THE ACCURACY OF THE QIBLA AXIS (*INHIRĀF AL-QIBLA*): A LEGAL DEBATE

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The Mālikī *madhhab* remains an indispensable component of the study of the social, cultural and urban history of medieval Maghrib. The habitat of the Maghrib, a large geographic foci, has always been germane to custom (‘urf), legal practice (‘amal), and the valued opinion (iftiā) of the jurist (muftī). The key aspect of this paper is a legal discourse among Mālikī jurists; it concerns the formulae inherent in the muftī’s reasoning and the manner in which his opinion sanctions the accuracy of the qibla. Using the debate, I explore the muftī’s interpretation of what is understood by the term the inclination of the direction of the qibla (*inhirāf al-qibla*).

The opinion of a muftī is therefore instructive in this regard, since it can be taken as basis for understanding the legal and religious dynamics of habitat. Since legal reasoning is often transferred to religious practice, the debate also deals with a general disagreement among the Mālikī jurists in medieval Maghrib concerning the accuracy of the direction of the qibla and the lawful placement of the *mīhrāb* of a mosque. Owing to the importance and the necessity of calculating the direction of the qibla when the site of a mosque is established, various methods were firmly incorporated to determine its accuracy of the *mīhrāb*.

However, since there was no singular accepted method of calculation we find that a jurist was free to exercise partiality to a particular method. In medieval Maghrib a collective debate soon gave rise to a controversy concerning the correctness of the direction of the qibla and the position of the *mīhrāb*.

*The origins of the debate*

There are at least three legally accepted ways to verify the direction of the qibla. The first is based on the belief that the
direction of prayer was already established by the buildings associated with the companions of the Prophet [qiblat al-Sahāba wa al-tabʿun]. The second is based on an approximate calculation using a ‘rule of thumb’. This means fixing the limits of the direction, based on one’s location in relation to the position of various stars. The third method is one based on an established set of calculations to fix the limits of the qibla. This method is supported by calculations using the azimuth [al-Sami] of the horizontal arc, expressed as the clockwise angle of a fixed point such as Polaris or true north and the vertical plane through an object.

While the first and second method do not offer the exactness of the third, all three methods do comply with the nass. When a conflict arose concerning the axis of prayer, or the direction of Makkah, a fatwā was applied as an operative device which the jurists used to resolve the issue and to arrive at exactitude.

Since the term mosque [masjid] is related to both a place of prostration and the act of prostration [sa-ja-da, lit.= to prostrate], the qibla debate is instructive with regards to the etymological meaning of the term. For example, with the well know hadith, “the earth has been made a mosque...therefore when prayer overtakes a person he should prostrate wherever he/she may be”, renders the space of the building as semantically undefinable. It is for this reason that the physical enclosure of the edifice makes reference to the masjid built by the Prophet in the 7th century C.E. at Madinah.

The mihrāb of the seminal building was entirely symbolic. This did not prevent the jurists in later periods—when the mihrāb had come to indicate the direction of Makkah—from arguing that the qibla established by the companions of the Prophet (qiblat al-