



How to Overcome Racism: Lessons From West African Scholars' *Tafsīr* of *Sūrat al-Hujurāt*

IMAM DAWUD WALID

YAQEEN™
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Imam Dawud Walid is the Executive Director of the Michigan chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-MI) and member of the Imams Council of Michigan. He is also the author of the books [*Towards Sacred Activism*](#), [*Blackness and Islam*](#), and [*Futuwwah and Raising Males Into Sacred Manhood*](#).

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Introduction

Of the chapters in the Qur'an, *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt* is the most concise and comprehensive in regards to conflict resolution and management. One of the socio-political conflicts which this chapter addresses is the proactive mitigation and prevention of racism. As racism, which is an extension of blameworthy tribalism (*‘aṣabiyya*), has become more frequently discussed in the public discourse in the West, this particular ‘ism’ has also become a more frequent topic of discussion among Muslims. Any Muslim analysis of societal challenges should begin with the Qur'an, as well as those Muslim communities with the most wisdom regarding the specific challenge of racism. As such, here we will focus on two relevant verses in *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt* and how they were addressed in the commentaries of two West African exegetes. They offer profound insights for how Muslims should mitigate racism within their communities.

Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt directly addressed a societal context in Medina that differed drastically from the pre-migration environment of Makkah. Makkah was a fairly homogenous society ruled by the Arabs of the Quraysh tribe, while Medina's population included Arabs from more diverse tribal backgrounds as well as non-Arabs of Jewish, Abyssinian, and Persian ancestries.¹ It was in this community, at once quintessentially tribal yet diverse in lineage and phenotype, that this chapter was revealed.

This article will focus on commentaries written by West African scholars on the 11th and 13th verses of *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt*. I first encountered these commentaries while in Mali and Senegal, during my studies in West African scholarship and in particular my studies of the exegetical sciences of the Qur'an with Shaykh Ali Sulaiman Ali (may Allah preserve him), who is from Ghana and is affiliated with the Hausa tribe. I do not claim that these two commentaries are superior to others produced inside or outside West Africa, nor do I claim that they bring forth any novel interpretations. But the perspectives of their authors are at once analogous to ours—they are surrounded by the dynamics of anti-black racism—and yet

¹ The Quraysh were among the Arabs who trace their lineage to ‘Adnān and back to Prophet Ishmael (Ismā‘īl).

refreshingly different, as they meet that challenge as Muslim scholars untrammelled by the identity crises and insecurities of Muslims living as marginalized communities. The first exegete is Shaykh Abū Muḥammad ‘Abdullāhī ibn Fūdū (1180AH/1766CE–1245AH/1829 CE), may Allah have mercy upon him. Hailing from the Fulani people of West Africa,² his family settled in Hausaland, now within contemporary Northern Nigeria, Niger, and much of Chad. It was there that his famous brother Shaykh ‘Uthmān ibn Fūdī, aka Uthman dan Fodio (may Allah have mercy upon him), established the Sokoto caliphate, in which Shaykh ‘Abdullāhī was a senior minister.³ The socio-political backdrop of this era involved, on the one hand, the struggle to purify the beliefs and practices of Muslims in the area from pre-Islamic practices such as animism and, on the other, the combating of corrupt Muslim chiefs who enslaved fellow Muslims for sale, including the enslavement of over 300 memorizers (*ḥuffāz*) of the Qur’an.⁴

Shaykh Ibn Fūdī was a prolific scholar in the Islamic sciences. He was not only a *ḥāfiẓ* of the Qur’an but was also a master of hadith, having memorized over 100,000 Prophetic narrations. He was also a chief jurist in his time of the Mālikī tradition in which he wrote three treatises on Islamic rulings and governance entitled *Ḍiyā’ al-ḥukkām* (Light Regarding the Magistrate), *Ḍiyā’ al-siyāsa* (Light Regarding Politics), and *Ḍiyā’ al-khulafā’* (Light Regarding the Caliph). His first exegesis, entitled *Ḍiyā’ al-ta’wīl fī ma’ānī al-tanzīl* (Light of Interpretation Regarding the Meaning of the Divine Revelation), shall be referenced later in this article; however, he wrote a second exegesis titled *Kifāya ḍu’afā’ al-sudān* (Sufficiency for the Blacks of Weak Understanding) which dealt more specifically with commentary based upon the Warsh reading of the Qur’an as well as verses with legal implications based upon his studies of the Mālikī tradition in Hausaland. Regarding the sciences of Qur’anic interpretation, he also skillfully condensed the meaning of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī’s book *Al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* (The Perfect Guide to the Sciences of the Qur’an) into Arabic poetry (*naẓm*) which he entitled

² Ibn Fūdī, *Ḍiyā’ al-ta’wīl fī ma’ānī al-tanzīl* (Sokoto: Al-Hajj Muhammad Ali Agha, n.d.), 1:3.

³ Ibn Fūdī, *Ḍiyā’ al-ta’wīl fī ma’ānī al-tanzīl*, 1:4.

⁴ Abdullah Hakim Quick, *In the Heart of a West African Islamic Revival: Shaykh Uthman Dan Fodio, (1774–1804)* (Cairo: Al-Falah Foundation, 2007), 43–46; Muhammad Shareef and Rudolph Ware, *Jihad of the Pen* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2018), 28.

Sulālat al-tafsīr (Descent of the Qur'anic Exegesis). He wrote two dozen other works on subjects such as Arabic grammar and morphology, foundations of Islamic jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), sciences of Prophetic narrations, and spiritual purification.

The second exegete is Shaykh Aḥmad Dem b. Muḥammad al-Amīn Dem (may Allah have mercy upon him). Shaykh Aḥmad Dem, who passed away relatively recently in 1973, was also Fulani and lived in Sokone, Senegal. He too followed the Mālikī tradition, which has long been the predominant *madhhab* in West Africa. Like Shaykh Ibn Fūdī, Shaykh Dem produced a commentary on the Qur'an. He was less prolific as a jurist and writer, perhaps because he did not enjoy the support of an Islamic government. Shaykh Dem was born into an environment in which racist French colonial rule dominated Senegal until the nation achieved quasi-independence in 1959. Shaykh Dem primarily dealt with two intellectual challenges. The first was the influence of French thought due to the colonial control of public education, which included the use of Christian missionaries. None of the indigenous Senegalese population had been Christian prior to the advent of colonialism, after which up to five percent converted.

Shaykh Dem's second challenge, more theological in character, was his public dispute with the Senegalese Mālikī scholar Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse (may Allah have mercy upon him), who authored an exegesis of the Qur'an entitled *Fī riyād al-tafsīr li-l-Qur'ān al-karīm* (In the Meadows of the Exegesis of the Noble Qur'an) that argued it was possible to see Allah ﷻ in dreams. Shaykh Dem staunchly opposed this claim.⁵ Such theological debates were without precedent at that time, as theologians in Senegal unanimously followed the Ash'arī creed. Niasse's view was seen by Dem as firmly unorthodox. Shaykh Dem and Shaykh Niasse eventually reconciled before the former passed away, though they still disagreed on the issue.

Compared to Shaykh 'Abdullāhī ibn Fūdī's concise four-volume exegesis, Shaykh Dem's is far more comprehensive at a length of twenty volumes. It delves deeper

⁵ Zachary Wright, "The Kashif al-Ilbas of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse: Analysis of the Text," *Islamic Africa* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 109–123, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42656318?read-now=1&seq=6>.

into such subjects as the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), the abrogating and the abrogated (*al-nāsikh w-al-mansūkh*), and the variations of the Warsh and Qālūn recitations of the Qur'an as transmitted from the early successor (*tābi'ī*) Nāfi' al-Madanī (may Allah have mercy upon him), which he had authorization (*ijāza*) in. Shaykh Dem's *tafsīr* also makes frequent reference to the *tafsīr* of *Rūḥ al-bayān* (Spirit of the Clear Speech) by Sayyid Maḥmūd al-Alūsī (d. 1217/1802-1270/1854).⁶ His exegesis *Ḍiyā' al-nayyirīn al-jāmi' bayna 'ulūm al-tifātayn* (Light of the Bright Stars Between the Sciences of the Two Readings) will be referenced in the succeeding comments as well.

The 11th verse of *Sūrat al-Hujurāt* states:

O you who believe, let not a *qawm* ridicule [another] *qawm*; perhaps they may be better than them; nor let women ridicule [other] women; perhaps they may be better than them. And do not insult one another nor call each other by [offensive] nicknames. Wicked is the name [i.e., mention] of disobedience after [one's] faith. And whoever does not repent, then it is those who are the wrongdoers.

Shaykh Ibn Fūdī stated that people (*qawm*) in this verse specifically means “the men from them [a people],” not people in general meaning women and men, as the verse addresses women separately.⁷

Shaykh Dem stated regarding the verse:

It was revealed pertaining to three occasions. The first occasion of those of His speech “better than them” according to Ibn ‘Abbās [may Allah be pleased with him] stated, “It was revealed about Thābit b. Qays b. Shammās that he was told to make room in a gathering for someone in which he referred to him as the son of his mother, then made light of his status in the Era of [pre-Islam] Ignorance which predated them coming to Islam.”⁸ The second is narrated from al-Ḍaḥḥāk that Tamīm mocked some of the poor companions, including ‘Ammār, who was a Black Arab, Ḍaḥḥāk, Ibn

⁶ Maḥmūd al-Alūsī was a nineteenth-century Iraqi scholar who was a descendent of the Prophet's grandson al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī. He was a mufti who judged according to the Hanafī school of jurisprudence during the reign of the Ottoman empire.

⁷ Ibn Fūdī, *Ḍiyā' al-ta'wīl fī ma'ānī al-tanzīl*, 4:130.

⁸ Dem, *Tafsīr ḍiyā' al-nayyirīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 17:122.

Fuhayra, who was African, Bilāl the Abyssinian, Ṣuhayb the Roman, Salmān the Persian, and Salīm Mawlā Abī Ḥudhayfa, who was also Persian.⁹ Shaykh Dem mentioned the same.¹⁰ The third is that some of the Muslims referred to 'Ikrima b. Abī Jahl upon him entering Medina as the Son of the Pharaoh of this Nation (*ibn fir'awn hādhihi al-umma*), about which he then complained to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ.¹¹

Shaykh Dem, commenting on the verse, wrote that “it is concluded that the associate of one making mockery of anyone is one who is involved in the mockery.”¹² Such an individual shares the burden of responsibility of judgment, because s(he) is complicit by not speaking out against the mockery. Moreover, the companion of mockery collects sin along with the active mocker. In all three occasions relayed by Shaykh Dem, the mockery targeted matters of lineage. Although the mockery in the second instance was fueled in part by socioeconomic disparity, there was a clear connection at that time, as in many instances today, between lineage and socio-economic status. Shaykh Dem also mentioned that a man reportedly said to Luqmān (peace be upon him), who was Abyssinian, “What an ugly face you have!” Luqmān replied to him, “You find fault with what has been engraved upon or created [by Allah]?!”¹³

“Nor let women ridicule [other] women”—Shaykh Ibn Fūdī stated that this part of the verse addresses some of the wives of the Prophet ﷺ who mocked his wife Ṣafiyya (may Allah be pleased with her) by calling out to her, “O Jew, the daughter of a Jew” (*ya yahūdiyya bint yahūdī*).¹⁴ These wives were Arabs, whereas Ṣafiyya was not. Shaykh Dem, referencing the same narration from al-Tirmidhī (may Allah have mercy upon him), said that Ṣafiyya came to the Prophet ﷺ in tears and told him what had been said to her. He ﷺ replied, “Surely you are the daughter of a

⁹ Dem, *Tafsīr ḍiyā' al-nayyirīn*.

¹⁰ Ibn Fūdī, *Ḍiyā' al-ta'wīl fī ma'nī al-tanzīl*, 4:130.

¹¹ Dem, *Tafsīr ḍiyā' al-nayyirīn*, 17:122–123.

¹² Dem, *Tafsīr ḍiyā' al-nayyirīn*, 17:122–123.

¹³ Dem, *Tafsīr ḍiyā' al-nayyirīn*, 17:124.

¹⁴ Ibn Fūdī, *Ḍiyā' al-ta'wīl fī ma'nī al-tanzīl*, 4:130; the hadith chain is graded authentic (*ṣaḥih*) in *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*.

prophet, your uncle was a prophet, and you are under the guardianship of a Prophet, so how can one take pride over you?"¹⁵

Shaykh Ibn Fūdī stated that the command in the verse to not make mockery means, "Do not find fault with one another for the believers are like one body."¹⁶ Shaykh Dem concurred with this meaning, noting the Prophetic promise of "glad tidings to whom is preoccupied with his [own] faults instead of the faults of other people."¹⁷ He also stated that this verse "indicates that no human being will completely rid themselves of faults."¹⁸ One's faults, however, do not relate to lineage or skin color, as these are given by the decree of Allah (Mighty and Sublime) and are not mistakes, nor errors.

Shaykh Dem commented that not calling people by bad names carries the meaning of not belittling converts from Judaism and Christianity by referring to them as "O Jew" or "O Christian."¹⁹ However, he stated that it is not prohibited to give people nicknames that are praiseworthy, such as "how 'Umar [b. al-Khaṭṭāb] is referred to as Distinguisher Between Truth and Falsehood (*al-Fārūq*), 'Uthmān [ibn 'Affān] is known as the Possessor of Two Lights (*Dhū al-Nūrayn*), and 'Alī [ibn Abī Ṭālib] is known as Father of the Dust (*Abū Turāb*)."²⁰

Shaykh Dem also mentioned that those who refuse to repent of their mockery are of the wrongdoers that are on the accursed path of Satan (Iblīs)—Iblīs, who refused to repent, who fancied himself to be better than Adam (peace be upon him). This is the path of being accursed, meaning being deprived of Divine mercy, as referenced in *Sūrat Hūd*, verse 18:

Surely the curse of Allah is upon the wrongdoers.

The second verse from *Sūrat al-Hujurāt* to be discussed is the 13th, which states:

¹⁵ Dem, *Tafsīr diyā' al-nayyirīn*, 17:129.

¹⁶ Ibn Fūdī, *Ḍiyā' al-ta'wīl fī ma'ānī al-tanzīl*, 4:130.

¹⁷ The hadith chain is graded weak in *Musnad al-Bazzār*.

¹⁸ Dem, *Tafsīr diyā' al-nayyirīn*, 17:127.

¹⁹ Dem, *Tafsīr diyā' al-nayyirīn*, 17:128.

²⁰ Dem, *Tafsīr diyā' al-nayyirīn*, 17:128.

O humankind, surely We created you from a single male and female, and We made you into different nations and tribes in order that you may know one another. Surely the most honorable of you with Allah are those of you who are most pious. Surely Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.

Shaykh Ibn Fūdī, commenting on the opening of the verse, said that one of its meanings is:²¹

From Adam and Eve, We created all of you from a single father and mother; thus all are equal in that, so there should be no seeking pride in lineage.

Shaykh Dem mentioned that there is a difference of opinion surrounding the circumstances of this verse's revelation. He relayed that Ibn 'Abbās said that this was revealed at the time of the Conquest of Makkah, when the Messenger of Allah ﷺ commanded Bilāl (may Allah be pleased with him) to call the *adhān* from on top of the Ka'bah. It is said that one man praised Allah that his father did not live to see this day. Another stated, "Could not Muhammad find someone to be the prayer-caller other than this Black crow (*al-ghurāb al-aswad*)?"²² It is said that Gabriel (Jibrīl) (peace be upon him) came to the Prophet ﷺ and informed him what was said, after which the verse was recited.²³ Another explanation given by Shaykh Dem is that the verse was revealed when the Prophet ﷺ instructed men from Banī Bayāḍa, an Arab tribe among the Anṣār, to have a woman from among them marry Abū Hind (may Allah be pleased with him).²⁴ They replied to him, "Marry our daughter to a client [meaning ex-slave]?!"²⁵ According to a different account, Thābit b. Qays would not make room for a man in an assembly because he perceived him to be of lesser lineage. The Prophet ﷺ told him, "Look at the faces of the people." Thābit said, "I see white, black, and red." The Prophet ﷺ then told him, "Surely you have no merit over them except in piety (*taqwā*)."²⁶

²¹ Ibn Fūdī, *Diya' al-ta'wīl fī ma'ānī al-tanzīl*, 4:132.

²² The hadith chain is graded weak in *Asbāb al-nuzūl* by al-Wāḥidī; the narration first appeared without a chain of narrators in the *tafsīr* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān.

²³ Dem, *Tafsīr ḍiyā' al-nayyirīn*, 17:159.

²⁴ The hadith chain is graded *ḥasan* in *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*.

²⁵ Dem, *Tafsīr ḍiyā' al-nayyirīn*, 17:159.

²⁶ Dem, *Tafsīr ḍiyā' al-nayyirīn*, 17:159; the hadith chain is graded weak in *Mukhtaṣar ithāf al-sādah al-maharah bi-zawa'id al-masānīd al-'ashara* by al-Buṣrī.

Shaykh Ibn Fūdī mentioned that nation (*shaʿb*) and tribe (*qabīla*) have two different interpretations. The first relates to more direct lineage. For example, the nation of the Prophet's lineage was from Khuzayma, and his tribe was Kinānh, from which Quraysh comes. The second relates one coming from a non-Arab or an Arab in lineage.²⁷ Shaykh Dem also conveyed the same.

According to Shaykh Dem, we should know our lineages and those of others, but there is no seeking pride through our forefathers and tribes and calling to superiority through lineages:²⁸

Honor is but in piety, meaning praiseworthy pride in being above the people of disbelief by leaving polytheism (*shirk*) and sticking to Islam and its symbols.

He continued in his commentary by saying:²⁹

Of its meanings is that the most noble with Allah the Most High is the one who is most pious, even if a Black Abyssinian slave like Bilāl was. So, if you seek honor, then find honor in piety and through the grace of Allah and His loving compassion. And by Allah the Most High, surely you look to the speech of him [the Prophet] صلى الله عليه وسلم "I am the master of the Children of Adam but I have no pride," means that there was not pride for him in being from nobles nor from him being given the Divine message. Of course not, it was through his servitude and worship. And that was his honor, meaning it was enough of an honor for him that being a slave took precedence over being the Messenger as conveyed in his speech, "And I witness that Muhammad is His slave and His messenger."

Shaykh Dem proceeded to reference the Prophetic narration:³⁰

Surely your Lord is One, and your father is one. There is no virtue of the Arab over the non-Arab, nor the non-Arab over the Arab. And there is no merit of the White over the Black, nor the Black over the White except in piety.

²⁷ Ibn Fūdī, *Ḍiyāʾ al-taʾwīl fī maʿānī al-tanzīl*, 4:132.

²⁸ Dem, *Tafsīr ḍiyāʾ al-nayyirīn*, 17:160.

²⁹ Dem, *Tafsīr ḍiyāʾ al-nayyirīn*, 17:160.

³⁰ Dem, *Tafsīr ḍiyāʾ al-nayyirīn*, 17:161; the hadith chain is graded authentic in *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*.

Then he quoted:³¹

Surely Allah does not look to your forms nor your outward actions, but He looks to your hearts and your intentions.

This is based upon the reality that Allah ﷻ is the only One who truly knows the inward states of persons; thus, no one can judge the actual piety of another to make the claim that they are more beloved to Allah ﷻ. Although there are Prophetic narrations that speak to the merits of the Arab clan of Quraysh, these reports do not mean that everyone from Quraysh is superior to those who are not from among them. Furthermore, the tribe of Quraysh does not denote a phenotypic racial identity group. For instance, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (may Allah ennoble his countenance), who was from Quraysh, was usually described as very dark (*adam shadīd al-udmah*),³² meaning he had the same skin color as most Abyssinians of his time. Yet his son al-Ḥasan (may Allah be pleased with him), who was equally a member of Quraysh, was light in skin tone and did not physically resemble his father.³³

The commentaries of Shaykh 'Abdullāhī ibn Fūdī and Shaykh Aḥmad Dem on these two verses in *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt* indicate that Muslims must shun racism both within their individual selves and within their communities. The 11th verse commands desisting from rhetorical racism in four different ways. One who does not repent from such derogatory language takes on the attribute of Iblīs, the original non-repentant racist. The 13th verse elaborates upon the reality that humans have a single Creator and common ancestry through two parents, and that true honor is secured through humble servitude to Allah ﷻ, not through lineage or phenotypic traits. Both commentators suggest that Muslims, irrespective of ethnicity, should be given space in the community safe from derogatory mockery, should be allotted opportunities to serve based upon merit of character, and should be allowed to marry other Muslims without lineages and phenotypes being automatic disqualifiers.

³¹ Dem, *Tafsīr diyā' al-nayyirīn*, 17:159; the hadith chain is graded authentic in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*.

³² Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1989), 1:169.

³³ Al-Suyūṭī, *Uqūd al-zabarjad 'alā al-Imām Aḥmad* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1987), 1:94.

Racialized language mockery is disavowed due to its destructive consequences. For one, those who are subjected to derogatory racialized language can begin to view themselves as inferior, an issue which prompted Ibn al-Jawzī (may Allah have mercy upon him) to write the book *Tanwīr al-ghabash fī faḍl al-sudān wa al-ḥabash* (Illumination of Darkness Regarding the Merit of Blacks and Abyssinians) to help Muslims who were Black in curing their self-loathing. The use of racialized slurs by those with positional power can socially marginalize persons from economic opportunities, from access to safe educational environments, from the ability to marry. In the worst possible case, dehumanization of entire groups based upon racial and ethnic differences could lead to violence or ethnic cleansing as has unfortunately been the case in some societies in which Muslims now reside. Hence, the affirmative stance against the usage of racist language and mockery has real social implications.

Conclusion

Though written in Africa decades and centuries ago, these two commentaries offer valuable guidance to Muslims in the West. Effectively mitigating racial conflicts requires Western Muslim communities to take more aggressive steps than they have historically done. For starters, congregations should consider inviting trained scholars and experts who don't share their predominant racial background. The same should be the case in regional and national conferences on community development. These invitations, however, need to go beyond Black History Month programs and commemorations of the life of Malcolm X. They should not wait for such tragedies as the police homicides of Black folks like Eric Garner and George Floyd; they should not wait for when the Black community again pleads, "I can't breathe."

The Prophet ﷺ appointing Bilāl (may Allah be pleased with him) as both the *mu'adhdhin* and the dispenser of charity even though other (Arab) companions could have done so reflected a commitment to including non-Arabs against a recent societal context of exclusion based upon origin. Just as the Prophet ﷺ fostered intercultural, intertribal, and interracial brotherhood by pairing together Medina's

natives and immigrants after the Prophet's migration (*hijra*), so too must our communities institute programs that pair together youth across socio-economic and cultural divides. Experiential knowledge obtained through regular social interaction is the antidote for racial ignorance. As 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib stated, "people are adversaries of what they are ignorant of."³⁴

Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt should be regularly taught, perhaps even in annual seminars on managing racial and ethnic differences. These seminars must be organized in multiple countries and cities, with preference given to exegetes' commentaries, as they offer in-depth and practical meditations on questions of tribalistic prejudice. The Qur'an is healing for all spiritual and social maladies, and our discourse on racism must be rooted in it rather than postmodern thought or secular critical theory. The goal, ultimately, is to foster a communal intolerance for derogatory name-calling based on phenotype and ethnicity. This was the example of the Prophet ﷺ, and it is an example that the *umma* must follow.

May Allah ﷻ have mercy upon Shaykh 'Abdullāhī ibn Fūdī and Shaykh Aḥmad Dem, and may He have us implement the lessons of these two verses.

³⁴ Al-Khuḍarī, *Itmām al-wafā fī sirat al-khulafā* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Thaqāfiyya, 1982), 130.