



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

# THE DEBATE ON THE BA'ALAWI LINEAGE IN INDONESIA

## Highlighting Weaknesses in the Genealogical Records

Ahmad Muhajir and Afra Alatas

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## FOREWORD

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The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# The Debate on the Ba‘Alawi Lineage in Indonesia: Highlighting Weaknesses in the Genealogical Records

By Ahmad Muhajir and Afra Alatas

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A scholar from Nahdlatul Ulama by the name of Imaduddin Utsman has recently challenged the long-accepted claim that the Ba‘Alawi—Muslims of Hadhrami descent also known in Indonesia as *habaib*—are descendants of Prophet Muhammad. The challenge arose out of his critical examination of available records on the Prophet’s lineage from the fifth century to the tenth century of Islam.
- His unprecedented challenge courted controversy in Indonesia. It was even more surprising that it came from a religious scholar with a traditionalist background.
- The debate that ensued was inevitable as the *habaib* community had to defend their ancestry, and joining them in their defence were some Javanese Muslim scholars. However, Imaduddin actively rebutted their responses, alongside several other like-minded non-Arab scholars.
- This article examines the debate where both sides presented documents and theories about the (dis)connection of the Ba‘Alawi lineage to Prophet Muhammad. We argue that while Imaduddin’s research does not fully invalidate the Ba‘Alawi lineage, the *habaib* have not been entirely convincing—from Imaduddin’s perspective—about their genealogy.
- Nevertheless, the authority of the *habaib* remains intact despite the challenge to their lineage. This is because they can derive their authority from other factors apart from their lineage.





# The Debate on the Ba'Alawi Lineage in Indonesia: Highlighting Weaknesses in the Genealogical Records

By Ahmad Muhajir and Afra Alatas<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The Ba'Alawi (بَاعْلَوِي) or the descendants of 'Alawi trace their lineage from Prophet Muhammad through Ahmad Al-Muhajir who migrated from Basra, Iraq, to Hadramaut, Yemen, in 320H.<sup>2</sup> They thus have their ancestral roots in the valley of Hadhramaut. Since the early nineteenth century, large numbers of people left Yemen and traversed the Indian Ocean, resulting in a Hadhrami diaspora across South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Africa (Ho 2010, p. xxii). They played an important role in commercial activity and the spread of Islam, and over the years became well-respected for their religious knowledge. In Southeast Asia, some of them even attained political influence through marriage to local ruling families. Most Hadhramis in the region are concentrated in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmad Muhajir was Visiting Fellow in the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. He teaches at the Faculty of Sharia at the State Islamic University Antasari Banjarmasin. Afra Alatas is Research Officer in the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

<sup>2</sup> Most dates used in this paper will be written according to the Islamic Hijriah calendar, marked with an “H” after the year in question. Dates without the “H” are in accordance with the Gregorian calendar.

<sup>3</sup> Some prominent Arab families in the region include the Alhabshi, Alsagoff, Aljunied, Alkaff and Alatas.

Where Indonesia is concerned, there are pockets of Hadhrami communities in Java, and various provinces across Kalimantan and Sulawesi. While their exact numbers are unknown, there are statistics showing over 13,000 Indonesian Ba‘Alawis as of 2017 (*Kumparan*, 13 January 2017). However, this number is only reflective of those living in the greater Jakarta region,<sup>4</sup> and should therefore be smaller than the actual figure. Popular estimates on online news sites say they could number around 1.2 million (Andi 2023). The Ba‘Alawi in Indonesia are commonly referred to as the *habaib*, the plural of *habib*, which means “beloved one”, and the term is often used as an honorific for male religious scholars of Ba‘Alawi lineage. Ba‘Alawi males often have the title “Syed” in front of their names, while females have the title “Sharifah”. While this is the common practice, it is rare for Indonesian male Ba‘Alawis who are often just known as *habib*.

There are several Indonesian *habaib* who are well-known to the general Muslim community, most of whom are religious scholars.<sup>5</sup> For example, Habib Ali Al-Habsyi (1839–1913) is the author of *Simth Ad-Dhurar*, a well-known book of life stories and praises of Prophet Muhammad which are regularly recited by traditionalist Muslims. There is also Habib Hasan Baharun (1934–99) who established an Islamic boarding school in East Java, specializing in Arabic language and the propagation of Islamic teachings. Among those who are still alive is Habib Luthfi bin Yahya (b. 1947), the current leader of the community of Sufi orders (JATMAN) and a member of the Presidential Advisory Council. A younger member of the *habaib* community would be Habib Husein Al Hadar (b. 1988) who is known for preaching about Islam in a way that is attractive to the millennial generation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This would include Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang and Bekasi.

<sup>5</sup> There are also *habaib* who are known in other fields. Some names include former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Alatas (served from 1988 to 1999), rock singer Ahmad Albar (b. 1946), journalist Najwa Shihab (b. 1977), and actress Atiqah Hasiholan (b. 1982). Syarif Abdurrahman Alkadrie (1771–1808) was also a well-known ruler of the Sultanate of Pontianak, West Kalimantan.

<sup>6</sup> There is also Professor Muhammad Quraish Shihab, a prolific author who writes about the Qur’an and produces his own exegeses. Although a member of the *habaib* community, he prefers not to be addressed as such out of humility.

Between March and August 2023, the lineage of the Ba‘Alawi was a topic of discussion on Indonesian social media. It was sparked by research done by Imaduddin Utsman, a respected traditionalist Muslim figure from Banten, West Java. Published in October 2022, Imaduddin’s research found that older records listing Prophet Muhammad’s offspring do not list the Ba‘Alawi ancestors, leading him to question whether they are genuine descendants of the Prophet. This question not only challenges the historical basis on which the Ba‘Alawi lineage is built, but also challenges the status of the Ba‘Alawi as religious nobility who have come to receive much love and respect from the traditionalist Muslim community in Indonesia. After all, it is because of their assumed connection to the Prophet that they came to acquire such respect and authority in the first place (Alatas 2021, p. 4).

The *habaib* rose to the challenge to defend their ancestry. They presented evidence and theories to challenge Imaduddin’s assertions, and non-Arabs who respect the Ba‘Alawi also supported them. However, Imaduddin further rebutted their evidence, as did several other like-minded scholars.<sup>7</sup> As a result, observers witnessed a series of arguments and counter-arguments about the (dis)connection of the Ba‘Alawi genealogy to Prophet Muhammad.

This article documents the debate between Imaduddin and the *habaib*. The debate is particularly unique, given that such a discussion has never occurred in Indonesia, and that the debating parties are religious authorities within the traditionalist Muslim community, the largest religious community in the country. We mainly focus on the academic side of the debate which used primary documents and scientific research as evidence.

After months of responses and rebuttals, the debate subsided in August 2023. However, despite the relative quiet at this juncture, the matter has not been completely resolved; the Ba‘Alawi lineage is neither

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<sup>7</sup> While this paper includes the responses from three non-Arab scholars, there are others such as Kiai Nur Ihyak Salafi Hadinagara, Tubagus Mogi Nurfadil and Gus Fuad Plered who are not discussed here.

fully invalidated by Imaduddin nor fully established and justified by the *habaib*—at least in Imaduddin’s view. Yet, despite the challenge posed, it can be argued that the authority of the *habaib* still remains intact.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF *HABAIB* IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Historically, the *habaib* are known for their role in transmitting Islam to the Malay Archipelago. However, not only did they bring Islam to the region, but they also had the ability to demonstrate how local pre-Islamic practices could coexist with Islamic teachings and traditions. Coming to the region as traders, scholars, missionaries and mystics between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D., they spread the teachings of Islam through an emphasis on universal principles such as equality, humanism, clean leadership, education and social justice. In the process, their accommodation of local practices led to a form of syncretism which is still a defining characteristic of Islam in the region today. Thus, there has been a historical recognition of the importance of the *habaib* as purveyors of Islam in the region, not least in Indonesia.

In the contemporary context, an aspect of socio-religious life which is not uncommon to Muslims—especially in Southeast Asia—is the recitation of the *ratib*, a compilation of supplications and invocations which are regularly read in congregation after the last obligatory prayer of the night. Two of the *ratib* that are well-known among Southeast Asian Muslims are *Ratib Al-Haddad* and *Ratib Alattas*. Composed by renowned Ba‘Alawi scholars Imam Abdallah bin Alawi Al-Haddad (d. 1132H) and Habib Umar bin Abdul Rahman Al-Attas (d. 1072H), the *ratib* are read in remembrance of Prophet Muhammad and are believed to provide believers with a sense of spiritual purification. They are similar to the *dhikr*, which is also a compilation of supplications recited repeatedly with the purpose of remembering God.

Additionally, apart from the recitation of *ratib* in mosques, there are also contemporary *habaib* who are known for their contributions in the area of religious supplication. An example is Habib Syech bin Abdul Qadir Al-Sagoff, an Indonesian musician known for his songs of devotion, also known as *qasidah* or *salawat*, which he performs on

the national stage. Given that these different forms of worship are well-known among Muslims and continue to be propagated and recited by the *habaib*, it can be argued that their centrality in Muslims' lives has contributed to the religious authority of the *habaib*.

For centuries, the *habaib*'s position as one of the authoritative religious groups in Indonesia was never questioned. Their links to the Prophet's household even positioned them at the apex of the hierarchy of Islamic authority among traditionalist Muslims. However, the controversy courted in late 2022 by Imaduddin deconstructed the *habaib*'s hold as the primary gatekeeper of the Islamic faith in Indonesia.

## **IMADUDDIN'S RESEARCH ON THE BA'ALAWI LINEAGE**

Kiai Imaduddin Utsman is the headmaster of Nahdlatul Ulum, an Islamic boarding school in Banten. Born in 1976, he is a young scholar from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and is chairman of its *pesantren* association in Banten. He also sits on the Fatwa Commission of Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Ulama Council, MUI) in the same province. Imaduddin has produced about seventeen treatises in Arabic and a long list of commentaries in Bahasa Indonesia, most of which are about Arabic grammar, literature, jurisprudence and genealogy (at-Tanari 2023). In October 2022, he started publishing articles on the *habaib* and began discussing his findings publicly.

Imaduddin contends that the longstanding claim that the Ba'Alawis are the descendants of Prophet Muhammad is unproven. This argument arose from his examination of books of record produced between the fifth and tenth centuries of Islam. These records, also known as *kitab nasab*, detail Prophet Muhammad's offspring. In essence, these genealogical records are very important to the Ba'Alawi as they serve as proof of their rich genealogy and their links to the Prophet. In fact, it is not uncommon for a male member of a Ba'Alawi family to have his own genealogical record which allows him to trace his ancestry. Thus, it was unsurprising that Imaduddin's claim that he found a significant mismatch in these records churned up much controversy.

Imaduddin focuses on ascertaining the legitimacy of the main Ba‘Alawi ancestors, ‘Alawi and his father ‘Ubaidillah (d. 400H). A *kitab nasab* written in the tenth century of Islam records that ‘Alawi bin ‘Ubaidillah was a grandson of Ahmad bin ‘Isa (see Table 1).<sup>8</sup> While Imaduddin agreed that Ahmad bin ‘Isa was a genuine descendant of the Prophet, he questioned whether ‘Alawi and his father ‘Ubaidillah were truly related to Ahmad by blood (Imaduddin 2022a).

In fact, he found no confirmation for this linkage in the lineage books from earlier centuries. He referred to *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah*,<sup>9</sup> a genealogical text from the sixth century of Islam which indicates that Ahmad bin ‘Isa had three sons, none of whom were named ‘Ubaidillah (ibid.).<sup>10</sup> There is no record in this text of ‘Alawi being Ahmad bin

**Table 1: ‘Alawi bin ‘Ubaidillah’s (No. 12) Connection to Prophet Muhammad, According to Ba‘Alawi Records**

1	Prophet Muhammad	7	Ali al-‘Uraidli
2	Fatimah (who was married to ‘Ali bin Abi Thalib)	8	Muhammad an-Naqib
3	Husien	9	‘Isa
4	Ali Zainal ‘Abidin	10	Ahmad
5	Muhammad Al-Baqir	11	‘Ubaidillah
6	Ja’far as-Sadiq	12	‘Alawi

*Source:* Reconstructed from the website of Rabithah Alawiyah’s Naqabatul Asyraf Al-Kubro.

<sup>8</sup> This source is titled *Tuhfatut Tholib bi Ma’rifati Man Yantasibu ila Abdillah wa Abi Tholib* [A Masterpiece for the Seeker: Getting to Know the People Connected by Blood to Abdillah and Abi Tholib], authored by Sayyid Muhammad bin al-Husain as-Samarqandi (d. 996H). Ahmad bin ‘Isa here is the same Ahmad Al-Muhajir mentioned earlier.

<sup>9</sup> *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah* [The Blessed (Family) Tree] is attributed to Fakhruddin ar-Razy, a great Islamic scholar from the sixth century of Islam.

<sup>10</sup> The three names mentioned in the text as Ahmad’s sons are Muhammad, ‘Ali, and Husein.

‘Isa’s grandson. Imaduddin found similar results from examining six other genealogical texts written between the fifth and ninth centuries of Islam.<sup>11</sup> None of them mentioned that Ahmad bin ‘Isa had a son named ‘Ubaidillah who fathered a man named ‘Alawi (Imaduddin 2023b). Imaduddin further claimed that ‘Alawi bin ‘Ubaidillah had not been in the genealogical records for about six centuries since Ahmad bin ‘Isa passed away in 345H (ibid.). His name first appeared in Imaduddin’s findings only in *Tuhfatut Tholib*.<sup>12</sup> Imaduddin quoted the following lines from this book, which for him, represents the “implanting” of Ba‘Alawi genealogy into Ahmad bin ‘Isa’s lineage.

Lineage experts from Yemen and Hadhramaut, such as ... [here, Sayyid Muhammad as-Samarqandi mentioned nine names] ... said that the honourable *Ahmad bin ‘Isa* went out of Basra, Iraq and with him was his son, *‘Abdullah* and a group of relatives, friends, children, and servants. They moved from one place to another, hiding in different locations until they safely reached Tarim, Hadhramaut with God’s blessing. They settled down there. *From Abdullah, a boy was born and named ‘Alawi*. Later, ‘Alawi had a boy and named him Muhammad. The latter had a son, ‘Alawi from whom Ali Khali’ Qasam was born. [The next in line was] Ali’s son, Muhammad Sohob Mirbath. Muhammad fathered two sons, ‘Alawi and ‘Ali ... ‘Ali had a son named Muhammad al-Faqih al-Muqaddam. This last figure had many offspring (as-Samarqandi 1998, pp. 76–77; emphasis added by authors).

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<sup>11</sup> The six books are (1) *Tahdzibul Ansab wa Nihayatul Alqab* by Al-Ubaidili (d. 437H); (2) *Al-Majdi fi Ansabit Tholibin* by Sayyid Syarif Najmuddin Ali bin Muhammad al-Umri an-Nassabah (d. 490H); (3) *Muntaqilatut Tholibiyah* by Abu Ismail Ibrahim bin Nasir ibnu Thobatoba (d. circa 400s H); (4) *Al-Fakhri fi Ansabit Tholibin* by Azizuddin Abu Tholib Ismail bin Husain al-Marwazi (d. 614H); (5) *Al-Ashili fi Ansabit Tholibin* by Shofiyuddin Muhammad ibnu at-Thoqtoqi al-Hasani (d. 709H); and (6) *Umdatut Tholib fi Ansabi Ali ibn Abi Tholib* by Ibnu Anbah (d. 828H). See list of references for English translations of the titles.

<sup>12</sup> See footnote 8.



Note that the father of ‘Alawi in this text is ‘Abdullah and not ‘Ubaidillah, a matter which Imaduddin takes issue with. However, for the Ba‘Alawi, this is only a matter of notation; both names, they claim, refer to the same man. Furthermore, the other names mentioned in the text are the same as those commonly found in the genealogical texts of the Ba‘Alawi.

But even if ‘Abdullah was indeed ‘Ubaidillah, Imaduddin emphasized that ‘Alawi’s appearance in the text was suspicious because it happened only after 651 years, and no such entry had previously been indicated. From the perspective of the science of hadith or establishing the validity of a saying of the Prophet, Imaduddin wrote that “a report like this one falls into the category of fabrication (*maudlu’*)” (Imaduddin 2023b). Thus, as the title of his article indicates, he declared that “the claim of *habaib* as descendants of Prophet Muhammad is not yet proven scientifically” (Imaduddin 2022b).

Up until this incident, traditionalist Muslims in Indonesia had not contested the claim that the *habaib* are descendants of the Prophet. They are the ones who actively cultivate love and reverence for the *habaib*. Imaduddin’s question thus rocked the boat.

## INITIAL RESPONSES AND REBUTTALS

At the forefront of the *habaib*’s response to Imaduddin’s claims was Rabithah Alawiyah, an organization established in 1928 by and for Indonesian Ba‘Alawis. The organization is regarded by Indonesians—Ba‘Alawi or not—as an authoritative voice on claims of prophetic descent made by anyone in Indonesia. It issues passport-like documents to certify one’s status as a *habib*, and also denies one’s *habib* status if it is not a clear-cut case in the records.<sup>13</sup> The organization has two wings. The first is Naqabatul Asyraf Al-Kubro, which is dedicated to studying records of the past. The second is Maktab Daimi (est. 1932), which is dedicated to recording the names of contemporary Ba‘Alawis. On the

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<sup>13</sup> For example, they found that Dipa Nusantara Aidit, the chairman of the Indonesian Communist Party, was not a Ba‘Alawi from the Al-‘Aidid family as many had claimed him to be (Ramadhan 2020).

whole, the organization has branches in several provinces and is well-respected as a socio-religious organization.

When Imaduddin suggested that the genealogical link between the *habaib* and Prophet Muhammad was highly questionable, the perception emerged that he effectively denied the existence of any descendants of the Prophet. This was despite the fact that he was specifically challenging the lineage of the Ba‘Alawis and not other families who also claim to have links to the Prophet, such as the Hashemites in Jordan (Britannica 2023), the Idrisis in Morocco (Jwaideh 2023), and the Al-Ahdal family in southwestern Arabia (Voll 2010).

This perception was reflected in the earlier comments made by those who disagreed with Imaduddin. One of these earlier responses came from Habib Bahar bin Sumaith<sup>14</sup> who suggested that Imaduddin’s argument could easily be rejected by turning to one reliable hadith: “All lineages will end at some point; all but mine. My lineage will continue until the end of the world” (Sayyid Bahar Bin Sumaith Official 2023). Habib Bahar interpreted this saying to mean that there would be *habaib* until the Day of Judgement<sup>15</sup> and Imaduddin had therefore come to the wrong conclusion.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Gus Qayyum from Lasem offered a long list of scriptural, historical, and motivational texts to make the point that there is indeed a group of people called *habaib* (Muhibbin Gus Qoyyum 2022). None of these early responses, however, spoke to Imaduddin’s point about the absence of ‘Alawi bin ‘Ubaidillah in the earlier genealogical records.

Habib Rizieq Shihab provided a more comprehensive yet unsatisfying response (Kemenko Polhukkam 2020; viva.co.id, n.d.). He responded

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<sup>14</sup> He is an outspoken young preacher who supports the cause of Habib Rizieq Shihab of the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI) and who has attracted many fans and haters (Tzu-Chien 2018). The FPI is an Islamist organization which the Jokowi administration banned in late 2020.

<sup>15</sup> The end of times.

<sup>16</sup> The authors believe that Imaduddin’s argument and this hadith are mutually exclusive. As far as his argument is concerned, this hadith does not say anything about the connection of the Ba‘Alawi to the Prophet’s bloodline.

not only because he was a Ba‘Alawi himself, but also because Imaduddin mentioned his name in his article (Imaduddin 2022a, p. 2).<sup>17</sup> The core of his argument was that because Ahmad bin ‘Isa was a key figure in the Ba‘Alawis’ claim, the task was simply to prove that he was a genuine descendant of Prophet Muhammad—which he did. However, Habib Rizieq’s proposition was a misstatement of the problem, as Imaduddin never denied the status of Ahmad as the Prophet’s descendant. He only challenged the claim that Ahmad had a grandson named ‘Alawi bin ‘Ubaidillah from whom emerged all the Ba‘Alawis.

Habib Hanif Alathas, Habib Rizieq’s son-in-law, wrote two treatises to respond to Imaduddin. The first is entitled *Answers to Imaduddin Uthman’s Suspicion (Syubhat) Regarding the Legitimacy of the Bani Alawi Lineage*. It is filled with several quotes from Muslim scholars, some of which glorify the Ba‘Alawis (Alathas 2023a).<sup>18</sup> In this treatise, he mentions that prominent Indonesian teachers within the traditionalist community recognize the genealogical connection of the Ba‘Alawis to Prophet Muhammad:

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<sup>17</sup> Habib Rizieq started his presentation on the premise that despite the early death of Prophet Muhammad’s sons, there was no break in the lineage. Instead of his sons, it is through his daughter Fatimah—who married his cousin ‘Ali bin Abi Tholib—that his lineage continues. Habib Rizieq then introduced the branch of the Prophet’s family tree which the Ba‘Alawis are part of (as presented in Table 1), mentioning several names and presenting evidence that these were real people and not fictional characters (IBTV 2022). Thus, hope was high that he would provide a strong rebuttal against Imaduddin’s claims.

<sup>18</sup> For example, he quotes Yusuf bin Ismail An-Nabhani (d. 1350H) who said that

...the Ba‘Alawi’s great Islamic scholars and saints are the people of illuminating knowledge and enlightening secrets. In this age and the previous ages, they are plentier and brighter than the stars in the sky. Anyone who followed them was guided to the right path. The only people who doubt the validity of their genealogy and their numerous virtues and merits with which they differentiate themselves from others, thanks to their great grandfather [i.e. the Prophet Muhammad], peace be upon him, are those who gain a small portion in Islam (An-Nabhani cited in Alathas 2023a, p. 7). See Yusuf bin Isma’il An-Nabhani, *Riyadh Al-Jannah fi Azkar Al-Kitab was Sunnah* (Beirut: Darul Fikri Al-‘Araby, 1990), p. 25.

In Indonesia, saints and scholars such as Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari, Kiai Kholil Bangkalan, Kiai Hasan Genggong, Kiai Abdul Hamid Pasuruan, Kiai Abdullah bin Nuh, Kiai As'ad Syamsul Arifin, Kiai Zubair Dahlan, Kiai Armia, Kiai Muhammad Zaini Abdul Ghani (Guru Sekumpul), Kiai Maemoen Zubair, and many others not only *acknowledge that the Ba'Alawis have a true genealogical connection with the prophet*, but also became good examples at showing love to them and at establishing good relations with all of them (Alathas 2023a, p. 5).

Imaduddin contended that such praises were useless without evidence of connection “from the time of Ahmad bin ‘Isa (d. 345H) to the tenth century of Islam when ‘Ubaidillah who had a son named ‘Alawi appeared for the first time in *Tuhfatut Tholib*” (Imaduddin 2023e). He re-emphasized the need to look for references authored by contemporaries of ‘Ubaidillah and ‘Alawi to prove their connection to Ahmad bin ‘Isa.

## **QUESTIONING THE AUTHENTICITY AND RELIABILITY OF THE SOURCES**

Despite Imaduddin’s rebuttal of the responses from individual *habaib*, other responses continued to emerge. For the most part, Imaduddin argued against most responses by questioning the authenticity and reliability of the *habaib*’s references. As mentioned earlier, an important Ba‘Alawi organization at the forefront of the response was Rabithah Alawiyah. One of its main wings, Maktab Daimi, issued a circular in response to Imaduddin and referred to two genealogical texts.<sup>19</sup> They claimed that despite Imaduddin’s findings, there were indeed old *kitab nasab* that recognized the Ba‘Alawi’s connection to Prophet Muhammad. They

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<sup>19</sup> A Ba‘Alawi YouTuber by the name of Habib Mahdi bin Yahya shared the circular to the public by reading it out in his vlog on 13 April 2023. He opposed Imaduddin’s argument, thinking that Imaduddin will be silenced by this statement from Maktab Daimi. Imaduddin later wrote a commentary about the circular.

proposed *Bahrul Ansab* by An-Najafi and *Abnaul Imam* by Ibnu Thabatha, claiming that these *kitab* were produced earlier than the ones Imaduddin examined. Therefore, for Maktab Daimi, those two references established the presence of Ba‘Alawi ancestors in older records, which Imaduddin had claimed he could not find.

Imaduddin was not impressed by this response, arguing that these texts could not be used as reference, mainly because the authenticity and year of publication of the texts were questionable (Imaduddin 2023d). Casting doubt on the references used by his opponents was one of his main strategies in the debate.<sup>20</sup> However, his opponents also cast their own doubts on his sources. In a recently published treatise on Ba‘Alawi lineage, Rabithah Alawiyah (2023, pp. 87–88) suggested that *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah* was problematic as a source. They argued that the origin of the text was suspicious and so was the attribution of Fakhruddin Ar-Razy, a sixth-century Hijriah scholar, as its author.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> There are two parts to Imaduddin’s rebuttal against Maktab Daimi. First, the organization was wrong about the production date of Muhammad An-Najafi’s *Bahrul Ansab*. It could not have been written in the fifth century of Islam, as in Maktab Daimi’s claim, because its author lived in the tenth century. As such, this text cannot substitute or challenge the information about Ahmad bin ‘Isa from *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah* which came out much earlier. Second, Imaduddin states that *Abnaul Imam* as we find it today cannot be regarded to be its original text from the fifth century. He said that its copiers and editors, four individuals who lived in the twelfth century of Islam and onward, added names to the original manuscript. Therefore, it is difficult to use *Abnaul Imam* in this debate because it cannot be ascertained if the name of ‘Ubaidillah or ‘Abdullah in this *kitab* is from the original text of the fifth century or if it is an addition by the copiers and editors in the later centuries.

<sup>21</sup> Rabithah Alawiyah gave three reasons for their suspicion towards *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah* used by Imaduddin to deny the claim that ‘Ubaidillah is a son of Ahmad bin ‘Isa. Firstly, in the 800 years between Ar-Razy’s passing in 606H and the discovery of the manuscript in 1418H by members of the Shi’a community, not a single historian or expert of lineage ever mentioned the text. Secondly, the biographers of Ar-Razy neither included *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah* as one of his writings nor did they ever describe him as an expert of lineage. Lastly, one can identify sentences peculiar to the Shi’a Imamiya in the text. This is

Yet again, Imaduddin responded to this criticism; he provided two reasons to support his claim that Ar-Razy was indeed the author of the text (Imaduddin 2023j, p. 9). Firstly, one can find evidence that *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah* was the work of Ar-Razy in the text itself, since at the very end, there is a sentence stating that Ar-Razy was the author. Secondly, a bibliographic encyclopaedia of books compiled by Turkish polymath Kâtip Çelebi listed Ar-Razy as the author of a *kitab nasab*.<sup>22</sup> For Imaduddin, this was a recognition that Ar-Razy was an expert on lineage.

## ARE ‘ABDULLAH AND ‘UBAIDILLAH ONE AND THE SAME?

The *habaib* continued to contest Imaduddin’s claim that their progenitor ‘Ubaidillah bin Ahmad bin ‘Isa was not in the genealogical records before the ninth century of the Islamic calendar and argued that a historical work by Muhammad Al-Jundi or Al-Janadi (الجندي) who died in the eighth century of Hijriah (either in 730H or 732H) actually mentioned his name. The title of his work is *As-Suluk fi Thabaqat Al-‘Ulama wa Al-Muluk* (The Lines: On the Classes of Islamic Scholars and Kings). One problem with their assertion, however, is that the person that Al-Jundi mentioned

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strange given that Ar-Razy was Sunni. However, it should be noted that the *muhaqqiq* or the person who prepared the text of *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah* for publication, Syekh Mahdi Ar-Rajai, is Shi’a. It is possible that he incorporated some suppositions peculiar to Shi’a Imamiya beliefs into the text, but without changing the narratives or the data. More points of critique on *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah* were made before by Ja’far Assagaf (2023, pp. 53–60).

<sup>22</sup> This evidence can be found in *Kasyf az-Zhunun*, a bibliographic encyclopaedia of books compiled by Turkish polymath Kâtip Çelebi from the eleventh century of Islam. On page 224 of the encyclopaedia, Kâtip Çelebi mentioned that Ar-Razy is the author of “a big book on lineage *Bahrul Ansab* (Sea of Lineages)”, which is a generic name for any genealogical manuscript whose title is unknown when found by later generations. Rumail Abbas, someone who challenged Imaduddin, argued that *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah* is *Bahrul Ansab*, after studying the record number of the manuscript and the person who made a copy of it (Pamitnya Ngantor 2023).

is ‘Abdullah, and not ‘Ubaidillah. A debate thus unfolded as to whether they were the same individual. While Imaduddin argued that they were two different people, the Ba‘Alawis contended that the names referred to one single man.

In *As-Suluk*, the connection between Ahmad bin ‘Isa and Abdullah is observable in Al-Jundi’s presentation of the lineage of someone named Abu Al-Hasan Ali. In the middle of it, Ahmad bin ‘Isa was mentioned to have a son named ‘Abdullah (see Table 2, nos. 10 and 11). The Ba‘Alawis propose that this ‘Abdullah is their ‘Ubaidillah. They made this claim despite the absence of ‘Alawi in this lineage, the son of ‘Ubaidillah who started the Ba‘Alawi family.

According to the Ba‘Alawis, there are three layers in the explanation as to why ‘Abdullah in *As-Suluk* was the same as ‘Ubaidillah. First, they claimed that ‘Abdullah preferred to be called ‘Ubaidillah for his humility, the trait of a Sufi.<sup>23</sup> Second, they identify ‘Abdullah in the

***Table 2: A Reconstruction of the Lineage of Abu Al-Hasan Ali to Prove that Ahmad bin ‘Isa and ‘Abdullah Were Father and Son (Al-Jundi, 1993 M, pp. 135–36)***

1	Prophet Muhammad	10	Ahmad
2	Fatimah (who was married to ‘Ali bin Abi Thalib)	11	Abdullah
3	Al-Husein	12	Hadid
4	Ali Zainal Abidin	13	Muhammad
5	Muhammad Al-Baqir	14	Ali
6	Ja’far As-Sodiq	15	Hadid
7	Ali	16	Ahmad
8	Muhammad	17	Muhammad
9	‘Isa	18	Abu Al-Hasan Ali

<sup>23</sup> The Ba‘Alawis hold that ‘Abdullah was a humble person. He did not feel he deserved the name because, from the Sufi perspective, it refers to the highest attainment of spirituality. ‘Abdullah (عبد الله) literally means “slave of Allah”,

above lineage as ‘Ubaidillah because both have a son by the name of Jadid or Hadid (no. 12 in Table 2). According to the Ba‘Alawis, Jadid was a stepbrother of ‘Alawi.<sup>24</sup> Third, they argue that ‘Abdullah in *As-Suluk* was their ‘Ubaidillah because the author mentioned some of his offspring (see Table 3) whom today’s Ba‘Alawis identify as their well-known progenitors, such as Muhammad Faqih Al-Muqaddam.<sup>25</sup> Habib

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and a true slave of God behaves with unquestionable obedience and total loyalty. Since he did not feel he behaved in such a manner, he preferred to be called ‘Ubaidillah (عبيد الله) instead, which denotes a “lesser slave of Allah” or a slave of lower rank. In Arabic, this change of notation from ‘Abdullah to ‘Ubaidillah is called *tasgir*. It was Habib Ali As-Sakran (d. 895H) who identified ‘Abdullah as ‘Ubaidillah after studying *As-Suluk* and mentioned this sense of humility based on Sufi tradition (Imaduddin, 25 April 2023).

<sup>24</sup> A puzzle remains as to why the above lineage indicates that ‘Abdullah’s son is Hadid, not Jadid. The Ba‘Alawis explain that Hadid (حديد) and Jadid (جديد) refer to the same person. Their names in Arabic spelling are only differentiated by one dot. Given the fact that old manuscripts were handwritten, it was possible that the one dot was left out or faded away. Habib Ja’far Assagaf (2023, pp. 34–35) explained that such an error in handwriting was well known among experts on prophetic traditions, history and genealogy. Al-Jundi himself in another page of *As-Suluk* mentioned this person as Jadid (Vol. 2, p. 463). In addition, an identical lineage of Abu Al-Hasan ‘Ali appeared in *An-Nafhah Al-Anbariyyah* by Muhammad Kazhim (p. 53) from the ninth century of Hijriah, mentioning Jadid in Hadid’s place.

<sup>25</sup> Their first clue is that Al-Jundi identified the individuals (listed in Table 3) as members of a big family called Bani Abi ‘Alawi from Hadhramaut, Yemen. Based on the Arab custom of *kun-yah*, Rumail Abbas argues that the Arabic words “Abi ‘Alawi” means “the father of ‘Alawi” (Pamitnya Ngantor 2023). He believes that this Abi ‘Alawi refers to ‘Ubaidillah who has a son named ‘Alawi, and the people mentioned by Al-Jundi must be his descendants. This *kun-yah* argument is consistent with the information provided in *Syams Az-Zahirah*, a book about Ba‘Alawi genealogy by Sayyid Abdurrahman Al-Masyhur (d. 1320H) (1984/1404H, p. 51). Other clues come from the resemblance of names. Rumail Abbas (Pamitnya Ngantor 2023) says that in volume 2 of *As-Suluk*, p. 463, Al-Jundi mentioned eight individuals from the family of Abi ‘Alawi (see Table 3). It should be noted here that Al-Jundi did not mention the complete sets of lineage for these figures, like he did in the case of Abu Al-Hasan Ali (no. 18 in Table 2). In one case, Al-Jundi mentioned five names connecting a figure to his great great



**Table 3: Names That Al-Jundi Mentioned in As-Suluk, Vol. 2, p. 463 from the Family of Abi ‘Alawi**

Figure I	1		2	3	4	5			
	Abu Marwan Ali	→	Ahmad	→	Salim	→	Muhammad	→	Ali
<p>Al-Jundi’s comment: He was a great Muslim jurist. Religious knowledge spread all over Hadhramaut from him. The spread was due to his religious piety and blessed teaching activities. He produced many works and was the first person from the big family of Abi ‘Alawi who became Sufi.</p>									
Figure II	Hasan	→	Muhammad	→	Ali Ba ‘Alawi	→	Ali	Al-Jundi’s comment: He was an expert in Islamic jurisprudence, knowing by heart a book by Imam Al-Ghazali titled <i>Al-Wajiz</i> .	
Figure III	Abdurrahman	→	Ali Ba ‘Alawi	Al-Jundi’s comment: This person was the uncle of Hasan (Figure II)					
Figure IV	Ali from Ba ‘Alawi	Al-Jundi’s comment: He did a lot of worship, performed prayers almost all the time, repeating the <i>salam</i> or greeting to the Prophet in prayers again and again until hearing a reply							
Figure V	Muhammad	→	Ali from Ba ‘Alawi	Al-Jundi’s comment: He was a pious child, a son of Ali (Figure IV)					
Figure VI	Ali from Ba ‘Alawi	Al-Jundi’s comment: He was a cousin of Ali (Figure IV)							
Figure VII	Ahmad	→	Muhammad	Al-Jundi’s comment: He was an important expert in Islamic jurisprudence and died in 724H					
Figure VIII	Abdullah	→	Alawi	Al-Jundi’s comment: He was a person of religious devotion, taking the Sufi path. He lived during the writing of <i>As-Suluk</i>					

Note: → represents *bin* or “the son of”.

Hanif in his second treatise (2023a, p. 19) made this last point with confidence.<sup>26</sup>

In response to this explanation, Imaduddin first addressed the basic fact that the name Al-Jundi mentioned in *As-Suluk* was ‘Abdullah. For him, it was mere speculation that this person preferred to be called ‘Ubaidillah out of humility. Moreover, Imaduddin proved that the figures in *As-Suluk* whom Habib Hanif eagerly declared as well-known Ba‘Alawi ancestors were in fact different people. Imaduddin skilfully did that by juxtaposing the information given by Al-Jundi against the primary lineage book used by today’s Ba‘Alawis, *Syams Az-Zahirah* (The Afternoon Sun).<sup>27</sup>

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grandfather, which did not include ‘Ubaidillah. In other cases, he only mentioned two or three names, linking a figure to his father or up to his grandfather. These partial lineages open a debate as to whether they are really descendants of ‘Ubaidillah via his son ‘Alawi. Rumail Abbas argued that incomplete lineages should not be a problem because the figures mentioned are “parts of the same big family” of Abi ‘Alawi (Pamitnya Ngantor 2023). But names can be identical, and yet the people do not necessarily belong to the same family.

<sup>26</sup> According to him, Muhammad bin Ali Ba‘Alawi (the father of Hasan, Figure II in Table 3) is known as Al-Faqih Al-Muqaddam. Moreover, Ali (Figure IV in Table 3) who would repeatedly recite greetings upon the Prophet Muhammad in prayers until he [miraculously] heard the reply is known as Kholi’ Qosam. Furthermore, Ali’s son, Muhammad (Figure V in Table 3), is known in Ba‘Alawi tradition as Sohib Mirbath (see also, Ja’far Assagaf 2023, p. 39).

<sup>27</sup> To support his points, Imaduddin uses *Syams Az-Zahirah* from the fourteenth century of Hijriah. Imaduddin questions whether Muhammad bin Ali Ba‘Alawi whom Al-Jundi mentioned on page 463 of his *As-Suluk* is really Muhammad Al-Faqih Al-Muqaddam. He said that one can find a clue about this figure from *As-Suluk* itself, where Al-Jundi indicated that this Muhammad had a son named Hasan (Figure II in Table 3). Imaduddin then asked: Did Al-Faqih Al-Muqaddam have a son named Hasan? He consulted Vol. 1 of *Syams Az-Zahirah*, page 78, and found that there was no Hasan among the five sons of Al-Faqih Al-Muqaddam (namely, Alwi, Ahmad, Ali, Abdullah and Abdurrahman). Imaduddin thus concluded that this Muhammad bin Ali Ba‘Alawi was definitely not the person Habib Hanif thought him to be. Imaduddin does a similar analysis of Ali (Figure IV). Habib Hanif said that this person is known in Ba‘Alawi tradition as “Kholi’ Qosam”, but Imaduddin questions this identification. Imaduddin says that *As-Suluk* provides two clues about this ‘Ali, namely, that he had a son named

Shattering Habib Hanif's argument on this aspect, Imaduddin then put *As-Suluk* into perspective. He suggested that this *kitab* simply cut down the period of absence of Ba'Alawi ancestor in the genealogical records. In his *Rengginang dari Banten*, he wrote:

*As-Suluk* is one of the main references that *habaib* often use to attribute their genealogical connection to Prophet Muhammad. Although this book was produced long after the death of Ahmad bin 'Isa in 345 Hijriah, *habaib* see it as a step that shortens the

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Muhammad and a cousin (ابن عم) named Ali. He again consulted *Syams Az-Zahirah* to find out whether Ali Kholi' Qosam had a cousin named Ali. This book indicates that Kholi' Qosam did not have a cousin because he had no uncle (Al-Masyhur, 1984/1404H, p. 70). His father, 'Alawi, was the only child in the family. After finding this out, Imaduddin discounts the fact that Kholi' Qosam indeed had a son named Muhammad, popularly called Sohib Mirbath (ibid., p. 71). For him, the fact that Kholi' Qosam did not have a cousin was enough to prove that Habib Hanif was wrong in saying that the Ali mentioned by Al-Jundi was Ali Kholi' Qosam. In conclusion, Imaduddin rejected the proposition that Al-Jundi mentioned offspring of 'Alawi bin 'Ubaidillah in page 463 of his *As-Suluk*. It follows that the name of Abi 'Alawi does not refer to 'Ubaidillah who had a son named 'Alawi.

If the Abi 'Alawi mentioned in *As-Suluk* is not 'Ubaidillah, the ancestor of the Ba'Alawis, who could he then be? Imaduddin does not have an elaborate answer to this question. His statements regarding Abi 'Alawi were short and scattered across different writings. In *Rengginang dari Banten*, he simply wrote that "this Abi 'Alawi is a descendant of Jadid bin 'Abdullah" (Imaduddin 2023g). In *Menakar Kesahihan Nasab Habib di Indonesia* (2022a, p. 16), he was more specific: Abu 'Alawi was a descendant of Jadid bin 'Abdullah from the ninth generation (see Table 4). He quoted *An-Nafhah Al-'Anbariyyah* by Muhammad Kazhim (d. 880H) who wrote: "Among the offspring of Al-Jadid is Banu Abi 'Alawi. He is Abu 'Alawi, the son of Abu Al-Jadid, [who is] the son of Ali, the son of Muhammad, the son of Ahmad, the son of Jadid, the son of Ali, the son of Muhammad, the son of Jadid, the son of 'Abdullah, the son of Ahmad, the son of 'Isa, which has been mentioned earlier" (p. 53).

Finally, in *Mawahib Al-Ladduniyyah*, Imaduddin states that Syeikh Muhammad Kazhim clearly indicated that "Banu Abi 'Alawi are the offspring of Abi Al-Jadid, not the offspring of 'Alawi bin 'Ubaidillah" (Imaduddin 2023j, p. 15).

distance between this date and the date when the names [of their ancestors] appeared in *Tuhfatut Tholib* [by As-Samarqandi who died] in 996 Hijriah (Imaduddin 2023g).

He then emphasized that even if it was true that ‘Ubaidillah and ‘Abdullah were two names for one individual,

there is still an absence of any mention of this figure [in authoritative sources] for about 385 years, since Ahmad bin ‘Isa passed away in 345 Hijriah to the death of Al-Jundi, the author of *As-Suluk* in 730 Hijriah (ibid.).

In other words, the *habaib* were still unable to present evidence in the form of a *kitab nasab* that was older than *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah*. Until then, Imaduddin said that he would not stop his challenge.

## THE STATE OF THE DEBATE

Within the span of a few months, Imaduddin attracted responses from the defenders of the Ba‘Alawi lineage, rebutting many of them. The debate also continued beyond the themes discussed above. By July 2023, he had the upper hand in the debate; he was able to steer its direction, pushing his opponents to put forward reference after reference from centuries earlier. Furthermore, their search for *kitab nasab* authored by the contemporaries of Ba‘Alawi ancestors or the closest generation of genealogists after them did not yield the expected results.

Zaini, a knowledgeable commentator who has been focusing his attention on this debate since April 2023, thinks that Imaduddin’s requests are almost impossible to fulfil. This is because Imaduddin will only consider a *kitab nasab* with three important characteristics:

- (1) It was produced earlier than *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah* (meaning early sixth century of Hijriah or earlier);
- (2) It mentions that Ahmad bin ‘Isa had a son named ‘Abdullah or better still, ‘Ubaidillah; and
- (3) It clearly indicates that this ‘Abdullah had a son named ‘Alawi.

Zaini equates an endeavour to find this type of *kitab* to an attempt to “pass a camel through the eye of a needle” (Zaini 2023b). It also appears that Zaini was only thinking of published materials.

Nevertheless, at the time of writing, Rumail Abbas, a historian rumoured to be from a Ba‘Alawi family, has promised his viewers that with older sources, he would prove the connection of ‘Abdullah with ‘Alawi, the progenitor of the Ba‘Alawis. This serious researcher has been doing consistent research on old handwritten manuscripts and analysing them using historical research methods. Initially, he relied on his network in the Middle East to send data to him, but lately, he himself travelled abroad to get the relevant manuscripts. He has shared extracts from certain manuscripts in his social media postings and YouTube videos and has presented data to strengthen the claim of the Ba‘Alawis. For this reason, Imaduddin himself, Zaini and other “lineage YouTubers” as well as lay observers in general have been discussing his new materials and arguments, and waiting for further updates. Rumail contends that Imaduddin made a premature conclusion about the disconnection of Ba‘Alawi lineage based on incomplete research.

The latest and most interesting finding that Rumail shared on his social media account in early November 2023 is that written evidence about Ahmad bin ‘Isa al-Muhajir having a son named ‘Abdullah who migrated to Yemen has been discovered in *isnad hadis*, a chain of reporters of Prophet Muhammad’s sayings. Rumail pays particular attention to one of the reporters in this *isnad*, a figure from the fifth century of Islam by the name of Al-Hasan bin Muhammad Al-‘Allal (d. 490H). This date is of great importance for it is earlier than the production of *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah* (estimated to have been produced in the sixth century of Islam). Rumail shows extracts from the manuscript that indicate that Al-Hasan bin Muhammad Al-‘Allal learnt about the Prophet’s sayings from his grandfather, Abu Al-Hasan ‘Ali bin Muhammad who in turn, learnt about it from his uncle, ‘Abdullah, the son of Ahmad bin ‘Isa (Abbas 2023). Thus, this proves that there is written evidence of ‘Ahmad having a son named ‘Abdullah.

While this is an exciting development for the defenders of the Ba‘Alawi lineage, they must wait until the whole manuscript is fully restored and made public. Note that Rumail promises to show more

*isnad*, and more interestingly, a newly discovered manuscript of *kitab nasab* from around the lifetime of the Ba‘Alawi progenitors. It would be academically unsound if the challengers of the Ba‘Alawi lineage describe these sources as nothing but fabrication and hallucination.

Despite the new development, the validity of Ba‘Alawi genealogy does not rely on countering Imaduddin’s research. When validating a genealogical claim, genealogists generally do not demand what Imaduddin demands: testimonies from *kitab nasab* from consecutive centuries.<sup>28</sup> If they did, several lineage experts with high scholarly reputations would not have declared that Ba‘Alawis were descendants of Prophet Muhammad.<sup>29</sup> Thus, this debate, while enriching readers’ knowledge of the past and hopefully stimulating further research, does not provide the final word on the status of the *habaib*.

## WHITHER THE *HABAIB*’S AUTHORITY?

The *habaib* are deeply revered and respected by other Muslims—whether Arab or not—just by virtue of their connection to Prophet Muhammad. Consequently, one may assume that such a challenge to their lineage could result in a change in attitude towards their authority, or a reversal of their reputation. However, the authority and reputation of the *habaib* is multi-faceted; lineage is not the only aspect, but rather, there are various socio-historical and socio-religious factors which contribute to their authority. Thus, despite the challenge to their lineage, their authority and reputation should remain intact.

There are also *habaib* who are well-respected for their role in knowledge production and countering extremist ideas. This is especially important, given that there are other *habaib* who actively propagate extremist ideas. For example, the founder of FPI, Habib Rizieq Shihab,

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<sup>28</sup> One can consult, for instance, ‘*Umdah At-Tholib* by Ibnu ‘Anibah (d. 828H) on the three ways to validate a lineage, according to genealogists (1961/ 1380H, p. 16). They do not include Imaduddin’s requirements.

<sup>29</sup> This includes the verifier of *As-Syajarah Al-Mubarakah*, Syeikh Mahdi Ar-Rojai.

mentioned earlier in this article, made headlines with his controversial views which sometimes incite violence, and label non-Muslims as enemies of Islam in the process. Having studied in Saudi Arabia, his views are unmistakably Salafi; he wishes to maintain the “purity” of Islam by protecting it from various forms of social deviance which are considered products of Western liberalism, secularism and pluralism (Yilmaz and Barton 2021).

But there are other *habaib* who, although not as loud, are active in promoting peace. For example, Habib Husein bin Ja’far Al-Hadar actively uses his social media presence to do his preaching. For one thing, he is active in inter-religious dialogue and emphasizes that coexistence is possible despite differing beliefs (Ahmad and Norshahril 2023). He also emphasizes that Islam is a religion of love and not war, and is meant to be a source of mercy to be shown to everyone, regardless of religious belief.

There is also Muhammad Quraish Shihab, a scholar and former minister of religious affairs in Indonesia. He has written several books on the Qur’an and Islamic law, and is known for views which run counter to dominant Islamist, extremist or conservative views. For example, in contrast to the likes of Habib Rizieq, Quraish Shihab has said that Muslims are not prohibited from voting for non-Muslim candidates. He has also said that it is not wrong for Muslims to wish Christians “Merry Christmas”, and that it is not obligatory for Muslim women to use the *hijab* or cover their hair.

## CONCLUSION

This debate on Ba‘Alawi lineage in Indonesia was certainly unprecedented. It is even more surprising, given that Imaduddin is part of the largest community of traditionalist Muslims, a community that cultivates reverence and love for the descendants of Prophet Muhammad. The debate has energized the younger portion of Islamic authority in Indonesia from both sides to dig deep into the surviving records of the past. As a result, new faces of Indonesian Muslim scholars have stood out due to their involvement in this debate. They make use of digital technology and Internet communication to disseminate their findings

and thoughts. All the materials of the debate, from the notes, articles, treatises and videos, to the Arabic books used as references, are mostly available on the Internet. Their use of technology also speeds up the collection of data and evidence from relevant figures living abroad. These developments within the largest community of Indonesian Muslims are worth watching.

It is inaccurate to think that this debate represents a competition between *kiais* (non-Arab Islamic scholars) and *habaib*. Senior NU figures have indicated explicitly or implicitly that they still believe that Ba‘Alawis are descendants of Prophet Muhammad. Gus Yahya Staquf, the general chairman of NU, has been very clear in this respect. He stated that there is “no need to look for records [to accept the Ba‘Alawi lineage]. We just need to follow what the majority of our preceding Islamic scholars have said about them” (NU Online 2023). Other senior figures appreciate the debate on Ba‘Alawi lineage as an academic exercise and recommend against spreading hatred and accusations. Kiai Said Aqil Siradj, the former general chairman of NU, chuckled after mentioning that “according to Kiai Imad from Banten, all *habaib* in Indonesia are fake”. He continued that “you may respond to that in a scholarly fashion, not by showing anger. Show with data and facts that our *habaib* are true [descendants of the prophet]” (Sunardi ZM 2023). Kiai Miftachul Akhyar, the chairman of the NU supervisory board, gives the advice to “keep searching and you will find [the proof]. If the spirit of this exercise is academic, then, keep searching” (Zaini 2023c).

There is a worrying fact, however. The debate is not done only in a scholarly fashion. It involves emotionally charged and polarizing campaigns on social media and religious pulpits by both the challengers and the defenders of the *habaib*. Imaduddin and his sympathizers are accused of teaching against loving the Prophet’s descendants and of denigrating the pious and highly reputable scholars of the past, from the *habaib* community or otherwise, who testify that Ba‘Alawis have a legitimate genealogical claim. In response, Imaduddin and some non-Arab figures have said that the *habaib* are exclusivist immigrants who have not mixed with local people, used to work with the Dutch against Indonesians, and have been colonizing the minds of innocent Muslims to serve them and give them money. A certain *habib* says that if it were not



for the religious propagation of their ancestors who came to Indonesia from Hadhramaut, many Indonesians would still worship trees and stones. In response, a discourse is developing with the underlying idea that the role of Ba‘Alawis in spreading Islam in Indonesia is overrated and that several of the Nine Saints accepted as the purveyors of Islam in Javanese society were not actually Ba‘Alawis. All these accusations and mockery raise concerns over a potential division among traditionalist Muslims.

Nevertheless, despite these developments, the Ba‘Alawis will still remain respected and loved by the Muslim community because of the roles they have played and continue to play in history, contemporary religious life, and socio-political affairs.

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