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**The Origin and Meaning of al-Futuwwa**

by

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Al-futuwwa is an Arabic word that encompasses a trove of meaning depending on the period in history and context in which it is used. Sources, both Islamic and academic, seem fairly consistent regarding the idea of al-futuwwa encompassing a “code of conduct” (Tor 243) to which “young men” adhere, be it the result of societal expectations, or, after having undergone formal initiation. However, concise definitions of al-futuwwa continue to elude scholars still today and there is debate regarding whether or not the activities of those groups belonging to futuwwa associations, were nefarious or noble. These issues, among others, serve to complicate the place of al-futuwwa within the realm of Islamic orthodoxy. In spite of these challenges, historians have tried to construct a narrative of futuwwa groups by looking at the development of this social phenomenon at various stages of its evolution.

There is debate regarding whether or not the word futuwwa was used during the early Islamic period amongst the Prophet Muhammad and his companions to denote a set of moral virtues or qualities that marked a young boy’s transition from adolescence to manhood. However, al-futuwwa’s etymological root fata—meaning “a male youth” in the literal sense (Sabzawari 5) has been a part of the Arabic lexicon since the ancient times, and was used to designate the “ideal” Arab warrior before the coming of Islam (loewen 544). Not surprisingly, the word fata did find its way into the Qur’an (the holy scripture of the Muslims) becoming forever solidified as, not only part of the Arab lexicon, but, as part of the lingua franca of the entire Islamic world. Thus, the evidence gleaned from academic and religious sources may help shed light on the nature and origin of al-futuwwa and its significance and development within a religious context.

The word fata may describe any young man of virtue who, in spite of his being beyond the age of puberty, has not yet reached forty—the age of manhood (Sulami 20). Some historians have suggested that the concept of al-futuwwa carries with it pre-Islamic notions of Arab masculinity that was pervasive among the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula before Muhammad’s revelation. The fata, in this instance, was epitomized by someone “...who personifies in the most perfect manner the qualities in which the tribe asks of its sons- a high degree of solidarity to secure cohesion, courage in war to insure adequate defense, and hospitality to maintain the tribal reputation among neighboring groups.” (Salinger 482) In this light, the fata is tied to Arab group solidarity (asabiyah) and valor with little religious significance from an Islamic perspective. Yet, the tribal motifs connected to the fata of the ancient Arabs became permanent fixtures among the “holy warriors” “poor rabble”, and sufi orders

that existed within the Persian heartland of Dar Al Islam (The Muslim Lands) from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onward.

As mentioned previously, the word *fata* and its plural form *fityatun*, do appear in several passages of the Qur'an in reference to the "young" Prophets; Abraham, Joseph and Joshua (sabzawari 15). The Qur'an's 18<sup>th</sup> chapter entitled Al-Kahf (The cave), references a group of pious "young men" (*fityatun*) who fled their city and sought refuge in a cave (*ashabu'l kahf*) against the persecution of a tyrant. The Qur'an narrates how God miraculously caused these youth to fall into a deep sleep while in the cave—a sleep that lasted for over three hundred years without them aging or experiencing bodily deterioration. God then extols the sleepers as "...young men (*fityatun*) who believed in their lord, and we (God and his power) increased them in guidance. And we made firm their hearts when they stood up and said, ["Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Never will we invoke a deity besides him..."] (Qur'an Ch. 18 V.13-14) When the sleepers awoke they found that the town they once fled had become a bastion of monotheistic piety akin to their own.

In this Qur'anic verse we have our first proto-*futuwwa* order of sorts where certain features indicative of the later *futuwwa* associations make their appearance. The first is the idea of there being a group of young men bound together in devotion and sacrifice to God—*al-futuwwa* as a group endeavor. The second defining motif generated from the story is the rejection of a corrupt populace or authority. The verse mentions how the youth of the cave proclaimed that, "These, our people, have taken besides Him deities. Why do they not bring for [worship of] them a clear authority? And who is more unjust than one who invents lie about Allah?" (Qur'an Ch.18 V.15) As an offshoot to this idea of rejecting wide spread corruption (in this case polytheism) is the practice of seclusion from (*khalwa*) and distrust of political authority, a definitive practice of the *futuwwa* through out the middle period. Finally, the willingness to endure peril for the sake of God is a common theme within the Qur'an and would be appropriated by all aspiring *fityaan* who looked to the Prophets and sages for guidance.

The individual who perhaps epitomizes *al-futuwwa* as a kind of righteous "young manliness" (Irwin 161) within the Qur'anic sense is the Prophet Abraham. Considered the father of monotheism within the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, Abraham's story is related in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of the Qur'an entitled Al-Anbiya (The Prophets). For those "piety minded" Muslims who would later fuse the concept of the *fata* with the rituals of Sufism, "The first center-point of the circle of chivalry was Abraham. He is called the father of chivalrous youths (*abu fityan*)" (Sabzawari 13). The Qur'an depicts Abraham as a young man who challenges the idol worship of his father and countrymen, going so far as to put the idols within their sacred temple to the axe, or sledgehammer as it were, destroying them all save the largest one, which he leaves intact as a sign of the impotence of idol worship. Speaking on behalf of the young Abraham's bewildered countrymen God says, "They said, ["Who has done this to our gods? Indeed he is of the wrongdoers.]" They said, ["We heard a young man (*fatan*) mention them who is called Abraham.]" (Qur'an Ch. 21 V. 59-60) Through the example of Abraham, the Qur'an establishes for all Muslims the context through which the *fata* should be understood and the criterion by which all young men of virtue should be judged thereafter. A later treaty on the subject of *al-futuwwa* reinforces this idea stating that, "Whoever destroys the idols of self and lust (*nafs wa hawa*) is of the spiritually chivalrous." (sabzawari16)

The paragon of Arab manliness, as exemplified by someone who was not a Prophet, was Ali ibn abi Talib. His centrality to the history and meaning of *al-*

futuwwa cannot be over emphasized. One tradition attributed to the Prophet Muhammad quotes him as saying, "I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate." (Sabzawari 14) Thus, imitation of Ali becomes the very means by which knowledge of the Prophet and his code of conduct, or sunna, is ascertained. Further, like the young Prophets and pious youth mentioned in the Qur'an, Ali too is reported to have demonstrated an inviolable spiritual maturity at a young age having accepted Muhammad's message at the tender age of ten (kattani 47). One scholar put it rather succinctly regarding the historical significance of Ali to the conception of al-futuwwa when she said "Ali ibn abi Talib the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and the fourth caliph and first Shi'ite imam, became the supreme model of manliness, a fata imbued with virtues of spiritual championship" (loewen 544)

Islamic sources contain numerous accounts of Ali's bravery, equity and valor, particularly during times of war. In one narration Ali is reported to have overpowered an enemy on the battle field such that he was able to place a dagger to assailed combatant's throat with the intention of slitting it. However, before Ali could make his last cut, the victim, described in the story as a "disbeliever", spat in Ali's face causing him to sheath his dagger almost immediately. Ali then stood and said to the man "Taking your life is unlawful to me go away!" (Sulami 13) The man, engulfed in complete astonishment at what he'd just experienced, questions Ali's motives stating, "O Ali...I was helpless, you were about to kill me, I insulted you and you released me. Why?" (ibid 13) Ali then replied, "When you spat in my face it aroused the anger of my ego (nafs). Had I killed you then, it would not have been for the sake of Allah, but for the sake of my ego. I would have been a murderer. You are free to go" (Sulami 13). We are then told that as a result of Ali's benevolence, the "disbeliever" accepts Islam at Ali's hand.

There exists an entire genre of Islamic literature that contains stories of this kind that simultaneously reinforce pre-Islamic notions of Arab manhood, while highlighting instances of divinely inspired altruism indicative of Sufi hagiography. Thus far we've provided examples in an attempt to demonstrate that "...Futuwwah is a code of honorable conduct that follows the example of the prophets, saints sages and the intimate friends (awliya) and lovers of Allah" (ibid 6). It is true that from the 10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century, al-futuwwa did become part of the nomenclature and codex of prominent Sufis masters in and around Nishapur, Iran and the area of Khorasan. Yet, prior to al-futuwwa's preoccupation with the "jihad of the nafs" (ego) that so characterized the institution during its later stages, the cadre of "holy warriors" who eventually adopted "sufi chivalry" as its modus operandi--the ayyarun, were more renowned for their preoccupation with the "jihad of the sword".

Clues regarding the history of al-futuwwa may be found among the ayyarun-- a class of "volunteer...proto-sunni" warriors (tor 34) that gained prominence during the Saffarid dynasty around the 9<sup>th</sup> century. When researching the role of the ayyars in the development of al-futuwwa, one encounters a group characterized by the stigma of brigandage. However, this narrative of the ayyars has not gone unchallenged by historians. Deborah Tor, a leading scholar on Islam's militant spiritual orders, maintains that most modern historians have "uncritically" adopted the "ayyars as-bandit paradigm" from "Baghdadi" scholars of the medieval Islamic period (11<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century) that were traditionally hostile towards the ayyars (tor p.13-14). Thus, the popular notion of the ayyars as a roving band of hired vagabonds and "outlaw(s)" wrecking havoc within the heartland of the Islamic empire, remains dominant due to undue primacy placed on particular sets of primary source materials used by modern historians. Tor argues for a more complicated view of ayyar/futuwwa history,

describing them as a heterogeneous mixture of proto-Sunni scholar notables and plebeians fighting alongside one another to defend the last remnant of the Abbasid Caliphate from inept leadership within, and heretics and rebels without—namely the Shi'ites and Khawarij.

Also according to Tor, they ayyars stem from a much earlier group of volunteer “frontier warriors” known as mutatawwi'a (those who prefer the Jihad) who migrated from “Eastern Iran” (ibid 42) to the borders of the Byzantine empire around Anatolia and Syria during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. These militant holy-warriors were mobilized for the sole purpose of pushing back those Christian forces who had managed to capture several Muslim outposts from the crumbling Umayyad Caliphate following the battle of Akrinon in 740 AD (ibid 42). The mutatawwi'a were characterized by a traditionalists oriented religious zeal that later became indicative of the school of Ahmad ibn Hanbal. The mutatawwi'a were also venerated for their deep asceticism and militant fervor for jihad against the Christians in spite of the fact that these campaigns were “...not incumbent upon them and present in their land. (ibid 43)

Those ulema (Muslim scholars) of the 8<sup>th</sup> century credited as the “founders” of the mutatawwi'a were “Abd al-Rahman b. Umar al-Awza'i, Abdullah ibn Mubarak, Ibrahim ibn Adham and Abu Ishaq al-Fazari” (ibid 44). The aforementioned scholars were known for their staunch adherence to hadith (traditionalism/proto-sunnism), militant fervor for combat, zuhd (extreme asceticism), and a sense of Islamic patriotism that disregarded, and often threatened, the political integrity of the Caliphate. Political indifference and often rebellion against the Caliph would become a distinguishing characteristic that would remain indicative of the ayyar's and futuwwa guilds that followed. This latter quality of indifference to political authority may also explain why accounts written by scholars connected to court of the Caliphs, paints a picture of the ayyar/futuwwa as undesirables.

However, these frontier-scholars not only helped to create the community out of which the ayyars emerge, but their religious discourse helped give birth to a cadre of ulema whose religious sanctions helped lend integrity to the Saffarid-Ayyar dynasty that emerged during the 9<sup>th</sup> century (ibid 46). Under the leadership of Ya'qub b. Layth al-Saffar—founder of the Saffarids, he and his nascent order of knights engaged in perpetual military campaigns that lead to the successful halt of Zaidi Shi'a theology and the eradication of the “heretical threats” (tor 119) posed by the Khawarij. During these raids, the Saffarid militia successfully captured key Abbasid strongholds through out central Iran, conquering Sistan and the Southeastern borders of Iran and Afghanistan. The ayyars under Ya'qub ibn Layth were also successful at generating support from “Sunni Traditionalist scholars” of the time whose intellectual heritage could be traced back to mutatawwi'a founders. One such scholar was “Abu Hatham Khalid b. Ahmad b. Khalid al Dhuli—a hadith scholar from central Asia and student of Abdullah ibn Mubarak (ibid 135). In addition to being revered for his piety and vast knowledge of prophetic traditions, Khalid was equally known for his aversion to the “incompetent” Abbasid official, Muhammad b. Tahir, who had him imprisoned for his outspoken support for the Saffarids (ibid 135).

Tor's analysis of the ayyars differs slightly from that of Hodgson's regarding the classification of these volunteer holy warriors. Hodgson categorizes the warriors under Ya'qub ibn Layth as a type of “mens club militia” (hodgson 128) whose activities were part and parcel to the futuwwa associations that emerged during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Saffarids, upon their conquest of new territory, often brought with them a strong sense of moral efficacy made manifest in new forms of communal

“solidarity” (‘asabiya), “civic discipline” and public deference to the new localized political authority, particularly among the lower classes (Hodgson 129).

Yet, by the 12<sup>th</sup> century the political authority of these proto-futuwwa orders had waned to almost complete non-existence due largely to the inability of these poor militiamen to reconcile class allegiances with their wealthier metropolitan counterparts. Like the militant mutatawwi’a from whom the ayyar/futuwwa had sprung, these networks remained “...resistant to imposed authority—in the spirit of the Shari’ah law and the futuwwa itself...” (ibid 129) Thus, the urbane masses may have rightfully understood that to support these proto-futuwwa orders may have inevitably lead to their own demise given the proclivity of these militiamen to lend their arms to the cause of the poor over the wealthy and more established elite. It is during this period that the militant cadre of Sunni warriors now scattered through out the central and eastern heartland of the Abbasid Empire undergo yet another metamorphosis, reorganizing themselves into trade guilds that emerge from the urban centers of the deteriorating Caliphate.

The sense of autonomy from the government embodied by the mutatawwi’a and the ayyars was too inherited by these trade guilds, which functioned largely outside the jurisdiction of the Caliph. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century these guilds also began to take on the Sufi character for which they have become synonymous. Al-futuwwa, when translated from Sufi parlance, may be understood as Islamic, or Sufi chivalry (Sulami 6). The term may have developed its spiritual connotation after having been appropriated by prominent Muslim sages that emerged around Nishapur, Iran as early as the century as the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The first of them seems to have been an adept by the name Abu Hafs al-Naysaburi who was renowned within the circles of the Sufis as a master of the spiritual path, pious ascetic and bosom companion to the champion of sober tassawwuf—al-Junayd al-Baghdadi (ibid 195). Many of the stories that exist regarding the encounters between Junayd and Naysaburi focus on conversations the two were said to have had around the meaning of al-futuwwa.

Much of what we know about al-Naysaburi, and other Iranian mystics associated with this early conception of al-futuwwa were recorded by Abu Abdul-Rahman Muhammad al-Sulami, a prolific scholar and Nishapurian mystic whose 10<sup>th</sup> century work *Kitab al Futuwwa*, is credited with being the oldest “surviving” treatise on the subject. (Irwin 163) Al-Sulami equated al-futuwwa with the distinct brand of Sufism to which he and his contemporaries adhered. He even authored a work entitled *Tabaqat al-sufiyya* (Classes of the Mystics) in which homage is paid to over 100 saints before and during his time. (Sulami 4) It is within this text that Al-Sulami highlights the exceptional qualities and teachings of Al-Naysaburi, who figures prominently in the *Tabaqat al-sufiyya*.

Al-Sulami chronicles how al-Naysaburi’s exalted rank was acknowledged by the contemporaries of his time, relating how on one occasion several of the shaykhs of Baghdad (among them Junayd) had gathered around al-Naysaburi and asked him to define futuwwa. On this subject, al-Naysaburi deferred to Junayd, who replied: “...futuwwa is not making a show of piety, and forsaking genealogy...” Al-Naysaburi then says “What you have said is so beautiful! However, with me futuwwa is the pursuit of justice, and desisting from the demand for justice...” (ibid 196) Al-Sulami then records Junayd as exclaiming, “Arise, O our friends! For Abu Hafs (al-Naysaburi) is greater than Adam and his progeny!” (ibid 196) On yet another occasion al-Sulami recounts again how al-Naysaburi was asked “What is futuwwa?” to which is reported to have said: “Seeing the excuses for people and your own dereliction, their perfection and your own imperfection; and having compassion upon

all people, the pious one and the profligate. And the perfection of futuwwa is not letting people distract you from God, may he be exalted” (ibid 197).

The following anecdotes are significant to the evolution of al-futuwwa in that they reconnect the institution back to Qur’anic, and early Islamic, notions of al-futuwwa encompassing the attributes of young Prophets and saints. Further, al-Sulami’s recording of those stories which reveal al-futuwwa as having been endorsed by the “shari’a minded” sufi al-Junayd, may demonstrate how widely accepted al-futuwwa’s connection with Sufism had become within the circles of the Persian mystics of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century.

That al-futuwwa would figure prominently in the Persian heartland of Dar al-Islam should be of no surprise when we consider that within Persian culture, the idea of the jawanmard (young champion or hero) had remained integral to the Persian ethos prior to, and after, the coming of Islam. (loewen 543) The culture of Persian masculinity known as jawanmardi, in many ways mirrored the ancient Arab fata. One historian captures this parallel between the Persian jawanmard and Arab fata stating that “Such a person possessed the aggregate of all positive virtues of manhood—courage, honesty, hospitality and generosity...One model of the jawanmard is the heroic warrior...In Persian culture Rustam, the legendary pre-Islamic hero of the epic Shah-namah embodied the characteristics of the heroic warrior” (loewen 543). Thus the culture of the jawanmard may have gelled quite well with the narrative of Ali as the epitome of manhood. When coupled with the institutionalization of Sufism, we can conceive of how the region between Baghdad and Nishapur became the perfect incubator for the militant piety of the ayyars. These elements helped forge a community ripe for the futuwah guilds that emerged under the Caliph al-Nasir din Allah during the later part of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

We mentioned previously how the collapse of the semi-autonomous Saffarid militia led to the futuwah-ayyars re-organizing themselves into trade guilds, and how these organizations were able to maintain relative independence from any centralized Caliphal authority. Hodgson further points out how the futuwah orders during this period were composed primarily of groups of poor young men who occupied the urban slums of Iran and Baghdad. These “clubs of young men”, were often involved in careers as sportsmen, tradesmen and cavalymen, and would come together in the form of “brotherhoods” of hospitality where communal meals and socializing would take place. Additionally, these clubs maintained their martial character often “...bearing arms, allegedly to defend at need their futuwah brethren” (hodgson p.127). These are the individuals whom Caliph Nasir al-din was successfully able to galvanize in a last ditch effort to salvage a crumbling empire. Nasir al-din was not alone in this endeavor. With the prominent Persian Sufi master Abu Hafs Umar Suhrawardi as his chief advisor, Caliph Nasir al-din was able to galvanize the scattered ayyar remnant of “urban lower class men” (ibid 19) and harness them into an organized body of Muslim knights at the service of the Caliph.

Al-Suhrawardi aided the Caliph in institutionalizing this new brand of al-futuwwa that became the hallmark of the tariqa (spiritual path or brotherhood) that he taught and practiced during the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. Al-Suhrawardi received the bulk of his religious and spiritual training under his uncle, Shaikh abu-Najib who was a disciple of Ahmad al-Ghazali, the brother to one of the most influential Muslim theologians of the epoch—abu Hamid al-Ghazali (ul-huda 13). Under his uncle’s tutelage, al-Suhrawardi was “initiated” into the sufi tariqa and presented as a pupil to the most renowned mystic and Hanbali jurist of Abbasid, Persia--Abdul Qadir Jilani, with whom he studied the sciences of tassawuf and jurisprudence (ibid 14). After his tenure

with Jilani, al-Suhrawardi was appointed Shaikh al-Islam (Scholar of the faith) by Caliph al-Nasir and it is during this period that we begin to see the formulation of rituals of initiation associate with al-futuwwa, and more specifically, the Suhwardiyya tariqa. Under al-suhrawardi and the, the investiture of the libas al futuwwa (trousers, belt and sash) and the drinking of a concoction containing salt and water called shurb al murada'ah, was a sign that the fata had advanced in spiritual rank on the path (ibid 26). These practices were not without criticism, among them being his contemporary and fellow Hanbali jurist, the prolific scholar ibn Jawzi. He accused al-Suhrawardi of being a heretic (ibid 14) and this critique was carried even further by another famous Hanbali theologian, Ibn-Taymiyyah who dismissed the above rituals as “innovations” that had nothing to do with the shari'a or practice of the Prophet Muhammad (ibid 28).

In spite of the objection by prominent jurist, Caliph al-Nasir was determined to make al-futuwwa the official code of state conduct. By using his political savvy and integrity as an ally of al-Suhrawardi, Caliph al-Nasir was able to penetrate the inner-ranks of the Ayyarun Fityan, eventually becoming one of them. As a member of the group, al-Nasir observed, “...their rules of purity, respect for ones brother, and the swearing of oaths” (ibid 20). Yet, before al-Nasir's ascension to the Caliphate these groups still maintained hostility towards the government and viewed them as corrupt “politicians” who had little regard for the poor. These futuwwa associations also engaged in occasional acts of civil unrest and “violence” that threatened the stability of the Caliphate, thus it became expedient for al-Nasir to gain a foothold over the associations before any serious threat emerged. After “10 years” as Caliph (ibid 20) al-Nasir did just that, having managed to gain full control over all the dissident Ayyarun Fityan, claiming himself their official leader in 1207 AD (ibid 21).

In spite of his being a staunch Sunni traditionalist not unlike the mutatawi'a and Hanbalis who came before him, al-Suhrawardi did become quite comfortable within the administration of the Caliph and aided him continuously as an advisor and emissary. Al-Suhrawardi was able to wield enormous power and influence due to his being “...a prominent and popular sufi sheikh of his time, who could gain access into decentralized futuwwa systems and shape it to serve the needs of al-Nasir” (ul-huda 19). The question one would be rightfully prompted to ask is, why would al-Suhrawardi do such a thing? The futuwwa guilds of the 13<sup>th</sup> century were an extension of militant shari'a minded Sunnis whose integrity was maintained, largely, by their healthy distance from the Caliph. Yet, during the reign of al-Nasir we see the coming together of the radical Hanbali jurists, Sufi ascetics and the political apparatus of the Abbasid Empire. The answer to the question above is beyond the scope of this study. However these convergent elements helped spawn a movement of al-futuwwa that is still remembered within the nomenclature of the Sufis even today.

For over 40 years the marriage between the Abbasid leadership and the Suhrawardi Sufis forged a new chapter for the history of al-futuwwa that seemed to grant the institution a fixed and permanent place within Islamic social hierarchy. However with the coming of the Mongol hordes in 1258AD, the eastern regions of Dar al Islam, and its capitol at Baghdad, were completely ransacked and overrun. This event re-arranged the socio-political and cultural institutions through out the region, and with it, the character of al-futuwwa. With the last of the Abbasid Caliphs fleeing to Egypt in 1261AD, the ritual of investiture of the libas al-futuwwa continued with the coronation of the Mamluk Sultan Baybars that same year (irwin 162). The last known record of futuwwa investiture in Egypt occurred in 1263AD (ibid 162). And with the socio-political reforms of the Turko-Egyptian Sultan, Muhammad Ali Pasha

in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "...the power of the Mamluks... the religious teachers...and the guilds" (vatikiotis170) were destroyed almost completely.

Thus, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we find the return of what some historians call the "corruption of al-futuwwa" (ibid 170). This idea is credited as being the byproduct of popular Egyptian novels and films, and more specifically, works associated with Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz in the 50's, 60's and 70's. (Irwin 162). Mahfouz's books are said to depict the futuwwa as "bullies of school children" and "toughs who dominate" the poor people of Egyptian neighborhoods neighborhood (ibid 162). One scholars critique describes the futuwwa character depicted in one of Mahfouz's novels as "Master of the people because he beats oppresses and murders them" (vatikiotis 175). Al-futuwwa has also been associated with an entire genre of Egyptian cinema that emerged in the 50's portraying young Arab men Egyptian "gangsters" or associations of "tough guys" akin to the Mafia (irwin 163).

The characters above bear striking resemblance to the baltagi (thugs/strongmen) of Egypt who recently clashed with thousands of Egyptian protestors calling for the ousting of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Many of these strongmen were captured by the protestors and in many cases their I.D. cards revealed that they were composed primarily of secret police who were taking orders from Mubarak himself. The violent clash between the baltagi and the protestors resulted in a widespread uprising through out Egypt that spread from Cairo to Alexandria. Yet, contrary to the actions of the police, that of the protestors as depicted in the media, bears striking resemblance to the code of al-futuwwa.

We saw footage of thousands of people, mostly young men, gathered at Tahrir Square, chanting and fighting against pro-government forces that had attacked them. There was footage of groups of young men protecting entire neighborhoods from looters and robbers despite the fact that very few of them actually had firearms. From the many women who did participate in the uprising, there were no reports of any (save a foreign reporter outside of the square) being harassed or accosted at the Square. Finally, we saw mutual cooperation and solidarity among the thousands of young men gathered at the square, whether they were standing shoulder to shoulder and bowing in unison during Jumu'ah (Friday congregational) prayer , or literally washing the walls and streets in an attempt to clean and restore the neighborhood and it's monuments to a more pristine condition.

An American friend of mine, who was studying at Al-Azhar University, called me from Cairo during the uprising and I remember him saying that the thing that impressed him the most about the behavior of the young men during the revolt "...was the valor they showed towards each other and everyone participating in the protest" especially with regard to "...protecting the people in the surrounding neighborhoods." In my opinion, the events in Egypt are living proof that the ideas of Prophetic futuwwa have not been totally lost. Indeed, those scenes which were broadcast worldwide, and the eye witness accounts given by the Egyptian men and women on the ground, are indicative of the kind of chivalry and heroic generosity born out of the best of the Islamic tradition. I sincerely hope that amidst the wave of change we have seen sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa that a revival of Sufi chivalry, will too, be on the horizon.



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