters and the other as the custodian of the community's religious endowments and holy sites. From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a separation emerged and took shape between the two parallel authorities. One is a religious authority based on religious knowledge and piety. From the point of view of the religious community, it holds a significant position as the guardian and final arbiter in matters of religion, morals, and religious law, focusing on a conventional process rather than a summarized and organized procedure (Abou-Zaki 2021, 268). In contrast, the institution of Mashyakhat al-'Aql is a representative religious authority, both within the community and outward. The debate over the duality of the two authorities has lasted for decades. The book details the separation of the two authorities towards the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is a significant refinement, and contributes to studying the history of the Druze in Lebanon, which has always been a focus of imitation for the other Druze communities in the Middle East.

As stated, this book presents a historical re-discussion in the sense of following the development of the institution of Druze community religious leadership in Lebanon from the time of al-Amir al-Sayyed to the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Based on a wide variety of sources, the historical research proceeds from the well-known premise that there is no written record of the history of the Druze in the period between the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the appearance of Al-Amir al-Sayyed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. From the introduction of the reform by al-Amir al-Sayyed until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, religious leadership held both the authority of religious guidance and the authority of management of religious life (Abou-Zaki 2021, 265). Since then, a new trend has emerged: forming a dual model of religious-spiritual authority. The first is based on knowledge, and the second is an official religious authority authorized to manage religious life, but usually not an authority in religious guidance (Abou-Zaki 2021, 266-269).

The research focuses on another, no less significant, development that continues to accompany the institution of the Mashyakhat Al-'Aql, and that is the division of the Shaykh Al-'Aql Institution into two wings according to the political division that exists among the Druze community in Lebanon (Abou-Zaki 2021, 276-278): one for the Junblati faction and another on behalf of the Yazbeki camp.

The author goes on to discuss the innovations and the roles assigned to Shaykh al-'Aql (a term that, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mainly indicated the official-representative authority) during the period of al-Mutasarrifiyyat (Abou-Zaki 2021, 293-298). In this context, it is essential to mention that the office of Shaykh al-'Aql was granted judicial authorities during the Mutasarrifiyyat period (Abou-Zaki 2021, 301).

The author presented a well-founded, consistent, and well-constructed historical discussion. At the same time, there is room to raise three comments. First, it would have been better methodologically to include the discussion in the first chapter rather than in the third and fourth chapters. Contrasting the existing narratives and theses with the author's innovative arguments would have been better. Presenting the author's arguments alongside existing narratives and theses would illustrate the innovation the author brings. Secondly, the author's thesis regarding the involvement of Emir Bashir Shihab II in creating the schism lacks convincing evidence and substantiation. I suggest discussing this question: Was the religious leadership division not a consequence of the political division and even inevitable? To the best of my judgment, the attribution of the split to Emir Bashir Shihab II is based more on the dominance of the Emir in the historical narrative of the Druze in Lebanon than on historical evidence. A third inevitable point is the degree of interaction between the spiritual leadership and the political leadership of the Druze community in Lebanon, particularly since the latter succeeded in establishing an autonomous government in the southern region of Mountain Lebanon. In light of this, it was essential to examine the degree of autonomy of the clerical class compared to the power of a political-feudal leadership that managed to connect the peasantry to it and build a harmonious model between the feudal leadership and the Druze peasantry.

Needless to say, these comments do not diminish the critical contribution of this historical study. We now have another essential contribution to the historical research on the Druze in particular and on Lebanon in general.

**“The Evolution and Historical Significance of Mashyakhat al-'Aql in Lebanon,” by Akram Khater**

Said Abou Zaki's book *Mashyakhat 'Aql al-Durūz fī Lubnān: Bahthun fī Usūlihā wa-Ma'nāhā wa-Tatawwurihā* is a much-needed, well-researched, and convincingly argued study of the history of the office of Shaykh al-'Aql of the Druze in Lebanon. Its valuable contributions and, at the same time, its internal tensions are embodied in the three different goals it tries to achieve while exploring the rise,

meaning, and development of this highest position of religious authority within the Lebanese Druze community. In equal parts, it is a historiographical essay, an origins story, and a history of Mashyakhat al-‘Aql.

In his introduction, Abou Zaki sets the stage for the book by discussing the political crisis that engulfed Mashyakhat al-‘Aql in Lebanon, which started with the succession crisis of 1991 and continued through the 2006 parliamentary legislation aimed at regulating the religious affairs of the Druze community in Lebanon. Throughout, the political rivalry between Walid Jumblatt and Talal Arslan cast a shadow on the efforts to designate a singular Shaykh al-‘Aql as the religious leader of the community and an elected council to assist him in regulating the religious affairs and endowments of Lebanon’s Druze.

From this premise, Abou Zaki argues that the constant political crises from 1920 forward engulfing—and undermining at times—the position of Shaykh al-‘Aql is due to a lack of understanding of the history of this position. Thus, he contends that his research (first published in 2008 as an MA thesis in the Department of History at the American University of Beirut) is a much-needed step towards overcoming the problems of the position. While perhaps overly optimistic in his assessment of how much attention political elites pay to historians, his book remains pertinent at many other levels.

Abou Zaki dedicates his first chapter to a historiographical essay that dismisses all of the existing secondary literature. From the outset, he notes that every one of these secondary sources suffers from one or more fatal flaws. Within his category of “historical narratives,” he argues that the three existing foundational texts about Shaykh al-‘Aql, Abu-Shaqra (1952), Salman (1963), and Talih (1971) are not based on primary sources, are full of errors, and lack any historical rigor. As Abou Zaki notes: “All of these [three narratives] suffer from serious systemic errors because they did not rely on documented historical sources...[and] did not follow the principles of proper scientific research method.” (Abou Zaki 2021, 35). From this premise, Abou Zaki then contends that all other non-historical studies that followed copied the errors and assumptions of these three texts.

Abou Zaki then proceeds to list, discuss, and evaluate primary sources that may be useful in writing a more “accurate” history of Mashyakhat al-‘Aql as a way of dealing with these problems. Amongst the various sources he listed are contemporary histories of the community, such as the 15<sup>th</sup> century *Tarikh Beirut*, biographies of major Druze religious leaders, European travelers’ accounts, and legal and financial documents such as wills, deeds of sale, and even material objects such



as tombstones. Abou Zaki's thorough analysis of each type of primary source, as well as his profound engagement with its limitations and even biases, provide an invaluable service to any researcher interested in Druze's historical studies.

With the foundation laid for "proper historical research," Abou Zaki then proceeds over the following two chapters to present his narrative of how Mashyakhat al-'Aql came to be. He concurs that the development of "local" Druze religious authorities in Bilad al-Sham began shortly after the collapse of their relationship with the Isma'ili imamate in Egypt in the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. However, he argues against previous narratives that without the existence of reliable primary sources, it is difficult, if not impossible, to write anything definitively about that development between the early 11<sup>th</sup> and mid-15<sup>th</sup> centuries or about the term Mashyakhat al-'Aql and its history. Thus, his narrative begins and focuses almost exclusively on events after the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly on al-Amir al-Sayyid, whom he regards as the foundational figure in the re-invention and invigoration of the position of local Druze leaders in Bilad al-Sham. Abou Zaki dedicates a significant part of his third chapter to an in-depth analysis of the etymology of the two words "shaykh" and "aql." He then pivots to explore the virtues that anyone aspiring to be Shaykh al-'Aql should possess. In this way, the biography of al-Amir al-Sayyid and his renowned qualities become the template for subsequent religious leaders to emulate. For example, Abou Zaki argues that al-Amir al-Sayyid proclaimed the concept of 'aql as the only way for humans to rise and reach the full extent of their abilities and to do so in order to better worship God (Abou Zaki 2021, 159).

Abou Zaki concludes his book by discussing the historical development of Shaykh al-'Aql's position. Once again, Abou Zaki highlights the oversized role of al-Amir al-Sayyid in two other matters. First, Abou Zaki fully credits him with creating the hierarchy of Druze religious authorities, from the village to the highest position. Moreover, he established the tradition of waqf, or religious endowments controlled by religious authorities, thus giving them greater freedom of action during the Ottoman period in Lebanon. Abou Zaki said these two developments created Mashyakhat 'Aql al-Durūz fi Lubnān. This position was politicized only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Emir Bashir Shihab II punished the Druze rebellion against his rule by introducing a council of elders to govern the community alongside Shaykh al-'Aql. This council was—and continues to be—split between Junblati and Yazbeki factions, thus undermining the unity of the community and the power of Shaykh al-'Aql.

While this last part of his argument seemed rushed and had little historical context, the book nonetheless remains an essential contribution to the history of the Druze community in Lebanon. It is convincing and insightful in its critique of the existing literature on *Mashykh al-‘Aql*, enlightening in its exploration of primary sources, and thorough (albeit painstakingly at times) in its narration of the development of offices of Druze religious authority in Lebanon. In this sense, the book is an excellent resource for graduate students and scholars alike who wish to delve further or for the first time into this topic.

### **“Institutionalization of Druze Religious Leadership in Lebanon and Ottoman Influence,” by Tuba Yildiz**

The Ottoman period (1516 -1918) holds special significance in the study of Lebanese history. Therefore, research on Lebanon during the Ottoman era must rely on two central perspectives. The first of these centers is Lebanon, which forms the primary base due to its internal dynamics. The second center is the Ottoman capital, Istanbul. The second center's importance lies in revealing policies toward Lebanon, enabling a narrative of state-society relations. In this context, examining both Lebanese and Ottoman perspectives together will facilitate a broader understanding of the subject within the framework of the sectarian dynamics in that period.

In line with the statements above, Said Abou Zaki's comprehensive research on institutionalizing Druze religious leadership from the 11<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century encompasses a multifaceted perspective. This study, prepared as a master thesis in 2008, consists of 4 chapters and 387 pages. In the first two chapters, the author conducts a source analysis by taking an inventory of the studies on the institution of *Shaykh al-‘Aql* and examining the sources (Abou Zaki 2021, 20-125). In this regard, Abou Zaki draws attention to the lack of historical readings necessary for accurately presenting the historical perspective by analyzing three fundamental works in the first section. The author also emphasizes the importance of questioning the information provided by historical sources when investigating a fact in order to reach accurate conclusions. Abou Zaki has found that many works written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century contain erroneous information about the earlier periods of the Druze (Abou Zaki 2021, 20). As a result, the author's contribution, which aims to achieve true knowledge through comparative studies, is highly significant. Abou Zaki also discusses works on the institution of *Shaykh al-‘Aql* in fields other than the field of history, pointing out that the information provided

without touching on the historical background is incomplete and doubtful (Abou Zaki 2021, 28). The last two chapters highlight the emergence of Shaykh al-'Aql and the role the religious institution played in the historical process. This review focuses on the book's historical perspective, drawing attention to the connection between the Ottoman Empire's policies and the institutionalization of Druze religious leadership.

Abou Zaki provides important clues about the development period of the Druze religious institution and the socio-religious dominance of the Ottoman Empire in the region. In this context, the author quotes Kamal Salibi in the first chapter, who stated that the Druze institutions of Shaykh al-'Aql were subordinate to local administrations or tax collectors (*muqataajis*) under the Sunni state (Abou Zaki 2021, 24). When questioning the source and validity of this quote by Salibi, the author implies that the state's relationship with the region's administrative structure also influenced the position of religious authorities. The Ottoman State continued this system, which was prevalent during the Mamluk period. Since the Ottoman state, affiliated with the Hanafi sect, did not question the existence of religious institutions of non-Sunni communities or intervene in the religious authority's relation to the *muqataajis*, it is possible to interpret the state-society relationship differently. For example, after the Druze broke ties with the Ismaili Imamate in Egypt around the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, there was no clarity regarding the position of religious leadership for a long time. Despite the dominance of the Tanukhis in the region, religious institutionalization developed due to the political transformation of local dynamics with the Ottoman State's dominance. The author mentions that local religious figures took over the religious leadership role in the Druze community from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Abou Zaki 2021, 48). Therefore, while Shaykh al-'Aql's history began in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it is evident that institutionalization intensified during the period of al-Amir al-Sayyid Jamaluddin Abdallah al-Tanukhi (Abou Zaki 2021, 1417-1479) in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Based on the cited references, Said Abou Zaki expresses that information about the position of Shaykh al-'Aql up until the time of Sayyid Jamaluddin remains unclear. This is because extant sources provide general rather than specific information (Abou Zaki 2021, 187). To illustrate, the author emphasizes that before the process of institutionalization, fundamental concepts and principles, such as the distinction between “*uqqal*” and “*juhhal*” and the principles of “*al-amr bel ma'ruf wa nahy 'anil munkar*,” were not fully clarified (Abou Zaki 2021, 191).

On the other hand, the author's observation is noteworthy in understanding

how some local sources perceived Fakhreddin's rebellion. Indeed, Fakhreddin's loss of allies in the center of the Ottoman Empire brought about a crackdown on his activities. Yet, it becomes clear that Fakhreddin's rebellion is seen as important in terms of local dynamics. However, the author does not discuss the topic. If he had included details about the politics of the Ottoman state in the region, he could have increased the book's richness by revealing the central government's perspective in the sections where he discussed the development and transformation of the Druze religious leadership.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was pivotal for both Mount Lebanon and the Druze community. Following two civil wars, establishing a new regional administrative system demonstrated the Ottoman Empire's shift in sectarian policies. This change, however, led to a challenging transition for local governance. The political transformation in the region necessitated the redefinition and evolution of religious institutions. Abou Zaki notes that during this period, the Druze formalized their religious leadership, using the term "Shaykh al-'Aql" for the first time following the establishment of the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifiyyat (Abou Zaki 2021, 167).

Another critical part of the book highlights the role of the waqf in institutionalizing Druze religious leadership (Abou Zaki 2021, 243). Al-Amir al-Sayyid planned for the Druze Shaykhs al-'Aql to avoid worldly works and to have their income sourced from donations to newly established waqfs. The author's detailed explanations on this topic provide critical insights into the development of institutionalization and the integration of Druze religious leadership with the broader community. The study also reveals that the number of waqfs established by senior Druze 'Uqqal increased rapidly during this period (Abou Zaki 2021, 243). This development coincided with the Ottoman Empire's efforts to integrate the waqf system into society. In fact, during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Ottoman waqfs experienced their most prosperous period, paralleling the Empire's rise. The largest and most significant waqfs belong to this era. Although waqfs occasionally weakened in later periods, they consistently maintained their vitality throughout the Ottoman era, contributing to the creation of a waqf tradition within the Ottoman Empire.

The Druze waqfs hold significance not only for their own community but also for the ruling Ottoman state's social policies and its emphasis on institutionalization. As a result, political and legal transformations in the region sometimes brought issues related to waqfs to Istanbul's attention. For instance, a case mentioned in the author's work (Abou Zaki 2021, 247) reached the Ottoman archives, where the relevant documents are filed under number DAB, MTZ. CL, 5/182/2/1,

1 Rebiülevvel 1322 (16 May 1904). This highlights how the book provides insights into Ottoman policies. Additionally, the book notes the similarities with the Ottoman waqf system concerning religious waqfs (Abou Zaki 2021, 260). Hence, by setting out the conditions of the waqf, the author also exemplifies the relationship between society and the state.

Another vital part of the work that draws attention is the author's reliance on the science of Islamic theology while making conceptual discussions in the third chapter. In this sense, the book not only serves as a history book but also contributes to enhancing the representation of Druze in the field of science of theology through its philosophical underpinnings.

Said Abou Zaki's work offers valuable contributions to understanding Druze history and sheds light on Lebanon's political and social situation in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Therefore, this book will serve as an important reference for understanding the formation of religious institutions and state policies.

## RESPONSE

### **“Revisiting the Office of Shaykh al-‘Aql and Druze Institutional Traditions,” by Said Abou Zaki**

I am honored to have read four critical reviews of my book, written by esteemed scholars from diverse academic and social backgrounds. Each reviewer highlighted aspects related to their respective fields of expertise and research interests, offering varied insights into the book's content, methodology, structure, and scope. I want to start by expressing my sincere gratitude for their thoughtful examination and valuable reviews. The book received positive evaluations from all four reviewers, who suggested ways to strengthen certain sections. In this response, I aim to engage with some of their comments to further clarify what the book seeks to address and what it offers.

In the preface, I expressed my hope that this book would contribute positively to resolving the long-standing conflicts that have plagued the Office of Shaykh al-‘Aql in Lebanon over the past 80 years. Khater noted that I might have overstated my optimism about the attention political elites might pay to historians. While I agree that politicians rarely consider historians, I argue that they often rely on flawed historical narratives to advance their agendas. Without a solid and objective historical account of institutions such as the Office of Shaykh al-‘Aql and

the Druze Waqf, these narratives can be manipulated to serve political purposes. In the following paragraphs, I will demonstrate how providing a purposeful and rigorous historical account improves our understanding of the crises affecting the Office of Shaykh al-‘Aql and contributes to resolving them.

The relevance of the topics I prioritized became evident early in my research, particularly through interviews with senior Druze religious authorities. These interviews revealed a long-standing conflict between two camps within the Druze religious and political hierarchy, dating back to the 1930s. One camp, composed primarily of the highest religious authorities, represented the Conservatives, while the other camp, composed of leading Druze politicians and ambitious religious figures from secondary ranks, represented the Modernizers. The latter sought to introduce a modern administrative structure to the Druze religious institutions, replacing the customary laws governing Druze's personal status with codified statutes suited to modern times.<sup>1</sup> The Conservatives, however, resisted these changes, seeking to preserve the unwritten customs that regularized Druze religious institutions for centuries. The book's findings reveal that the history of Druze religious institutions strongly supports the Conservatives' stance. However, they were unable to capitalize on this advantage in their struggle with the Modernizers due to their lack of a true historical understanding of the very traditions they sought to preserve (Abou Zaki 2021, 140-141). The Modernizers, on the other hand, leveraged the legislative powers granted to Druze politicians by the Lebanese confessional system to advance their goals by passing binding laws in the Parliament.

The Modernizers achieved their first significant victory in 1948 when the Lebanese Parliament passed the first Druze personal status law, drafted by Druze politicians (Talih 1971, 16-41). After Husayn Talih, the Shaykh al-‘Aql serving in the Junblati seat died in 1949, the two camps engaged in an open confrontation. Druze politicians sought to appoint a religiously uncommitted Druze in his place, aiming to strengthen their camp's ability to implement changes within the Druze religious institutions and practices. Their leading candidate was ‘Aref Abu Shaqra, the author of the first modern account of the history of Mashyakhat al-‘Aql, which he published three years later. However, a group of young, activist Conservatives outmaneuvered the Druze politicians by secretly lobbying for a religiously committed member of the same family, Muhammad Abu Shaqra, who had no notable religious standing at the time. They hoped that the Abu Shaqra family, wanting to see one of them appointed to the prestigious office, would rally behind Shaykh

<sup>1</sup> Shaykh Abu Salih Farhan al-‘Aridi, Interview, 2004.

Muhammad because his religious commitment gave him a far better chance of becoming the new Shaykh al-'Aql.<sup>2</sup>

The Conservatives achieved significant success in 1949. They blocked Druze politicians from appointing the new Shaykh al-'Aql and influenced them to publicly acknowledge that the right to name the two Shaykhs al-'Aql belongs to the 'Uqqal (Doha Magazine, 1992, 39–40). They also avoided the precedent of appointing a religiously uncommitted Druze to this office. However, they soon faced major setbacks. Their appointee, Shaykh Muhammad Abu Shaqra, gradually adopted many of the modernizers' objectives. Meanwhile, 'Aref Abu Shaqra's flawed narrative about the office's definition, functions, and history gained ground among the modernizers and the wider Druze community. This added a layer of obscurity to the already forgotten institutional traditions of the Shaykh al-'Aql office. Despite its lack of historical accuracy or value, this narrative falsely claimed that the Shaykh al-'Aql was the highest spiritual leader of the Druze and the functional heir to the Fatimid Imam (Abou Zaki 2021, 29–30), a view Shaykh Muhammad eventually endorsed. The Conservatives' failure to invoke these lost traditions in their discourse made it easier for the modernizers to pursue their agenda, as they appeared to be building sectarian laws and institutions on a blank slate.

In 1962, the Lebanese Parliament passed two additional laws drafted by Druze politicians. The first established the Druze Sectarian Council, and the second regulated the election of Shaykh al-'Aql. The primary function of this Council, which was predominantly made up of religiously uncommitted members, was to manage the Druze Waqf. The new law stripped the Shaykh al-'Aql of all his traditional functions, and the 'Uqqal lost their right to decide who to appoint as Shaykh al-'Aql in the future. Moreover, politicians appointed religiously uncommitted Druze to serve as judges in the Druze judiciary, a role previously reserved for the 'Uqqal. All these changes starkly contrasted the long-established Druze institutional traditions, which I uncovered for the first time in my book. The Conservatives viewed these actions as continued violations of the legitimate traditional rights of religious authorities, further deepening the rift between the two camps.

The charismatic and ambitious character of Shaykh Muhammad Abu Shaqra allowed him to appropriate an exaggerated religious and political role, justified by the previously mentioned mistaken definition of the office that he promoted. This expanded role posed a challenge to both Druze politicians and religious authorities, further complicating the position of Shaykh al-'Aql. His death in 1991 sparked

<sup>2</sup> Shaykh Abu Muhammad Najib Ghannam, Interview, 2004.

another succession conflict, this time between the highest religious authorities and prominent Druze politician Walid Jumblatt. A behind-the-scenes struggle between them and Jumblatt lasted for thirty years, during which the politicians and modernizers achieved all their institutional goals in 2006 after the Lebanese Parliament passed the Law for Regulating the Affairs of the Druze Community. The conflict became public in 2022 when Shaykh Amin al-Sayegh, the current spiritual leader of the Druze in Lebanon, declared that he would not recognize Jumblatt's appointee, Sami Abi al-Muna, as Shaykh al-'Aql. This created an unprecedented situation where a formally appointed Shaykh al-'Aql lacked the recognition of the sect's spiritual leader (Abou Zaki 2023, 6-7).

Many Druze, particularly younger generations, often wonder how such deep dissonance has developed across various sectors of their community. A significant part of the answer lies in the legislative powers granted to Druze politicians by the Lebanese confessional system, allowing them to shape the community's laws and institutions according to their preferences. The other part stems from the complete disregard for Druze institutional traditions. In this latter area, I hope to offer a valuable contribution by rediscovering and explaining the historical evolution of the Druze religious hierarchy and the institutional traditions governing their religious affairs. As Khater suggested, no scholarly research alone, however authentic and credible, can fully resolve these complex disputes. Yet, once a spirit of reconciliation emerges and politicians decide to bridge the gap with the highest religious authorities, a well-researched and objective account of the core issues, as thoroughly explained in this book, will undoubtedly be a valuable foundation for dialogue and a necessary background for resolving these disputes fairly.

The reviewers suggested some improvements to the book. Akram Khater and Tuba Yildiz saw that the historical account of how the Office of Shaykh al-'Aql in Lebanon evolved, especially its institutionalization, lacked sufficient contextualization within the broader history of Lebanon under Ottoman rule. Abdul-Rahman Chamseddine suggested that more examples of the shortcomings of secondary literature would have strengthened my critique. Yusri Hazran indicated that the book lacked an account of the relationship between the Druze religious authorities and the political leaders of the community, mainly the feudal lords of Mount Lebanon. While I generally agree with them on the benefits of their suggestions, I would like to explain certain practical limitations within which I had to frame my research.



I wrote this book to fulfill the requirements for my MA in Arab and Middle Eastern History at the American University of Beirut (AUB). As a result, there were limits on its length and scope, which necessitated a selective focus on topics most relevant to the secondary literature and the concerns of the Druze community in Lebanon. The book's title highlights its central themes—origin, meaning, and evolution—to indicate these limits. I opted for "development" rather than "history" in the title, as the latter would have required adding a separate chapter on the political role of the religious authorities, which was beyond the scope of my research (as explained in the Preface, page 15). This is particularly relevant to the third point in Hazran's critique.

Given the foundational nature of this research, I tried to overcome its limitation by deliberately inserting hints in both the main text and footnotes, indicating topics for further exploration in future studies. When compared with the assertions from specialized scholars about the difficulty of attempting an academic study on the topic (footnote 16, pp. 15-16), the suggestions from the reviewers to elaborate on certain issues highlight the originality of this work and its potential to open new avenues of research. For instance, my periodization of the key developments in the office of Shaykh al-'Aql during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was designed to allude to the broader historical context. I divided these developments into three phases: the final 15 years of Emir Bashir Shihab II's rule, during which he monopolized power in Mount Lebanon with the support of Muhammad 'Ali Pasha of Egypt, the Double Qaimaqamate, and the Mutasarrifiyyat regime of Mount Lebanon. This division lays the groundwork for future research into how these political and social changes in Mount Lebanon affected the office of Shaykh al-'Aql, addressing the broader contextualization that Yildiz and Khater suggested. Similarly, the analysis I presented in Chapter Three on the local socio-political origins of the title Shaykh al-'Aql helps researchers explore possible links to the Ottoman administrative structure and regional policies, as Yildiz suggested. Yildiz's discussion of the Druze Waqf (charitable endowment) also underscores the originality of my research, which established for the first time the Druze Waqf's organic connection to the office of Shaykh al-'Aql.

Chamseddine noted that my critique of the secondary literature could have included more "concrete examples of inaccuracies" and that specific terms, such as Junblati-Yazbeki partisanship, were not adequately defined for readers. The conciseness of the thematic critique stemmed from my thesis advisor's request to significantly reduce the length of the first draft, advising that I develop the

omitted parts in future academic articles. One of the omitted parts explored the uncertainties around whether, before abolishing feudalism in 1861, Druze subjects' loyalty to the Junblati and Yazbeki parties crossed district boundaries or if it was restricted to their feudal lords' territories. This analysis was important for understanding how the hometown of Shaykh al-'Aql might have influenced his political orientations. However, I excluded this and other significant topics to keep the thesis within its limits.

On a more specific note, Hazran highlighted the importance of the book's argument in explaining the nature of the division that the Office of Shaykh al-'Aql underwent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, he found the claim that Emir Bashir Shihab II was responsible for this division "lacks convincing evidence and substantiation," suggesting that it stemmed more from the Emir's prominence in the historical narrative of the Druze in Lebanon than from solid historical evidence. In his critique, Hazran implied that my analysis, whether consciously or not, reflected a bias inherent in the Druze narrative. Explaining this division and its historical context was one of my thesis's most challenging yet original aspects. After a thorough examination of contemporary documents, I was able to reasonably demonstrate that the division began in 1825 (Abou Zaki 2021, 272–290), the same year that Emir Bashir II, supported by regional allies, quelled a major Druze uprising, orchestrated the execution of their leading feudal lords by Ottoman provincial authorities, and monopolized political power in Mount Lebanon.

Two written accounts further supported this conclusion. The first was by an unknown Druze historian, Muhammad Abdul Samad, who stated that Emir Bashir II appointed two Shaykhs to the Office of Shaykh al-'Aql in 1825 (Abou Zaki 2021, 278), whom I demonstrated to be the first dual holders of the office. The second account came from British orientalist Colonel Churchill, who lived in Mount Lebanon for a decade, beginning just 17 years after establishing the aforementioned duality in the Office of Shaykh al-'Aql. Churchill noted that Emir Bashir II attempted to bring Druze religious authority under his control by appointing a Shaykh al-'Aql loyal to him. However, he was unsuccessful due to the strict spiritual qualifications required for the 'uqqal to recognize a Shaykh's prominence.

On the other hand, Emir Haydar Shihab, a close ally of Bashir, stated that one of the Druze's highest religious authorities, Shaykh Yusuf al-Halabi, was captured and imprisoned for his involvement in the 1825 uprising against Bashir. Moreover, a widely known oral tradition among the Druze recounts that Shaykh Abu 'Ali Yusuf Abu Ruslan, from Ras al-Matn, who served as the spiritual leader of the Druze

from 1826 to 1828, was also imprisoned after the conflict ended and subjected to torture. The Hamadies of Ba'aqlin, who were Bashir's allies at the time, mediated his release. Although Shaykh Abu Ruslan was freed, he had to reside in Ba'aqlin and spent the remaining three years of his life in one of its religious retreats, Ras al-Nahl, where he was later buried. His grave became a revered shrine among the Druze.

This harsh treatment of Druze religious figures indicates that Emir Bashir II viewed them as a serious threat to his autocratic rule, treating them with the same severity he applied to Druze feudal lords. Thus, it is unsurprising that he sought to weaken their political influence by dividing the prestigious Office of Shaykh al-'Aql into two seats—one Junblati and one Yazbeki—thereby exacerbating existing political divisions within the community.

Lastly, I believe it is crucial to address Khater's remark about my portrayal of al-Amir al-Sayyed Abdullah al-Tanukhi, where he mentions that I gave him an "oversized" role in developing the Druze local religious institutions. I did not base my emphasis on al-Tanukhi's central role as a religious reformer who firmly re-established the basic religious hierarchy and institutional customs of the Druze community in Mount Lebanon, and which other Druze communities across the Levant later emulated, on mere conjecture. Instead, it was a conclusion well-supported by primary sources (Abou Zaki 2021, 244-245) and reflected in the current practices of the Druze 'Uqqal. While gathering oral histories about the lives and practices of twentieth-century Druze religious authorities, I consistently encountered the meticulous observance of al-Amir al-Sayyed's teachings, even in the simplest aspects of daily life, which further reinforced his profound influence on the community.

With that in mind, the insightful feedback from the reviewers highlighted several areas where future researchers can build on the findings in my book, further enriching our understanding of the Office of Shaykh al-'Aql and its historical evolution while making new and original contributions to the field of Druze Studies. Finally, I want to sincerely thank Dr. Rami Zeedan, editor of the *DSJ*, for offering this valuable platform to engage in a thoughtful academic discourse about my work.

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