



# The religious thoughts of Abdullah ibn Muhammad Al-Habashi Al-Harari and the doctrines and politics of Al-Ahbash: An evaluation

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## Abstract

*Shaikh Abdullah ibn Muhammad ibn Yusuf Al-Habashi Al-Harari of Ethiopia is a controversial Islamic scholar and founder of Al-Ahbash in Lebanon. He was involved in the struggle mainly with the Islamic fundamentalist Wahhabis there and was expelled from Ethiopia in 1947. After living in different cities, he settled down at Beirut. He was declared leader of the Jam'iyat al-mashari' al-khayriyya al-islamiyya (Association of Islamic Charitable Projects) in 1983 after the death of its founder Shiakh Muhiyy al-Din al-Ajuz. Since then, it has been known as 'Al-Ahbash' (the Ethiopians) after his title Al-Habashi. Al-Ahbash became one of the most controversial Muslim associations in the contemporary spectrum of Islamic groups because of its religious attitudes. Al-Ahbash philosophy blended Sunni and Shi'a theology with Sufi spiritualism into a doctrinal eclecticism. Its ideological discourses mainly follow Shafi'i, Ash'ari and Maturidi doctrines. Al-Ahbash's doctrine has also been influenced by some Sufi orders like Rifa'iyya and Qadiriyya. It emphasized Islam's innate pluralism and determines the religious and political program, which do not fit with the conventional Islamists idea. It advocated for opposition to Islamic political activism and the use of violence against the ruling order. These attributes opposed to the political thoughts of many Islamic thinkers like Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, Sayyid Qutb. The most controversial issue in Al-Ahbash doctrine is the question of the relation among religion, politics, and the state in Islam. Al-Ahbash advocated the separation of religion and state and thereby rejected the idea of an Islamic state. Its views on education, women and science also contradict many of the above named writers opinions. This paper aims at evaluating the philosophy and political doctrines of Al-Ahbash and analyze its impact on the contemporary global Muslim thoughts.*

*Keywords: Al-Habashi, Al-Ahbash, Lebanon, religious philosophy, doctrine, politics*

## Introduction

Shaikh Abdullah ibn Muhammad ibn Yusuf Al-Habashi Al-Harari of Ethiopia is a controversial Islamic scholar and founder of *Al-Ahbash*. He was involved in the struggle mainly with the different local Islamist groups mainly with the Wahhabis there and was expelled from Ethiopia in 1947. After living in different cities, he settled down at Beirut, Lebanon in 1950. He was declared leader of the Jam'iyat al-mashari' al-khayriyya al-islamiyya (Association of Islamic Charitable Projects-AICP) in 1983 after the death of its founder Shiakh Muhiyy al-Din al-Ajuz. Since then, it has been known as '*Al-Ahbash*' (the Ethiopians) after his title Al-Habashi. *Al-Ahbash* gradually spread its ideological doctrines in Lebanon and it became one of the most controversial Muslim associations in the contemporary spectrum of Islamic groups because of its religious philosophy and doctrines.

*Al-Ahbash* philosophy blended *Sunni* and *Shi'a* theology with *Sufi* spiritualism into a doctrinal eclecticism. Its ideological discourses mainly follow Shafi'i, Ash'ari and Maturidi doctrines. *Sufism* plays also an important role in *Al-Ahbash*'s doctrine, demonstrated by supporting some *Sufi* orders (*tariqas*) like *Rifa'iyya* and *Qadiriyya*. It emphasized Islam's innate pluralism and determines the religious and political program, which do not fit with the conventional Islamists idea.

The beliefs of *Al-Ahbash* about *Iman*, *Qura'an*, *Takfir*, *Sahabah* (companion of the Prophet) are also different from the thoughts of Ahl-al-Sunnah-wal-Jama'ah. It advocated for opposition to political activism in Islam and the use of violence against the ruling order. These attributes opposed to the political thoughts of many Islamic thinkers like Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, Sayyid Qutb and Syeed Abul-Ala Moududi. The most controversial issue in *Al-Ahbash* doctrine is the question of the relation among religion, politics, and the state in Islam. *Al-Ahbash* advocated the separation of religion and state and thereby rejected the idea of an Islamic state. Its views on education, interest, media, women and science also contradict many of the above named writers opinions. Thus, *Al-Ahbash* represents a new but highly controversial view in Islam. This paper is aimed at understanding the philosophy and political doctrines of *Al-Ahbash* by studying its history, beliefs and views. It will also address the conceptual, political, and theological aspects of *Al-Ahbash*.

## Short Biography of Abdullah ibn Muhammad Al-Habashi

Shaikh Abdullah Al-Habashi was born in 1910 in Harare of Ethiopia where he studied hadith and Islamic jurisprudence. He followed different *Sufi* orders including the *Qadiriyya*, then the *Tijaniyya*, then the *Qadiriyya*

again, then finally the *Rifa'iyya*. He helped the government in closing all the schools of Islamic National Association for memorizing the Holy Qura'an in Harare city in 1940 and to internment the scholars there, after which many Islamic scholars denounced him as an agitator. Subsequently, he was compelled to leave Ethiopia in the 1950s and settled in Damascus where he got the fame writing rebuttals of *Nasir-al-Din-Al-bani (At-Ta'aqqub-ul-Hadith ala man ta'ana fima sahha min-al-Hadith)* and apparently defending the beliefs of *Ahl-al-Sunnah-wal-Jama'ah*. Because of controversy, he was expelled from Damascus and then moved to Lebanon where he spread his idea almost freely because of civil war there. He and his followers took over a charity organization named *Jam'iyyat al-mashari' al-khayriyya al-islamiyya* 'Association of Islamic Charitable Projects-AICP'. [8] He and his AICP from the beginning were supported by Syrian government and some local, influential personalities such as Nizar Halabi (1952-95), Husam Qaraqira present leader of *Al-Ahbash*, parliament deputies Adnan Trabulsi and Taha Taji; and Usama al-Sayyid. He died of natural causes on September 2, 2008, aged 98.

### **Writings of Abdullah ibn Muhammad Al-Habashi**

Al-Habashi authored good number of books, almost all of them published

from the publication wing of AICP namely *Jam'iyyat al-Mashari*, Beirut as follow: [23],[8]

1. An explanation of *Alfiyyat-ul-Iraqiyy* in the Science of al-Hadith.
2. *As-Sirat-ul-Mustaqim* in *At-Tawhid*.
3. *Mukhtasar* *Abdillah-il-Harariyy*, al-Kafilu bi *Ilm-id-Din-id-Daruriyy*.
4. *At-Ta'aqqub-ul-Hadith ala man ta'ana fima sahha min-al-Hadith*.
5. *Al-Mawlid-ush-Sharif*.
6. *Sharhu Alfiyyat-iz-Zubad* in the *Shafi'iy Fiqh*.
7. *Sharhu Matni Abi Shuja* in the *Shafi'iy Fiqh*.
8. *Sharh Kitab Sullamit Tawfiq ila Mahabbatillah 'Ala Tahqiq*
9. *Sharh-ul-Bayquniyyah* in the Science of al-Hadith.
10. *Sarih-ul-Bayan fir-raddi 'ala man Khalaf-al-Qur'an*.
11. *Idhhar Al-'Aqidah As-Sunniyyah bi Sharh Al-'Aqidah At- Tahawiyyah*.
12. *Risalah Fi Buthlan Da'wa Awwaliyyatil An-Nurul Muhammadiyy*.
13. *Risalah Fi Raddi 'ala Qawlil ba'dhi Innar Rasula ya'lamu kulla Shai'in ya'lamuhumullah*.
14. *Al-Ghaaratul Imaniyyah Fi Raddi Mafasidi At-Tahriryah*.
15. *Sharh As-Sifat Ats-Salats 'Asyarata Al-Wajib Lillah*.
16. *Sharh At-Tanbih*.
17. *Sharhu Matn-il-'Ashmawiyyah* in the *Malikiyy Fiqh*.
18. A poem in *At-Tawhid* (Islamic Belief) of about sixty lines.

19. Ad-Dalil-ul-Qawim alas-Sirat-il-Mustaqim in at-Tawhid,
20. Bughyat-ut-Talibli marifat-il-Ilm-id-Diniyy -il-Wajib.
21. Nusrat-ut-Ta'aqqub-il-Hathith 'ala man ta'ana fima sahha min-al-Hadith.
22. Sharh-ul-'Aqidat-in-Nasafiyyah.
23. Sharh-ul-'Aqidat-it-Tahawiyah.
24. Sharh-us-Sirat-il -Mustaqim.
25. Sharhu Mutammimat-il-  
"Ajurummiyyah in an-Nahw.
26. Mandhumah "Nasihah At-Thullab".
27. At-Tahdhir al-Wajib
28. Kitab Ad-Durri An-Nadhidi Fi Ahkam At-Tajwid.
29. Al-Maqalat As-Sunniyyah fi Kashfi Dhalalat Ahmad bin Taymiyah.
30. Ad-Durarul Bahiyyah Fi Halli Alfadh Al-'Aqidah At-Tahawiyah.
31. Sharh Mandhumah As-Shibhan fil 'Arudh.
32. Al-'Aqidah Al-Munjiyyah.
33. Sharh Manhaj At-Tullab.

### ***Al-Ahbash: Root, Establishment and Development***

*Al-Ahbash* is an Arabic word means the Ethiopians. It is after the name of Abdullah al-Habashi, as he originated from Ethiopia. It generally refers to the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects-AICP (jam'iyat al-mashari' al-khayriyya al-islamiyya). The AICP was founded by Ahmad al-Ajuz in 1930 as a small philanthropic society at Burj Abi Haidar in west Beirut.[9] According to Gary Gambill the AICP arrived in

Lebanon in the 1950s and remained without a leader until the 1980s when Abdullah Al-Habashi became the nominal head of the organization.[19] It was taken over by Al-Habashi's followers in 1983 and by the late 1980s, the society had become one of Lebanon's largest Islamic movements. [9] The devout followers of Al-Habashi started to be known as *Al-Ahbash*. During the Lebanese civil war, *Al-Ahbash* grew from a few hundred members into a large organization. Gradually, *Al-Ahbash* followers had spread in different territories from Lebanon to Tripoli, Akkar and Iqlim. They founded several educational and religious institutions.[22] The AICP or *Al-Ahbash* has its headquarters at Markaz al-Shaykh al-Iskandarani, based in Beirut's Burj Abi Haidar Mosque. Since its inception, the AICP has been backed by the Syrian authorities. Within few years *Al-Ahbash* propelled from a minority group to the largest *Sunni* movement in Lebanon in the early 90s.[16] The Ahbash became one of the most controversial Muslim associations among the contemporary Islamic groups. *Al-Ahbash* launched two-pronged offensive programs against mainly the local Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, and the *Sunni* religious establishments. During the so-called 'war of the mosques', the AICP and its followers took forcibly a number of mosques and campaigned to have its charismatic leadership of Nizar

Halabi elected mufti (legal adviser) of the Lebanese republic. *Al-Ahbash* runs its own radio station. Beyond Beirut, Ahbash followers are concentrated in the *Sunni* communities of Tripoli, Sidon, Biqa, and Iqlim. At the end of 90s the idea of *Al-Ahbash* disseminated in different countries and the members were close to 250,000 worldwide.[21] Gradually *Al-Ahbash* had become a transnational movement, while it has established thirty overseas branches in a dozen countries: Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Jordan, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and most importantly in the different states of the US.[12] Jordan is apparently the only Arab country that permits AICP activities. *Al-Ahbash* promotes its beliefs internationally through strong internet activities and regional offices.[17] *Al-Ahbash* entered the Lebanese politics participating in the parliamentary elections of 1992.

*Al-Ahbash* is led by a group of Shaikhs. Abdallah al-Habashi is its spiritual leader, while Shaikh Husam Qaraqira, president of the organization, is its administrative head. The vice-presidents are Shaikhs Samir al-Qadi, Usama al-Sayyid and Khalid Hunayna. *Al-Ahbash* publishes its journal *Manar Al-Huda* chiefly edited by Shaikh Abd Al-Qadir al-Fakhani. The public relations of *Al-Ahbash* are conducted by Dr. Adnan Trabulsi.

## **The Religious thoughts, Beliefs, Dogmas and Practices of *Al-Ahbash***

The beliefs of *Al-Ahbash* are a new interpretation of Islam blending elements of *Sunni*, *Shi'a* and *Sufism*. Al-Habashi in his books and lectures amalgamated the elements of *Sunni* and *Shi'a* theological doctrines with *Sufi* spiritualism. In an address to his followers, Al-Habashi stated that “we are Ash’ari and Shafi. The Ash’ariyya is the basis of our belief, and the Shafi’iyya is our daily code.”[11] *Al-Ahbash* supports the legitimacy of Imamah of Ali and his descendents while condemns Mu’awiyya and his son Yazid as ‘seditious’ thus follows *Shi'a* tradition in this concern.[20] Al-Habashi’s *Sufi* ideology mainly derived from the Rifa’iyyah philosophy,[16] while it supports *Qadiriyya*, and *Naqshabandiyya* practices. It legitimizes several *Sufi* traditional practices such as the *Ziyarat* (pilgrimage to the saint’s tombs), mystical dance and the use of musical bands in religious ceremonies. [9] Many beliefs of *Al-Ahbash* are strongly confronted to traditional Islamists ideology. In spite of opposing the idea of *Takfir*, the excessive use of *Takfir* by *Al-Ahbash* has created strong controversy among the greater Muslim community. The group vehemently rejects the idea of political activism in Islam by several famous Islamic scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Sayyid

Qutb and Syed Abul ala Moududi.[9] Thus the beliefs of *Al-Ahbash* mixed *Sunni*, *Shi'a* and *Sufism* together, while it followed many controversial practices. Their principal beliefs are discussed below:

1. *Al-Ahbash*'s beliefs combined the *Sunni*, *Shi'a* and *Sufi* elements together.
2. Al-Habashi defines *Iman* (faith) as *tasdiq bil-qalb* (believing in the heart), and expressed by *iqrar bi'l-lisan* (verbal affirmation) only.[2]
3. Al-Habashi maintains that the acts of men are created by God subject to His will and decree. So, in one sense they are acts of God, they are also men's acts subject to his free *ikhtiyar* (choice). God created both good and evil and will guide only those who, He knows, will choose the right way and will lead *dalalah* (astray) those who, He knows, will choose the wrong way. Thus, Al-Habashi follows Ash'ari in ascribing all acts to God and Maturidi in according men's free will.[3]
4. Al-Habashi legitimizes the *Shi'a* Zaidi doctrine as he maintained that everyone who fought against Ali was a *baghi* (transgressor) [3] and thus Mu'awiya and his followers were *Al-firqa Al-baghiya* (faction of transgressors).[2] Thus, *Al-Ahbash* rejected the idea of using *ijtihad* by most of the *Sunni* jurists to legitimize Mu'awiya's stand as a companion of the Prophet (SAAS) simultaneously keeping due respect to Ali. *Al-Ahbash* legitimized the Imamah of Ali, Hasan, and Husain. [2] In this point, *Al-Ahbash* is closer to *Shi'a* idea and farther from the concept of *Ahl-al-Sunnah-wal-Jama'ah*.
5. *Al-Ahbash* supports many *Sufi* beliefs and mystic practices that are condemned by the many *Sunni* Islamic scholars. Such practices include giving *bay'a* (allegiance) to the *Pirs/Awlia* (saintly ancestors), upholding the name of Allah by singing and dancing, celebrating the Prophet's birthday, visiting the shrines of saintly ancestors, seeking the blessing from the pious ancestors (who already passed away), praying loudly after mosque services, and keeping *Mihrab* (meditation boxes) in the mosques etc.[12]
6. *Al-Ahbash* opposes to *takfir*, the charge of unbelief leveled by a Muslim against another Muslim. Therefore, Al-Habashi rejected the practice of *takfir* in denouncing some oppressive rulers in different Middle-Eastern and North African countries by different Islamist movements. For example, he differed with Shaikh Ibn Baz of Saudi Arabia for denouncing the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser as a *kafir*. [12] Al-Habashi strongly criticized Fathi Yakan, the leader of Lebanon's *Jama'a al-Islamiyya*, for asserting that rulers who do not

govern by the Islamic law are *kuffar*. [12]

7. *Al-Ahbash* philosophy strictly rejects the idea of any form of anthropomorphism (*al-tashbih*) of God which they accuse of Wahhabis. [11] Thus, *Al-Ahbash* holds that it does not befit God to speak like that, and his word is not a voice or letters and therefore, the *Qura'an* contains the word of God but could be written only after 'Gabriel listened to His word, understood it, and passed it on to the prophets and the angels', [4] a highly controversial point of view in Islam which is not fully compatible with the consensus of *Ahl-al-Sunnah-wal-Jama'ah*. [11]
8. *Al-Ahbash* decidedly opposed to the Salafist, and many Islamist thinkers, namely Sayyid Qutb, Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab and Ibn Taymiyyah. [9] *Al-Ahbash's* views on education, interest, media, the role of women, and science also contradict many of the above named writers opinions.

### **Views of *Al-Ahbash* towards Politics in Islam**

The most controversial theory of *Al-Ahbash* is its view towards politics in Islam and the relation among religion, politics, and the state. Departing from the most writings of Islamic scholars on this topic, *Al-Ahbash* advocates a separation of religion and state and thereby vehemently rejects the

idea of political activism in Islam and Islamic state system anywhere in the world. It propagates Islamic pluralism and emphasizes the need for Muslim-Christian co-existence and tolerance towards other religious groups. It strongly opposes the use of violence against the ruling authorities. Al-Habashi decidedly opposed to the Islamic political thoughts of Ibn Taymiyyah, Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, Sayyid Qutb and Syed Abul Ala Moududi. [8] *Al-Ahbash* declared them deviated from Islam (*kafir*), while Ibn Taymiyya was declared as 'an exponent of extremism'. [5] Thus *Al-Ahbash* creed strongly opposes to the political activities of contemporary Islamic political movements in the world such as Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya and affiliated movements in different countries including Egypt, Algeria, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia and Lebanon. [12]

### **Some Controversial *Fatwas* of *Al-Ahbash***

Al-Habashi and *Al-Ahbash* issued several *fatwas* (Islamic jurisdiction) on different issues, which created huge controversy among the contemporary *Sunni* Ulama. These *fatwas* are found in their publications particularly *Manar Al-Huda*, their journal. Here are few examples from their *fatwas*:

1. Al-Habashi allowed dealing in *Riba* (interest) with non-Muslims.

Gambling with them and robbing their harvest and cattle are also permissible with a view to take away their money as long as it does not lead to sedition. [2]

2. Paper currency is free of *Riba* and no *Zakat* on it. Because *Zakat* is only applicable on gold and silver.
3. To pray with *Najrasah* (dirty) is allowed. [4]
4. The first sight on strange women is allowed. To go out of home for a woman wearing beautiful clothes and using perfume and cosmetics are allowed as long as she is covering her head. Intermingling between men and women is permissible. [2],[4]
5. To view women through mirror or any kind of reflections is lawful, and thus Al-Habashi permitted watching movies-dramas on television or pictures because they are also reflections.
6. All unlawful intercourse is not fornication until there is penetration.
7. *Al-shafa'a* -appeals for intercession (*Al-tawassul*) from the faithful to the prophets and pious ancestors is allowed. [5]
8. If one spouse becomes '*Habashi*', he or she should leave the other if he or she is not '*Habashi*'. It means the marriage of their followers with the non-followers is illicit.

## Controversies and Evaluation of *Al-Ahbash*'s Philosophy and Practices

The religious philosophy, doctrinal attitudes, beliefs, political views, programs and practices of *Al-Ahbash* created extreme controversy among the contemporary Islamic groups and thinkers particularly *Sunni Ulama*. Among their controversial doctrines and philosophies here are some examples:

1. Though *Al-Ahbash* declared that it follows *Ash'ari* and *Shafi*, but it has been seen that it doesn't follow *Shafi* in several cases. It also ignored the principles and jurisdictions of Great Imam Abu Hanifa and Imam Malik in determining *fatwas* (Islamic jurisprudences). Regarding *Sufi* ideology, it considered some *Sufi* orders like *Qadiriyya*, *Rifa'iyya* and *Naqshbandiyya* as *Turuq Ahl Allah* 'Godly religious orders'. [2],[12] It means the group does not accept all other *Sufi* orders.
2. *Al-Ahbash* believes that *Iman* is *Tasdiq bil-qalb* (believing in the heart) and *Iqrar bi'l-lisan* (verbal affirmation) only without deeds. Anyone who believes in Allah is *Mu'min* either he prays or not, he performs *Farz* (obligatory duties) or not. [4] The group maintains that if anyone utters '*La ilah illa Allah*' (No God but Allah) at least once in lifetime, he is Muslim and *Mu'min* (believer), even if he does not do



any of Allah's commands, and do not leave Allah's prohibitions.

[4] The *Ulama* of *Ahl al-Sunnah* maintain that *Iman* is *Tasdiq bil-qalb*, *Iqrar bi'l-lisan* and *A'mal bi'l-Arkan* (performing the obligatory duties). Belief without practice has no meaning in Islam.

3. According to *Al-Habashi* good and evil both are created by the Almighty Allah and thus the activities of human being are also belonged to Allah. He said Allah helps the *Kafir* (non-believer) on their *Kufr*, if Allah does not help them they will not be *Kafir*. [14] This philosophy does not fit with the beliefs of *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah*.
4. Al-Habashi explicitly disagreed with most of the contemporary *Sunni Ulama* and attributed sinfulness with a number of *Sahabi* (companion of the prophet) particularly *Mu'awiya*. In his book '*Al-dalil Al-Shar'i ala ithbat man qaatalahum Ali min Sahabi wa Tabi'i'*' (The Legal evidence for establishing the Sinfulness of those companions or successors of companions who fought against Ali) and others, he openly insulted many companions of the prophet and attributed them with sinfulness and rebellion particularly to *Mu'awiya*, *Talha*, *Zubair*, *Amr ibn al-'As*, *Khalid ibn al-Walid* and even the mother of believers

*A'ishah*. He declared that *Mu'awiya* was not a true believer.[6] He clearly attributed sinfulness and transgresses to the companions of the Prophet who fought against Ali. With this belief, he rejected the idea of all the *Imams* of *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah* including *Ash'ari*, *Shafi*, four *Imams* who explicitly said that whatever took place among the companions was the result of interpretation and *ijtihad* (individual reasoning) on their part. *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah* maintains that it is obligatory to respect all the *Sahaba* of the Prophet. If anyone disrespects any of them in the least is a *Munafiq* (apostate) as the Quranic verse declares Allah's satisfaction over them. The holy Qura'an declares (*Sura At-Tawbah*: 100) "Allah is well-pleased with them as they are well pleased with Him." [1] There are several sayings of the Prophet which instructed to show due respect to the companions of the Prophet and strongly prohibited not to disrespect any of them. The Prophet (SAAS) said: "My Companions are like the stars: any one of them you follow for guidance, you will be guided rightly." Regarding the battle of *Siffin* between Ali and *Mu'awiya*, *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah* maintained that Ali was the rightful 4th caliph of Islam and *Mu'awiya's* stand was a result of his *ijtihad*.

- They firmly refrained from any disrespectful mention of any of them as well as any of the *Sahaba* of the Prophet. *Imam Al-Shafi* said: ‘Do not probe the Companions of the Prophet because your prosecutor will be Allah Himself on the Day of Resurrection.’ Whenever Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was asked about the battles of Siffin and Jamal he would reply: “Allah kept my hands away from those matters; therefore I will not involve my tongue in them.” *Imam Al-Qurtubi* stated that ‘All of the companions are upright and chosen friends of Allah.’ *Imam Ibn Abd al-Barr* said: ‘The companions are all upright and held in high esteem by unanimous agreement of the specialists of *hadith*.’ [10]
5. Al-Habashi’s support for some *Sufi* practices is highly condemned by the *Sunni* jurists. For example visiting the graves of *Pirs/Awliyas* (saintly ancestor) and appealing their help who are already dead. [2],[4] He believed that the *Pirs/Awliyas* come out of their graves to respond people’s needs and then they go back to their graves. Singing and dancing in the religious celebrations, observing Al-Milad (the Prophet’s birthday) and keeping meditation boxes in the mosques are allowed by *Al-Ahbash*. He asked people to have *Tabarruk* (to seek blessings in something) by stone. [2],[6] *Al-Ahbash* uses music and dances in their parties and they use it to pray to Allah. *Al-Ahbash* uses two musical bands bearing the names of two *Sufi* orders: ‘*al-Rifa’iyya*’ and ‘*al-Jilaniyya*’. These ideas and practices are highly controversial in the traditional Islamic thoughts of *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jama’ah*.
  6. *Al-Ahbash* opposed to the concept of *takfir*. But at the same time the group declared many Islamic thinkers and Muslim people who don’t follow their beliefs and ideologies as *Kafir*. Therefore, their stand is self-contradictory.
  7. *Al-Ahbash*’s belief about the holy Qura’n is highly controversial. According to Al-Habashi’s claim, Qura’n contains the word of God but could only be written after ‘Gabriel listened, understood and passed it on to the Prophet and the Angels’.[6] It hypothetically means the Qura’n is actually Gabriel’s word as per his understanding of the word of Allah. The concept may also be explained that Qura’n is actually not the speech of Allah, rather somebody’s speech and thus it could have some mistakes and then it could be incomplete or imperfect. This idea is completely incompatible with the consensus of *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jama’ah*.
  8. *Al-Ahbash*’s extreme view of rejecting the traditional concept of politics in Islam is strongly

condemned by the contemporary Islamic thinkers particularly the Islamic political groups such as Muslim Brotherhood, *Al-Jama'at al-Islamiyya* and affiliated Islamic movements in different countries of the Muslim world. In the name of Islamic pluralism, Al-Habashi vehemently rejected the idea of Islamic state system. Though *Al-Ahbash* opposed to the Political activities in Islam, at the same time it participated in the Lebanese parliamentary elections in 1992 and their candidate Dr. Adnan Trabulisi was elected to the Lebanese parliament.[9] Thus, their theory and practice contradict with each other.

9. The *Qura'nic* verse '*Ar-rahman ala al'arsh istawa*' (Sura Ta ha: 5) [1] has been meant by almost all Ahl-al-sunnah scholars 'The Most Merciful (who is) above the Throne established.' [1] It means Allah attributes as what He mentioned in His book and in the Sunnah of the Prophet. Here the meaning of *Istawa* is Allah rose over, that set no more details such as how. But Al-Habashi translated it as 'The most Beneficent (Allah) rose over the mighty Throne.' In that sense the word *Istawa* means take possession of the Throne. It may be explained as there was a god before Allah, then Allah possessed the throne from that first god, which

contradicts to the original beliefs of Tawhid (monotheism) in Islam.

10. Al-Habashi intentionally insulted the world famous Islamic scholars such as Ibn Taymiyah, Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, Sayyid Qutb, Syed Abul Ala Moududi, Al-Thahabi, Adh-Dhahabi and Sayyed Sabiq etc. *Al-Ahbash* labeled them as Kafir or deviated from Islam. Shaikh Ibn Taymiyya was criticized as 'an exponent of extremism'. The group also severely criticized many contemporary *Sunni* scholars unethically with exaggeration in their books '*Al-Ta'awun ala al-Nahy an al-Munkar*', '*Al-Radd al-Ilmi ala al-Buti*', '*Al-Qaradawi fil-Ara*', '*Nusrat al-Ta'aqqub al-Hadith*' and their journal *Manar Al-Huda*. *Al-Ahbash* accused them of *kufir* (unbelief), *dalalah* (misguidance), apostasy and hypocrisy. Some of them are: Nasir al-din Albani, Shaikh Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi (1911-1998), Dr. Muhammad Sa'id al-Buti, Dr. Wahbat al-Zuhayli of Syria, Shaikh Rajab Dib al-Naqshbandi of Damascus, Shaikh Nazim al-Qubrusi, The late Mufti of Lebanon Shaikh Hasan Khalid (1921-1989), Shaikh Muhammad ibn Alawi al-Maliki (1948-2004) of Makkah, Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi etc.
11. Al-Habashi misinterpreted the statements of many Islamic scholars to use it in supporting his idea. For

example the statement of Imam Al-Tahawi: “We love the companions of the Prophet, and we never mention them except in a good way” manipulated by Al-Habashi in his book *Idhhar al-Aqidat al-Sunniyyah* saying ‘Its meaning is that on the whole we never mention them except in a good way, but whoever is authentically charged with something, he is critiqued for it’. Al-Habashi explained the statement of Imam Al-Nasafi ‘One must refrain from mentioning the companions except in good terms’ in his book ‘*Al-Matalib al-Wafiyyah fi Sharh al-‘Aqidat al-Nasafiyyah*’ saying that ‘It does not mean that it is forbidden to mention individuals among the companions other than in good terms.’ With this, Al-Habashi meant criticizing the companions of the Prophet selectively is allowed. And thus he criticized many companions of the Prophet.

12. Al-Habashi claimed authorship of a book which was originally authored by Al-Habib Abd Allah Ibn Husain Ibn Tahir Ba’alawi (1778-1855). He published the book entitled ‘*Bughyat al-Talib li-Ma’rifat al-‘Ilm al-Dini al-Wajib*’ in 1407 H with ‘Authored by Abd Allah al-Harari’ on the cover. But in its 3rd edition in 1416 H, it was exposed that the book actually authored by Ibn Taher Ba’alawi.
13. *Al-Ahbash* created several

controversies with settled issues. For example concerning *Qiblah* (the direction of prayer) in the US, it violated all the principles of modern science and traditional practice. Al-Habashi directed his follower in the US and Canada to change their *Qiblah* by 90 degree. In Lebanon, the group changed *Qiblah* to the north. The group created same problem in Japan. They don’t pray with the general Muslims in the *Masajids*. They also created controversies over food, the issue of getting married to women belonging to other revealed religions.

### **Evaluation of *Al-Ahbash* and Fatwa’s by the Contemporary Islamic Scholars**

Several World famous contemporary Islamic scholars, Jurists and Fatwa institutions issued *fatwas* and discourses concerning the practices, thoughts and *fatwas* of *Al-Ahbash*. Markaz al-Nasr li Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamaah of Jakarta and World Fatwa Management and Research Institute of Malaysia compiled some of them. Here are some examples:

1. Dr. Ali Gomma, the Grand Mufti of Egypt and Professor of the Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence at Al-Azhar University, issued *fatwas* in 2003 and 2005 describing the Ahbash as ‘deviant’. ‘At the surface, this sect seems to adhere to the Shafi School of Jurisprudence,

- and to *Imam Al-Ash`ari's* School as regards creed. However, at the deep level, their main intention is to corrupt the Muslim creed and incite sedition amongst the Muslim *Ummah*. 'This group has made all Muslims disgusted with their behavior as Habashis are always associated with confusion (*fitnah*) and division (*firqah*).'[7]
2. Dr. Muhammad Wahbat al-Zuhayli of Damascus, a specialist of Law, legal principles, and Qur'an commentary, declared the group *Al-Ahbash* to be an alien group that has infiltrated the *Ummah* to misguide Muslims and spread *fitna* with support from a non-Muslim country. He said 'Al-Harari and his sect make the *halal* (legal) *haram* (illegal) and the *haram halal*.'
  3. The historian and famous *hadith* scholar of Damascus Shaikh Muhammad Mu'tazz al-Subayni, who was a follower of Al-Habashi but realizing their misguidance, he left him and declared the group to be *fitna*-mongers.
  4. Dr. Ahmad Umar Hashim, president of the University of Al-Azhar in Egypt, issued a statement in 2001, in which he announced that Al-Azhar had nothing to do with the Ahbash of Lebanon and he stated that the position of Al-Azhar was "that group is unwholesome, untrustworthy, and un-Islamic in its thinking."
  5. Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi declared on his website, [24] 'These *Ahbash* are a sect that rebelled against the consensus of the *Ummah* and declared the scholars of the Muslims to be unbelievers. This sect has legal opinions that are abysmally misguided. They have declared as unbelievers *Ibn Taymiyya*, *Ibn al-Qayyim*, *Al-Dhahabi*, *Ibn Baz*, *Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab*, *Sayyid Qutb*, *Al-Ghazali*, and they have spared no-one. Moreover they are ignorant, and they are ignorant of their own ignorance, which is called compound ignorance (*jahl murakkab*)."
  6. Shaikh Muhammad Adib Kallas (1921-2009) one of the great *Hanafi* authorities in Damascus considered Al-Harari a misguided innovator. His foremost student and erudite *Hanafi* scholar Shaikh Abd al-Hadi Kharsa al-Azhari declared *Habashis* to be "deviant, leading others astray, and former *Sunnis* now lying outside of *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah*".
  7. The great *mufti* Ibn Baaz of Saudi Arabia in 1985 issued a *fatwa* stating that: 'The group is deviant and their leader, a person named Abd Allah al-Habashi, is known for his heresy and misguidance. Therefore it is obligatory to have no relations with them and to reject and condemn their false beliefs and to warn people against them and against listening to them or accepting anything they

- say.’
8. According to Tariq Ramadan, *Al-Ahbash* ‘adherents carry on a permanent double discourse: to Western questioners, they claim to support the emancipation of women and laicism to oppose the ‘fundamentalists’ (all the issues they know are sensitive and useful for getting them recognized). However, within Muslim communities, they carry on an extremely intransigent and closed discourse, usually treating most of the principal *Muslim Ulama* as *kuffar*. They base their teachings on interpretations recognized as deviant by all other schools of thought and all other scholars of note. Their approach on very specific points of doctrine is hostile and usually violent.’ [18]
  9. According to French academic Bernard Rougier who taught at the Université St Joseph in Beirut, Lebanon, from 1996-2002, ‘*Ahbash* is the creation of Syrian Secret Services. Prompted by General Kan’an, the Security forces designed the organization in the 1980s as instrument of control’[19] of *Sunni* Islam.
  10. In 2011, the Australian National Imams Council accused the Muslim Community Radio incorporated as being associated with *Al-Ahbash* and made public announcement for government officials not to renew its broadcasting license.[15]

## Conclusion

Abdullah Al-Habashi and his movement *Al-Ahbash* advocated for a new but highly controversial interpretation of Islam. From a small association, *Al-Ahbash* emerged as one of the important and powerful political actors in Lebanon and within the Islamic orbit. It opened several branches in many Islamic and non-Islamic countries and spread their ideology. The theological doctrines of *Al-Ahbash* blended the elements of *Sunni*, *Shi’a* and *Sufism*. It severely opposed to the traditional ideology of political Islam of many Islamic thinkers. Regarding different issues of Islam such as *Iman*, *Qura’an*, criticism of the companions of the Prophet, *Qiblah*, women, media, interest, mysticism, behavior with the non-Muslims, *Al-Ahbash* followed a very different philosophy and practices, which have created high controversies among the contemporary Islamic thinkers particularly the *Sunni Ulama*. Many *Fatwa* of Al-Habashi completely went against the consensus of the *Imams* of *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jama’ah*. Though *Al-Ahbash* declared that it follows *Ash’ari* and *Shafi*, but in several *Fatwas*, the group violated the principles and jurisdictions of *Shafi* and *Ash’ari*. It completely ignored the ideas of Great Imam Abu Hanifa and Imam Malik. It supported some *Sufi* orders like *Qadiriyya*, *Rifa’iyya* and *Naqshbandiyya*, at the same ignored many others. *Al-Habashi* unethically

criticized the role of some companions of the Prophet, which is unacceptable to all the Imams of Ahl al-Sunnah. It supported some mystic practices in the name of *Sufism*, which are not supported by traditional Islamic principles such as asking help from the saintly ancestors who already passed away, dancing and singing as a way of prayer, using musical band in the religious programs etc. It thinks interest based transactions with the non-Muslims, forcefully taking their wealth is legal until it does not lead to sedition. While the group opposed to the idea of *Takfir*, at the same time it declared many Muslim scholars as '*Kafir*'. It decidedly criticized many world famous Islamic scholars of several centuries as deviant from Islam.

The group's debate went to the heart of Islam's major dilemmas and it attracted attention from all over the world. It may be concluded that the major ideas of the group are clearly contradict to the Islamic principles of

centuries. It amalgamated different ideologies together and accepted or rejected as its wish. *Al-Ahbash* is neither a moderate movement as many western scholars evaluated it, [11] because its ideas are unfit to modern concepts such as forcefully taking away of the wealth of non-Muslims is believed legal in Al-Habashi's view, nor a flexible one as it does not allow the marriage of their followers with whom don't follow them. Neither it is a fundamentalist movement as it does not advocate a purification of religion, nor a modern movement presents an alternative to the traditional one, rather it can be termed 'opportunistic idea within Islam'. Thus *Al-Ahbash* ideology presented a new, controversial creed and doctrinal proximity within Islam which created inner-Islamic conflicts and confusions among the contemporary Islamic groups and individuals as well as fragmentation among the *Muslim Ummah* rather dialogues and unity.[]

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