

“It is difficult for people who are angry to listen to a message. Our message is for people of understanding who live amongst the angry masses.”
al-Habib Ali al-Jifri

Interview with the Yemen Times

Reporter: Saeed Al-Batati

Translated by: Wael Zubi

Habib Ali Zain al-Abideen al-Jifri was born into a family of noble lineage extending in an unbroken chain to Imam Hussein, the Grandson of the Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him. Habib Ali is from the majestic city of Tarim in Southern Yemen. Nestled in the ancient valley of Hadramawt, Tarim has been a centre of learning and spirituality for centuries. Habib Ali received a classical Islamic education from the illustrious scholars of Hadramawt, embodying a methodology which crystallizes the middle way of Islam, Islamic jurisprudence, a respect for the difference between jurists and a spiritual education drawn from the Quran & the Sunnah.



Habib Ali is the founder of the Tabah Foundation for Islamic Studies and Research (www.TabahFoundation.org) based in the United Arab Emirates. He is also a lecturer at Dar Al Mustafa, Tarim, an educational institute established for the study of traditional Islamic sciences.

He is continually invited to lecture in many countries across the globe and appears regularly on a variety of network television and radio programmes.

Saeed Al-Batati from the Yemen Times visited Habib Ali's house in Tarim and conducted the following interview.

YT: Why has there been an increased interest in the Moderate Religious Discourse?

At its origin our religious discourse is moderate but the Muslim Community has experienced circumstances at different periods of its history where these

circumstances have caused the more extreme voices to rise to prominence over the voices calling for moderation. The inclination within certain individuals to take on extreme positions is present in every nation, society, and way of life because one of the peculiarities of human society is the existence of moderate and extreme individuals and this is dependent upon circumstances and the psychological make up of a person - be it a balanced or imbalanced personality.

However, in the presence of stability in the Muslim community individuals holding extreme views find no room to extend their opinions to those around them. They find themselves severely limited and unable to have an impact on the reality of the Muslim community unless the Muslim Community goes through a period of weakness.

During periods of weakness and instability, those holding extreme positions take advantage of the situation and use it as an opportunity to spread their opinions. If one was to take a look back through Muslim history one would find that groups such as the Qaramitah and the Khawarij had no real impact except during periods of weakness.

It is the custom of God that extremes do not continue for long because extremism by its very nature does not contain the qualities that ensure permanence and continuity. Extremism spreads when there is a void, but is then unable to continue.

The voices calling to moderation have a background which is dual faceted: firstly, that which relates to what is called the war on terror and what it entails. But there is a second reason, one which is deeper and has a more profound relation to the human soul. It is the fact that extremism by its very nature is repugnant to people with a healthy psychological make up and because moderation is the foundation of the Islamic discourse. The voices of moderation were unheard because some of the powers which are now calling for a War on Terror were the very same powers who once supported the extremists during the Cold War. Were it not for this support the voices of extremism would not have been prominent for all that time. But once the powers that backed the extremists turned on them, the voices of moderation began to be heard. They were never absent - it was just now that the loudspeaker was brought closer to them.

**YT: Who is responsible for distorting the luminous message of Islam?
And what is the way to bring it back?**

Everyone holds some responsibility for this. The magnitude of the burden each one carries depends on his position in society, so the ruler has a responsibility and government advisors have a responsibility (as indicated in the Prophetic saying: "*You are all shepherds, and each shepherd is responsible for his flock*").

Therefore, the responsibility is shared, but its weight differs. The responsibility of the scholar for example is to raise people's awareness. The responsibility of the ruler is to provide a platform for the moderates to educate the people as well as to take the extremists by the hand and admonish them so that they leave their position. The responsibility of the cultured elite is to ensure that the moderate position is prominent in the public domain instead of just sufficing themselves with polemics against those holding extreme views. The responsibility for the distortion of the luminous message of Islam is a shared one.

YT: What is the impact of the events of September 11th upon your work in disseminating knowledge on Islam? And where were you on that day?

I was in the state of Virginia on my way to New York, and we went past the Pentagon about 45 minutes before the building was hit. At the time I was on my way to deliver a lecture at one of the Islamic centres in New York. We then received a call telling us what had happened so we turned back to the place we were staying and saw for ourselves the negative impact of this event upon the lives of Muslims living in America. We then saw the negative impact of this event in the East with what followed in Afghanistan and Iraq.

There is no doubt that these actions by the extremists gave those on the extreme fringes of Western politics a golden opportunity to use these events against the Muslims.

YT: You said in a TV interview broadcast on Iqra' and on your weekly TV program (Al-Mizan) that you were better able to carry out the work of disseminating knowledge on Islam in non-Muslim countries than in some Arab Muslim countries. What are the pressures that you experience in some Muslim Countries?

It is the truth. Whoever wants to serve Islam should expect to experience suffering wherever he/she is. But my intention by this statement was that in some Muslim countries extremely atheistic ideologies and narrow security concerns dictate the decision making process, and dealings with Islam are still based on superficiality and an absence of understanding that Islam is a comprehensive way of life.

The upshot is that there is no way to ensure national security except through the presence of a moderate religious discourse, however some of the regimes in the Muslim world are unaware of this fact. This absence has overshadowed the religious discourse to the point that some scholars cannot even hold a lesson on grammar with four or five students without exposing themselves to being questioned and investigated. The woman who wears Hijab cannot walk in the street in some Muslims countries without compromising her security or being

harmed, whereas a Muslim woman would not have any such problem in many Western countries.

YT: The centres of learning in Hadramawt had a huge role in spreading Islam to the four corners of the earth. But in the last few years some people have been demeaning the huge role Hadramawt played. What is your response to this?

Since I am a product of this centre of learning I do not want to praise it too much, but as they say the facts and the numbers speak for themselves. A third of all Muslims on the face of the earth are so as a result of the missionary activities of this school and as a direct result of the way Islam was taught in this centre of learning. It was taught in a way that was and still is peaceful, morally rectifying, sublime and moderate. You begin to realise the greatness of this school when you realise that many areas of the world map were changed from non-Muslim into Muslim lands at the hands of men who were the product of this school.

You also realise the greatness of this school when you come to realise that this school has been around for more than a thousand years something truly rare in this time. When one looks back at the crimes committed during the last political era (by the Communists of Yemen) against the men who belonged to this school and see that this school still has plenty to give, you will realise the greatness of this school.

The elements that have contributed to the success of this school are sincerity, the unbroken chain of transmission, moderation & balance, in addition to benevolence in dealing with people coupled with addressing them with clear proofs. Those who repeat these demeaning remarks about the school of Hadramawt are not the first people to stand against it and if they understood anything they would look back at those who preceded them in doing this historically, and how they only had a superficial success in their endeavour before they disappeared while the school remained. Those who had good dealings with this school, whether as individuals or groups, disappeared yet their good memory remained.

YT: Amongst the things held against the callers to Islam is that they permit themselves to call to Islam in the West yet they would not permit a Christian Missionary to call people to his/her faith in the Muslim lands, and the fact that Mosques are built in the West yet the building of churches is not allowed in some Muslim countries. Is this not a form of hypocrisy?

The answer to this question is dual faceted:-

Firstly: the West cannot really be considered Christian so the comparison does not really exist... you build a Mosque we build a church. Western governments are largely secular in outlook, and secularism accepts the mutual coexistence of different faith communities, be it Jewish, Christian, Islamic or Buddhist, so the comparison is flawed from the outset. I do not think there is a need to bring up the historical facts surrounding how the Church dealt with Islam and other faiths in Europe.

Secondly: The building of churches in Muslim lands which have an indigenous Christian population is permitted. If you were to visit Egypt or Syria you would find Churches that are attended by worshippers and which are very apparent. All talk of how the Christians or other faith communities were persecuted in Muslim lands is not without exaggeration.

Thirdly: The problem with the work of the Christian Missionaries is that it is not based on proofs and convincing arguments. If that were the case we would not have stopped them but rather allowed them to come and have an open dialogue based on factual proofs and persuasion so that it would become manifest which side holds the truth. Missionary work is usually based on taking advantage of a situation such as poverty, the need for medical help, educational needs and suchlike.

These are the means used to facilitate the process of conversion to Christianity. This is something totally rejected by us as it is based on taking advantage of someone's misfortune as a pose to convincing a person. Whoever has a convincing argument is welcome to come and convince people. The history of Islam is full of examples of open dialogue between the Muslims & Christians, Muslims & Jews and even Muslims & Atheists. The Christians and Jews lived an honourable existence in the Muslims states.

There is no problem in this regard between us and those who differ with us in matters of faith. What we reject is someone taking advantage of the weakness we are going through. There is something quite disgusting in taking advantage of the dire straits of another human being to bring him round to your way of life or thought.

YT: What is your evaluation of the freedom to call to Allah in the Western World?

There is no doubt that there is a freedom to call to Allah in the West, despite the existence of a minority belonging to the political extremes who stand against anything Islamic and look for faults in every caller to Islam in an attempt to place him on the Terror List. It would also be a mistake to say that there is absolute freedom of opinion anywhere; be it America, Europe or any other place. But

there is a greater proportion of freedom in those countries and this allows the Muslims to make their faith better understood by the people they live with. The problem is whether or not the Muslims know how to deal with this. The misuse of these liberties by certain Muslims has given rise to a negative image of Islam; this is what must be dealt with.

YT: Is it true that you were barred from entering into or were asked to leave certain Arab countries?

It is true that I was asked to leave certain Arab countries. They are countries which I love and hold in high regard.

YT: Could you tell us a little about Dar al-Mustafa?

Dar al-Mustafa is an institution set up on three main objectives. First, the dissemination of knowledge which will revive the unbroken chains of learning both in terms of understanding and transmission. Second, wayfaring on the spiritual path; disciplining the lower self, taking on good character and travelling to Allah. Third, to revive the understanding of the methodology of calling to Allah and the work it entails, and tempering these three objectives in the being of the students who study at the institution.

Dar al-Mustafa is a fruit of the school of Hadramawt, as the founder of Dar al-Mustafa, Habib Umar Bin Hafiz, is one of the men produced by this school. Students come to Dar al-Mustafa from every part of the world. There are lodgings for students who want to board and it has branches in Yemen and internationally which were established by graduates of the school. The international branches include Indonesia, and parts of East Africa. There also exists Dar al-Zahra, which is similar to Dar al-Mustafa and specifically for women.



YT: Do the foreign students in Dar al-Mustafa face any pressure from the government?

On the contrary we found a great deal of co-operation from those in positions of responsibility in the government. The talk of some about the Government putting pressure on foreign students of the sacred sciences is contrary to the truth. The only demand of the security services is that they do a check on the students to ensure they do not belong to any groups or ideologies that could be detrimental to Yemen.

The truth is that the government and people of Yemen will not accept Yemen, a country with a long history of producing balanced callers to Islam who were able to convince others to embrace Islam, be turned into a country which produces extremism and radicalism. There are some places in Yemen that taught Western students extremist views. This reflected badly on Yemen and its moderate schools when those students returned to their home countries carrying those views, and this of course is unacceptable.

YT: What enabled you to make Dar al-Mustafa the destination of so many seekers of knowledge from all over the world?

The first reason is that the school of Hadramawt had a hand in the spread of Islam in South East Asia, East Africa and India, and some of those living there moved to the West. They carried with them the methodology which they took from their families and forefathers and this led to those who accepted Islam at their hands coming to Hadramawt. Secondly, the strong link that Habib Umar has with the Sheikhs who themselves were converts to Islam. This led to them sending their students to Dar al-Mustafa, the fruit of which was the students returning to their countries carrying themselves in a praiseworthy manner and embodying good character, moving those around them to want to go to Hadramawt. Thirdly, the spiritual environment that is present in Tarim. Tarim is a city of knowledge, light, uprightness and spirituality. Anyone who enters it is pervaded by a feeling of deep inner peace and tranquillity, and this alone had a great impact on those who came seeking inner peace.

YT: What is your evaluation of the worldwide call to Islam today?

The call to God in the contemporary world is undergoing a pre-birth crisis which manifests itself in the absence of mature authorities to whom people can turn to in times of instability and discord. The institution of calling to the faith needs be reorganised.

The opportunity for calling to Islam is very great and can be seen in the dedication of today's youth and the receptivity of so many people to understand it, despite globalization. Maybe this is one of its good points in that it has made the world into one huge crucible in which everyone brings forth what they have. The information explosion and the communication revolution are an opportunity to take the message of Islam to the world. The weariness of the northern hemisphere from materialism and the southern from oppression have made people receptive and willing to listen objectively to whoever could present his case well.

YT: The School of Hadramawt is accused by some quarters of being pro-government; meaning it always sides with the ruler. What is your reply?

Ten years ago we had the exact opposite. The ruler was on the side of those who make these statements, they were even part of the government. We do not want to live through a period where each party is blaming the other. We can answer by saying the ruler allied himself with you one day in order to strike at his opponent, then moved you to one side. The history of the school of Hadramawt is well known... and the people who paid for Yemen's period under Communism by being murdered and assaulted were scholars from this school and not from the people who talk this rhetoric... but we do not want to go into this narrowness.

Praise be to Allah that there is understanding with the groups from whom such statements are made. Amongst these groups are men of discernment and we have open channels of communication with them, love & respect, and they have made clear their displeasure at some of the statements that came from within their ranks.

Regarding the ruler the statements of the people of knowledge (the scholars of the community) are clear. One cannot revolt against a Muslim ruler except if he does something which is open disbelief. He cannot be obeyed in disobeying the commands of Allah, and he has the right of being given counsel. The ruler does not have absolute loyalty or absolute enmity. Now is a time we need to heal wounds as rulers & ruled, caller & called, politically and socially. This a difficult phase and we cannot overcome it except with our hearts united. I say: "My brothers, leave this rhetoric; more important things face us."

YT: The number of schools of thought in the Muslim world differ as a result of different understandings. You can hardly find a Muslim country which does not have a number of schools of thought. Do you find the existence of these schools agreeable?

Differences and plurality of thought is not a fault, but could be indicative of something positive. The problem arises when these differences are used as a means to achieve the personal goals of those who lead the different groups' schools of thought. Thus we turn our interaction with these differences, which are a mercy, into a means by which we pull people into an ugly spectacle of confrontation, used to bring each leader the biggest following and the best winnings, thereby reducing them into no more than a means to an end. This is a mistake we must overcome.

YT: Jihad has become an area hard understood, giving rise to many debates and much controversy. What is the sound Islamic position on Jihad?

Linguistically the word Jihad is derived from the words (Translators addition: trilateral root words made up of 3 consonants) Juhd defined as: expending all

possible resources, and Jihad defined as: taking oneself to the limit. This essentially means expending every possible resource and working to the limit of one's ability to make the word of truth reign supreme.

Jihad is of many kinds. One is as the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said: "The best Jihad is that of saying the truth in the presence of a despotic ruler." Another is the Jihad of exerting one's best effort to convey Allah's Word to creation. As for the Jihad of fighting in the way of Allah, it is either to fend off an aggressor who has come to take another's land or honour, and it is honourable to sacrifice your life for your faith, land, or honour. There is also the Jihad of bettering one's society - educationally, economically, socially and other areas where occurs a shortfall. Jihad is the pinnacle of Islam. The problems lie where Jihad is used to take advantage of the emotions of an exasperated people, and lead them to a course of action that falls outside the parameters of the sacred law - by leaving its universal principle and reducing it to armed conflict. This is by leaving the universal spirit of Jihad, and reducing it to armed conflict. The second problem occurs when Jihad is misemployed in a conflict in a way that contradicts the teaching of Islamic Sacred Law, becoming a barrier for people coming to Allah and a justification for the enemies of humanity to execute their plans which are based on narrow minded interests.

YT: The global Muslim community is going through a difficult period in its history - its enemies are pursuing it like a pack on a hunt and in every place one finds a part of it injured. In your opinion what is the way out of this crisis?

The answer and way out will not come through a newspaper interview. The way out must come through a comprehensive strategy which necessitates the involvement of scholars, leaders, intellectuals, and politicians who congregate the global Muslim community upon a united front to heal its wounds. As for asking for a quick fix solution during a newspaper interview - this is another one of the problems that has compounded the wounds of the global Muslim community. Part of the problem is that people think we can answer it through a newspaper interview, when in reality it is much bigger than that. What we're experiencing today is an accumulation of complex issues. Due to negligence in trying to understand the faith and acting upon it, mistakes arose from many quarters. The result of these cumulative problems is the disunity seen within our societies and the lack of trust between Muslims. These events can only be resolved with patience and diligence.

YT: What's your message to all the people out there who are angered by what is happening to the Muslims?

It is difficult for people who are angry to listen to a message. Our message is for people of understanding who live amongst the angry masses. Remind people

about the root of the problem ... and the root is our turning away from Allah. The enemies of truth have been allowed to overpower us because of our sins and vices. We have to remind ourselves that with the deep pain which tightens our breasts because of the suffering of our fellow Muslims, we should feel an even greater pain for those who are being sacrificed on the knife edge of sins and disobedience of the Allah's commands. We need to shed even more tears for the Muslims who go to bed drunk and those who fill the dance floors. As long as our community feels more pained by these fatalities than it does by these sins, it will lag behind and not progress. In our golden era the community feared falling into sin more than it did being killed in a conflict, for a Muslim to die when he stands for the truth is martyrdom and an honour by which he can draw near to Allah.

What is more painful to my heart? Seeing a Muslim killed inside a mosque hit by a missile causing him to fall as a martyr or seeing a Muslim male or female betray one another or their community, people who bear false witness or take or accept bribes, or cheat, or spend the night dancing in a night club and consuming alcohol. I am not trying to belittle the magnitude of the disasters we are facing but we need to look at the reasons that have put us in this position.

YT: After the events that unfolded because of the Danish Cartoon, you visited Denmark along with a number of Muslim Speakers. What was the goal of the visit?

The visit to Denmark was in obedience to God's command that a Muslim should seize any opportunity to call to Islam wherever the opportunity is given. We went following an invitation to dialogue. Praise be to God, great achievements were made. The dialogue achieved more than we had expected in terms of opening the minds of people and the fact that many of them were able to understand the reason behind the contention. It became apparent that certain groups created the problem in order to place obstacles before the growing Muslim presence in the West and the growing acceptance of Islam among people in the West. After our trip a delegation came to Abu Dhabi from Denmark and we organised a conference for dialogue. After this a group of students from Denmark (including those who were born Muslims and converts) attended our yearly summer program in Dar al-Mustafa. The problem is that some people do not know how to distinguish between dialogue and negotiation, and ask us "What did you achieve, did they apologise??" Negotiation is the responsibility of other quarters such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference as it has been granted the right to do so, and it is not the responsibility of an individual or a group.

YT: Is there a relationship between you and other callers to Islam?

Our relationship, praise be to Allah, is based on love and respect and evolves in many instances to the level of co-operation. Our outlook is that this is a weighty

burden and the more shoulders are involved in carrying the burden of responsibility, the lighter the burden becomes for each person.

YT: Have you had the opportunity to visit and advise any leaders?

I've had a number of opportunities where I advised and saw a great deal of receptivity to it, as well as seeing its results affecting things on the ground. Advising the rulers should not be a way to glory or gaining popularity. There is a



vast difference between the one who gives advice and the one who attacks the rulers openly on the pulpit or through the media just to show his courage, thereby escaping the pitfall of showing off and doing things to please the ruler only to end up doing the same with the people.

YT: Do you have any final remarks?

Whoever has a position in life should use it for its most exalted purpose which is service in Allah's way. A Muslim should look at himself and ask "... What have I given the Muslim community? What have I given my society? What have I given my family?" And finally, we should live a life based on looking at creation through the eye of mercy, which was how the Beloved Mustafa, peace and blessings be upon him, looked upon both Muslims and non-Muslims.

(Taken from <http://yementimes.com/article.shtml?i=1008&p=report&a=1> with slight editing)