Introduction

On June 2, 1949 the grand vizier of the French Protectorate of Tunisia, Muștafa al-KaYa, issued this circular to provincial officials all over the country:

I would like to know if there are any private endowments (abbās) established by Tunisians in the lands of the Egyptian Kingdom. It is desired that a broad search be conducted, and thorough investigations undertaken in order to obtain this information and to record it as soon as possible. If some of those under your administration possess endowments of this kind, you should let us know their type, their importance, and the names of their founders.1

When the official from the island of Jerba responded two months later, he attached to his letter a remarkably detailed table of private endowments in Egypt owned by Tunisians from this island in the south.2 The list was far longer than those from other parts of the country. It included endowed homes (diyār), shops (bawānit), and trade depots (wakā’il) in Cairo and Alexandria dating to as early as the seventeenth century, managed by prominent Jerban merchant families in Egypt. First on the list were the extensive endowments of the al-BaYa hBar family, an Ibadi Muslim family from the southern Jerban town of Ajīm (Figure 0.1).

Over three centuries earlier, on November 18, 1617, several members of the same Jerban families listed in that document had stood in the Civilian Inheritance Court (al-Qisma al-ʿArabiyya) in Ottoman Cairo. Those present, “all from among the distinguished merchants of the market of the [Ibn] Tulun Mosque,” had gathered to serve as witnesses in a case regarding the estate of a merchant from the al-BaYa hBar family named ʿAbd al-RaYa hIm ʿAbd al-RaYa hIm ʿAbd al-RaYa hIm, ed., 3

1 ANT A 281 0006 (1949–1950), doc. 13 (French), doc. 14 (Arabic).
2 ANT A 281 0006 (dated 25 Shaw 1368/Aug 20, 1949), doc. 4.
3 Mahkamat al-Qisma al-ʿArabiyya, 23, case 440 (dated 19 D. al-QaYa da 1026/Nov 18, 1617). Reproduced in ʿAbd al-RaYa hIm ʿAbd al-RaYa hIm ʿAbd al-RaYa hIm, ed.,
These documents, one from the colonial-era archives of the French Protectorate in Tunisia and the other from the court registers of Ottoman-era Egypt, together capture the main themes of this book. First, they demonstrate a centuries-long presence for Jerbans and other

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Maghribi Ibadis in Ottoman-era Egypt that lasted from the seventeenth century well into the twentieth. Second, the family at the center of these two documents, al-Bahhar, endowed the building that is the geographic anchor of my story here. In the early seventeenth century a member of the al-Bahhar family established a trade agency, school, and library beside the Ibn Tulun Mosque that would become known as the “Buffalo Agency” (Wikālat al-Jāmūs).

That institution would be operated and supported by the Ibadi Muslim communities of the Maghrib from the island of Jerba, the Mzab Valley (today in Algeria), and the Jebel Nafusa (today in Libya). As in these two documents, however, the Ibadi affiliation of the Buffalo Agency and its residents over the course of its three-and-a-half centuries of operation remained hidden in plain sight. In this book I argue that this is because the Maghribi Ibadis of Cairo participated in the legal, commercial, religious, and political spheres of Ottoman Egypt to such an extent that they are only with great difficulty distinguished from their non-Ibadi contemporaries. Their unusual status as members of both the Muslim majority and a coherent minority religious community facilitated this participation and enabled them to be at once Ottoman and Ibadi. In short, this is the story of the Ottoman Ibadis of Cairo.

The two documents referred to above likewise bookend the time-frame of the story I tell here. In the following chapters I anchor the history of Ibadis in Cairo to that of the Buffalo Agency and the individuals whose commercial, scholarly, and personal lives intersected there from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries. Finally, the documents convey something of the range of materials I use to tell this story, including Ottoman shariah court records, personal documents and letters, official correspondence, colonial-era archives, and notes and marginalia from private manuscript libraries.

Ibadis as a Community

The Ibadi community constitutes a religious minority, whose history predates the Ottoman period by several centuries. Ibadi Muslims trace their own origins to the first century of Islam in the city of Basra, in what is today Iraq. By the eighth century CE they had begun to emerge as a distinct community, which would develop separately from what would become known as Sunni and Shiʿi Islam. The two spheres of
premodern Ibadi communities – one in the east, centered in the southern Arabian Peninsula, and another in the west, in the Maghrib – developed their own legal, theological, and prosopographical textual corpora that distinguished them intellectually from both one another and their Sunni or Shi’i counterparts.4

The two spheres also followed separate political trajectories throughout the early Islamic centuries. In the Arabian Peninsula, especially in Oman, their communities would hold political power, and in the early modern era even commanding a vast maritime empire that led to the incorporation of the island of Zanzibar into the realm of Ibadism.5 In the west, by contrast, there was only a brief period of Ibadi political control in the form of the Rustamid dynasty of Tāhart (778–909 CE). From the fourth/tenth century onward, Ibadis in the region lived under the control of other empires or regional polities.6 Over the subsequent centuries Ibadi scholars would fashion a historical narrative that drew the boundaries of an Ibadi community and distinguished it from other Muslim groups.7

Since the extension of Ottoman influence into the Maghrib beginning in the sixteenth century, Ibadi communities there have concentrated in three main regions: the Mzab Valley in what is today central Algeria, the island of Jerba in southern Tunisia, and the Jebel Nafusa in northwestern Libya. The Ottoman centuries would witness the continuation of a trend toward a growing familiarity among Ibadi scholars with Sunni texts, a trend that accelerated with the attraction of Sunni


5 Wilkinson, Ibadism; Amal N. Ghazal, Islamic Reform and Arab Nationalism: Expanding the Crescent from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean (1880s–1930s) (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).


Institutions of learning such as the Zaytuna Mosque in Tunis and, as this book explores, the al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo. By the end of the Ottoman centuries, Ibadis knew the Sunni postclassical canon well, and were participating in the pan-Islamic and Salafi discourses of their non-Ibadi contemporaries. One of the purposes of this book is to shed light on this long-term participation of Ibadis in the legal, intellectual, political, and religious life of the Ottoman Empire.

Ibadi Studies

Until very recently, the scholarship on Ibadi Islam in European languages has focused on one of two periods. The first and largest has been research on the earliest history of the community, including its development in late antique and early medieval contexts. Interest in this period of Ibadi history dates back to the first half of the twentieth century in particular. Drawing on that earlier generation of scholars, more recent historians focused on these periods, including many from the contemporary Ibadi community, have made remarkable contributions to our understanding of the place of Ibadis in early Islamic intellectual and legal history. Historiography in Arabic has long

recognized and emphasized the place of Egypt as a site of transit connecting the eastern and western spheres of Ibadism. Like European-language scholarship, however, the emphasis has usually remained on the earliest centuries of Ibadis history with little attention to the Ottoman period.\(^\text{11}\)

Scholars have also begun to turn their attention to Ibadi history in the modern era, situating the history of Ibadi in North Africa, East Africa, and Oman in the contexts of the global events that shaped the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Demonstrating how Ibadi in different places participated in or opposed modern Islamic reform movements, for example, has done tremendous work in making Ibadis visible as distinct intellectual and political communities in the contexts of European colonialism and the early years of independence in North Africa, East Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula.\(^\text{12}\) That scholarship has also emphasized the ways in which Ibadi, like their contemporaries, utilized the technologies of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as the printing press, steam power, and the telegraph to participate in both intra-communal and global conversations on and


engagements with modernity. A continued engagement with globalization has also been the subject of recent scholarship on Ibadic communities in Oman and East Africa.

Although Egypt appears frequently in this scholarship as a hub connecting different Ibadic communities in the late nineteenth and especially the first half of the twentieth century, its role as a site of Ibadic activity in the centuries of Ottoman rule that preceded those periods has gone largely unremarked. I use the history of Ibadis in Cairo throughout much of the Ottoman period to emphasize the long-term importance of Egypt as a site of Ibadic interaction stretching back to the beginning of the seventeenth century. The lack of attention to Egypt in much of the historiography of Ibadic communities is remarkable, since as I demonstrate throughout this book Ibadis were ubiquitous in all aspects of everyday life in Ottoman Egypt. I argue here for recognizing the central place of Ottoman Egypt – and Cairo, in particular – in the history of generations of Maghribi Ibadic students, scholars, pilgrims, merchants, journalists, and activists from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

Ibadis as Ottomans

A history of the Ottoman Ibadis of Cairo and the Buffalo Agency offers three contributions to the historiographies of northern Africa and the broader Ottoman world. First is the transnational nature of the story told here. The Buffalo Agency’s history is primarily one of Maghrabis


living, studying, and working in Egypt but operating in networks linking them to the rest of the Ottoman Mediterranean and beyond. The legal, commercial, and communal ties linking Ibadis in Cairo with their coreligionists in Tunis, Jerba, Alexandria, Mecca, or Istanbul demonstrate the remarkable interconnectedness of the Maghribi to the rest of the Ottoman Empire. Ibadis share this transregional history with other Maghribis in Egypt, whose lives have captured the attention of prominent historians. The collective works of André Raymond and ᵐAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAbd al-Muṭṭṭ, have demonstrated the ubiquity of Maghribis in Ottoman Egyptian society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this book I draw heavily on the work of these three scholars, but I also extend their arguments in two ways. First, I move beyond the general community of Maghribis in Egypt to follow the history of a particular community: Maghribi Ibadis. Second, I follow the history of Maghribis in Egypt beyond the eighteenth century and demonstrate the continuity of the Ibadi Maghribi experience into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This means that the book traces the history of Ibadis in Cairo over almost the entirety of Ottoman rule in Egypt, which I approach here as having lasted in one form or another from 1517 CE until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following World War I.

My emphasis on the Ottoman character of this period and the Maghribi Ibadis who lived through it connects to the second contribution of the book: making Ibadis visible as a religious minority in the historiography of the Ottoman Empire, and Ottoman-era Egypt in particular. Rich and innovative scholarship on the Ottoman Mediterranean from the past several years has highlighted the histories of religious minorities such as Sephardic Jews, Armenian Christians, and Coptic Christians in Ottoman and European colonial contexts.¹⁶

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¹⁶ Recent examples include Magdi Guirguis, “The Organization of the Coptic Community in the Ottoman Period,” in *Society and Economy in Egypt and the*
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Those studies likewise draw attention to how the roles of those minorities within the Ottoman Empire varied according to time and place. Treatments of some of these minorities, as Magdi Guirguis has written, often “do not fully describe these groups of people nor . . . take into consideration the changes that take place in the internal dynamics of such groups in the course of the historical process.”17 In this book I follow Guirguis’s example by tracing the history of Ibadis in Cairo to highlight elements of continuity and change both in the internal dynamics of the community and its place vis-à-vis Ottoman state and society in Egypt and beyond.

While they shared much with non-Muslim religious minorities in the Ottoman Empire, Ibadis nevertheless belonged to the Muslim majority. This unusual combination afforded them opportunities in that it gave them space to participate fully in Ottoman society in Egypt while also allowing them to draw on a vast support network of coreligionists throughout northern Africa and beyond. This dual status of minority within a majority raises two interrelated questions for my purposes here: (1) How visible as a distinct community were the Ibadis to the Ottoman authorities in northern Africa? and (2) What, if anything, distinguished the Ibadis in Cairo from elsewhere in Ottoman lands?

In the lands west of Egypt, Ottomans encountered Ibadis beginning with the establishment of their control there in the sixteenth century. The Mzabi community of the Sahara signed a special agreement with the Ottomans that distinguished them from other parts of the eyalet al-Jazā’ir, granting them autonomy in exchange for tribute and at least indirectly recognizing their identity as Ibadis.18 Internally, the Mzbis

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17 Guirguis, “The Organization of the Coptic Community,” 201.
18 Yūsuf Ibīn Baktr al-Ḥājī Saʿīd, Tārīkh Bant Mzāb: dirāsā ājītimā’iyya wa-istiqṣādīyya wa-siyāsīyya, 3rd. ed. (Ghardaia: n.p., 2014), 68–70. Al-Ḥājī Saʿīd is referencing an agreement with the Wargala, rather than the Mzāb, which is cited
were allowed to maintain their form of governance centered on local
councils of scholars (ʿazzāba). Within the territory under more direct
Ottoman control in the northern tell region, especially in the city of
Algiers, Mzabīs held a special status and remained organized under
and responsible to the leader of their community (āmin). As
I demonstrate in this book, the physical separation of Ibādis in the
Mzab or their “social separation” in the north contrasted with Ibādi
participation in Ottoman society in Egypt.

The identity of the Mzabīs as a trading community throughout the
eyālet al-jāzā ir resembled that of their coreligionists from the island of
Jerba, whose merchant communities could be found throughout the
empire. Ottoman control of Jerba began first through the island’s
incorporation under the Ottoman government in Tripoli in the six-
teenth century. Largely autonomous families ruled the island on behalf
of the Ottomans until Jerba came under control of the Husaynid
Ottoman government in Tunis in the eighteenth century. Over
the period of Ottoman rule, Ibādis in Jerba watched the traditional council
of religious scholars, the ʿazzāba, progressively lose its influence as the
Ottomans exercised control of the island through the appointment of
officials and the establishment of courts. A growing rate of conver-
sion of the island’s population to Maliki Sunnism, especially in the last
two centuries of Ottoman rule, distinguished the Ibādi experience in
Jerba from that of the Mzab. In Jerba people would have been very
aware of the Ibādi community as a distinct one, but there is little to
suggest that the Ottomans were particularly interested in the Ibādis’

in Diego de Haëdo, Histoire des rois d’Alger, trans. H. D. de Grammont
(Algiers: Adolphe Jourdan, 1881), 86–87. Robert Brunschvig suggested that the
Ibādis from both Jerba and the Mzab enjoyed “la liberté . . . pour pratiquer leur
rite” beginning with the Ottoman occupation at the end of the sixteenth century.
Unfortunately, he did not cite the source of that information: see Robert
Brunschvig, La Berbérie orientale sous les Hafsides des origines à la fin du

19 Donald C. Holsinger, “Migration, Commerce and Community: The Mzâbâts in
Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Algeria,” Journal of African History 21,

20 Ibid., 70.

21 Muhammad al-Martmt, Ibâdiyyat Jarba khîlâl al-ʿasr al-hâdith (Tunis: Kulliyat
al-Adâb wa-al-Funûn wa-l-Insânyat bi-Manâbba, 2005).

22 Farhat Djaabiri, Niżâm al-ʿazzâba ʿind al-ibâdiyya bi-Jarba (L’organisation des
azzâba chez les ibadîtes de Jerba) (Tunis: Institut national d’archéologie et