“A Muhammadan Breeze, From Tarim to Oakland

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In the spring of 2011, Habib Umar bin Hafiz, the director of Dar Al Mustafa seminary in Tarim, Yemen, and leading figure of the spiritual and social movement of the Hadramout Ba’Alawi (Tariqa Alawiyya), embarked upon his first North American tour. The “Tranquility Amidst Turbulence” tour traveled to urban centers across Canada and the United States, and Habib Umar’s lectures, workshops, and congregational prayer events were also streamed live and posted online for an international audience. This paper examines how Muslims – both American and Yemeni – articulate the conditions of “turbulence” and the means of “tranquility” that an Islamic perspective and praxis yields. For the Muslims who follow him, Habib Umar is both a source of sacred knowledge and an embodiment of the Prophetic way in his lineage and being, and his tour mobilizes Islam as not only a spiritual or religious framework, but also as an ethical-political force. This presentation incorporates the mediated presence and reception of Habib Umar with an ethnographic examination of his visit to the Bay Area, as experienced by the scholars, students, and community of Zaytuna College (the first Muslim liberal arts college in the US) and the Ta’leef Collective (a collective of teachers and volunteers who predominantly serve Muslim youth and converts to Islam). Both sites are actively engaged in forging an American Islam that emerges from the “traditional” Islamic sciences, local circumstances, and a global consciousness. This audiovisual and paper presentation examines the ways that Habib’s travels (retracing in reverse the journeys of his American students to Yemen) embody a visceral, spiritual, political, and practical understanding and experience of the global Umma (community of believers) and the possibilities for Islam to be the means of sakina (tranquility) in the turbulence of the geopolitical, environmental, and socio-economic realities of the American inner city.