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Sufism, Politics and Violence

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Sufism, Politics and Violence: Reading Notes

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**SUFISM, POLITICS AND VIOLENCE:
READING NOTES**

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Abbas Aroua

1. Introduction

Sufism is often portrayed as the moderate face of Islam, and it is common to hear within political, diplomatic and even academic circles in North America and Europe, as well as in the Arab world and Africa, that Sufism is the remedy to political Islam, the answer to Islamic extremism and the antidote to Islamic violence. Moreover, in many countries with Muslim populations, it is argued that Sufism represents the genuine Islam and other Islamic currents such as Salafism are imported from outside, particularly from Saudi Arabia, the cradle of the Wahhabi version of Salafism. Hence, there is a political will to support Sufism in order to block the expansion of Salafism.

Like Salafisⁱ and other religious currents, depending on the social context, the degree of political freedom and inclusiveness, and individual predispositions and group dynamics, Sufis may be apolitical or political, pro- or anti-authoritarian, non-violent or violent, be the violence lawful or extreme. Examples of some of these categories are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Diversity of the Islamic Schools of thought

		Salafis	Soufis	Muslim Brotherhood
Non	Political Participation	Post 2011 Salafi parties	Adl wal Ihsane in Morocco	PJD in Morocco
Violence	Political Instrumentalization	Nour Party in Egypt in 2013	UAE-led Sufi groups	Algerian Hams Party in the 1990s
Violence		Jihadi Salafis (against foreign aggressions)	Sufi Orders (against colonial expeditions)	Palestinian Hamas (against Israeli occupation)

Therefore, to consider Sufis as a monolithic group with the same characteristics is a misleading, essentialist and reductionist approach. A dangerous one if it underlies State policies.

ⁱ In another paper the author presented a typology of Salafi movements, groups and religious leaders, based on the type of power chosen to operate societal change (political, military, economic and cultural), the type of action, the type of target and the type of tool. This typology consists of 4 categories, 10 sub-categories, and 17 sub-sub-categories. This typology attempts to cover the Salafi spectrum as broadly as possible, and tries to include as many categories that are omitted in common typologies as possible, particularly those related to economic activity, involving the Salafi business community and Salafi charities, and the Salafi actors engaged in non-party politics and in negative politics. It also offers a finer differentiation within the scholarly and jihādi categories of Salafists. (Abbas Aroua. *The Salafiscape in the wake of the 'Arab spring'*. Cordoba Foundation of Geneva. Second Edition. October 2017. Available online at www.cordoue.ch.)

This paper attempts to shed some light on the nexus “Sufism-Politics-Violence” and to show how Sufism, like other religious currents, spans a wide spectrum and how it would be misleading to consider Sufis’ approach to politics and violence in an indiscriminate way. The aim is to draw the attention of academics and policy makers to the fact that opposing Sufis to other Islamic currents such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis or the Tablighis is not the right way to prevent or counter extremism. On the contrary, such an approach is not only ineffective but may be counterproductive and prompt sectarian violence.

2. On the “peaceful Sufis vs. violent Salafis” strategy

There is a tendency all over the world to invest in Sufi empowerment in order to counter Salafi movements, considered by many as essentially extremists and violent. Several Sufi gatherings have taken place in recent years to highlight the role of Sufism in the fight against extremism and violence in the Muslim world: Kenya (2015),¹ USA (2015),² Algeria (2016),³ India (2016),⁴ Chechnya (2016),⁵ Egypt (2017),⁶ Pakistan (2017).⁷ Such events are supported and publicized by the ruling elites of the host countries, who use Sufi orders as a lever for political and social control and take advantage of these events to gain religious legitimacy.

But there are more and more scholars who have challenged the assumption that empowering Sufi groups will end extremism. A sample of such opinions is worth reporting here.

Indian writer Omair Ahmad, who underlines the structural roots of extremism, believes that

there is a further aspect to the ‘Sufism versus radicalisation’ narrative that it is important to flag. It is no surprise that the countries producing the most militants are also those which have experienced deep destabilisation due to war and have not been able to deepen their democratic structures. [...] Focusing on sectarian differences allows the countries who are most deeply involved in the ‘War on Terror’ to occlude their own role in proposing war, not stability and the promotion of democratic progress, as the answer to security issues. The promotion of “Sufi culture”, therefore, is a bread and circuses approach, distracting the populace with theatre while leaving the core issues of governance untouched. It did not work for the Roman Empire. It is unlikely to work for us either.⁸

Rashid Abdi, project director of International Crisis Group for the Horn of Africa, observes that “a CVE strategy based exclusively on harnessing Sufism is therefore fraught and unlikely to be effective in the

long run,”⁹ and that “the growing hostility to Salafism and its wholesale demonisation is unhelpful. [...] There is little historical and contextual evidence to support the notion that the theology is inherently violent.”¹⁰ He argues that

the attempt to rally Sufis in the struggle against extremism seems attractive, but the government ought to be aware of potential pitfalls. In embracing Sufism, it may, inadvertently, be opening itself to charges of creating an ‘official’ Islam designed to ‘correct’ a form of Islam deemed ‘distorted’. This would invariably deepen sectarian divisions and alienate non-violent Salafis – the single most important constituency whose support is critical in defeating jihadism. The government is constitutionally bound to remain neutral and must resist the temptation to micro-manage Muslim affairs. Its role and intervention must be deliberately aimed at fostering cohesion and an impartial, concerted response.¹¹

In their work entitled *Salafi Violence and Sufi Tolerance? Rethinking Conventional Wisdom*, researchers Woodward et al. show that the “violent Salafi / peaceful Sufi dichotomy is factually incorrect.”¹² They argue that

Theological orientation cannot be used as a predictor of either violent or nonviolent behaviour. Broadly defined theological orientations including Salafism and Sufism are not prime movers or causal factors leading to either acceptance or rejection of violence against religious others as a political strategy. They can, however, be used to legitimate a priori dispositions towards both. In the case of violent movements many theologies become tools for the demonisation of designated enemy others. The very same theologies can be used to promote tolerance, and even acceptance of religious diversity.¹³

In her recent work ‘The Flawed Hope of Sufi Promotion in North Africa’, Vish Sakthivel believes that

by instrumentalizing Sufism, North African regimes and their international backers have essentialized the practice as diametrically opposed to political Islam or any extremist trend, creating false binaries that do little to fully understand the diversity in tendency among the Sufi (and Salafi) networks. [...] The extreme Salafi versus moderate Sufi dichotomy thus glosses over myriad tendencies in either practice.¹⁴

The idea of empowering Sufis for the benefit of the Muslim world is not new. In the wake of 9/11, already, Cheryl Benard-Khalilzad from the RAND Corporation recommended in a 2003 publication entitled *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies*, that in order

to encourage positive change in the Islamic world toward greater democracy, modernity, and compatibility with the contemporary

international world order, the United States and the West need to [...] encourage the popularity and acceptance of Sufism. [...] Build up the stature of Sufism. Encourage countries with strong Sufi traditions to focus on that part of their history and to include it in their school curricula. Pay more attention to Sufi Islam.¹⁵

In October 2003, the International Security Program of the Nixon Center hosted a conference in Washington DC on *Understanding Sufism and its Potential Role in US Policy*, where the panellists advised the audience on how the US administration could indirectly empower Sufism¹⁶, especially in Central Asia. One of the participants, Alan Godlas, from the Department of Religion of the University of Georgia, suggested that “if the United States takes a proactive stance in supporting the revival of Central Asian Sufism, it may be able to move the region out of the hands of militants towards a more irenic future.”¹⁷ Similar support to the *Qadiriyya* and *Tijaniyya* Sufi ordersⁱ was recommended in a report authored by Jonathan N. C. Hill and published in 2010 by the Strategic Studies Institute¹⁸.

This attitude towards Sufism, traced back to the early nineteenth century,¹⁹ is grounded in a double assumption, transformed in the mind of many into a myth, considering Sufism, in an undifferentiated way, as an apolitical and pacifist strand of Islam. This attitude towards Sufism in the West is to some extent shaped by a romanticized view, associating it solely with introspection, mysticism, music, dance, poetry and other artistic expressions. Indian writer Omair Ahmad argues that “the emphasis on Sufism also comes from a condescending view of Sufis as happy dancers and singers who are all obsessed with love, and who do not care about politics.”²⁰ Jonathan Brown, assistant professor of Islamic Studies and Muslim-Christian Understanding at the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown, notes that in Egypt, for example,

the rise of Sufi political parties since the January revolution has received relatively little attention, in part because Sufis are not seen as a particularly threatening political force. In the United States and Europe in particular, Sufis are seen as ‘moderate’ Muslims, non-violent, harmless mystics more interested in spiritual than political matters.²¹

This attitude towards Sufism ignores the fact that Sufism is not only the masterpieces of Muhyiddīn Ibn Arabī, Jalāladdīn Rumi, Shamsuddīn Hafiz and other prominent Sufi figures, nowadays renowned in

ⁱ “Sufi Order” is used in this contribution to denote a Sufi *Tariqa* (Path) or *Zawiya* (Lodge).

Hollywood, but it has been and may also be about political engagement and even armed struggle.

Several scholars see in the Western attitude towards Sufism a political will to undermine any interpretation of Islam that challenges Western worldviews, and which calls for resisting aggression and oppression. Egyptian philosopher Abdel Wahab El-Messiri observes, in an op-ed on *Islam and the West*, that

it is significant to see the West, which wages war on Islam, encouraging Sufi movements. [...] The US congressional commission on religious liberty recommended that the Arab States boost Sufi movements. Engaging in asceticism and abandoning worldly affairs and the political realm undoubtedly weaken the resistance to Western colonialism. Hence, Western hostility to Islam is not absolute, but rather a hostility to resistant Islam.²²

In the French context, Judith Scheele observes in her work *Recycling Baraka: Knowledge, Politics, and Religion in Contemporary Algeria*, that

the distinction between ‘good Muslims’ and ‘bad Muslims’ runs through French colonial ethnography and policy towards Islam. ‘Good Muslims’ tended to be those who accommodated themselves to colonial rule, and followed non-political, ‘traditional’ (in the French terminology) practices; ‘bad Muslims’ used religion to fight against French domination. This distinction is still alive in the French press, where ‘good Muslims’ ‘assimilate’ to French culture, are open and tolerant (and speak French), whereas ‘bad Muslims’ refuse French ‘acculturation’.²³

French sociologist François Burgat explains how, “not finding a sufficient number of agnostics, we often have great hopes in the ‘Sufi mystics’ – forgetting in doing so that their brotherhoods had, in the nineteenth century, formed the spearhead of resistance to colonial aggression.”²⁴ In the context of North Africa, he adds, in a post entitled *Soufis ou... soumis ?*:

At the end of the 19th century, the ‘Bin Laden’ of the time was called ‘*The Senoussiya*’ by the name of a powerful Sufi fraternity that resisted Western penetration in North Africa. In fact, the contemporary fascination of Westerners for the (good) Sufism may well be based today on a simple misunderstanding: I do not believe that we really like ‘Sufi’ Islam. We like, in fact, ‘*Soumis*’ (submissive) Islam.²⁵

3. Sufism within the Islamic religious landscape

The Islamic religion (*din*) encompasses a wide scope, covering: (1) the creed or doctrine (*aqida*) defining the faith and setting the system of

beliefs; (2) the way of conduct (*shari'a*) regulating worship (*'ibādāt*), common practices (*'ādāt*), dealings (*mu'āmalāt*) and penal provisions (*jināyāt*); and (3) ethics (*akhlāq*) addressing matters of morality. However, each major Islamic movement focuses on one or a couple of aspects related to the 'creed-conduct-ethics' system of Islamic values, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Focus areas for various Islamic currents

Islamic Current	Focus
Salafis	Creed (<i>aqīda</i>)
Muslim Brotherhood	All-inclusiveness and organisation (<i>shumūliyya wa tandbīm</i>)
Community for predication (<i>Jamā'at at-Tablīgh</i>)	Invitation to God (<i>da'wa</i>)
Liberation Party (<i>Ḥizb at-Ṭahrīr</i>)	Unity of the Muslim Community (<i>umma</i>) under one political authority (<i>khilāfa</i>)
Sufis	Purification and education (<i>taẓkiyya wa tarbiyya</i>)

Although the focus on one aspect is quite normal due to differences in natural personal inclinations and skills, Muslims are recommended to attempt addressing all aspects. Imam Muhammad Al-Shafi'i (767—820) in one of his poems said:

“Be a faqih and a Sufi at the same time,
this is my advice to you.
The former being austere with a harsh heart,
the latter being condemned to ignorance.”ⁱ

Imam Al-Shafi'i obviously meant the corrupted forms of Fiqh and Sufism.

In his Letter to the fifth Congress of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), held in 1939, the founder of the movement, Hassan al-Banna, emphasising the importance for Muslims to adopt an all-inclusive approach to religion, described the MB as a “comprehensive reformist

ⁱ فقيهاً وصوفياً فكن ليس واحداً * فإني وحق الله إياك أنصح
فذلك قانس، لم يذق قلبه تنقي * وهذا جهول، كيف ذو الجهل يصلح؟

project” that is simultaneously “a Salafi call, a Sunni order, a Sufi reality, a political institution, a sports league, a scientific and cultural association, an economic corporation and a social idea.”²⁶

4. Sufism and politics

It is true that some Sufis are apolitical and dedicate their life to the mystical aspects of Islam, but others are in a search of a political role at the local and even at the regional level and sometimes they claim it loudly. Syed Qamar Afzal Rizvi observes that “during the last few decades we saw that even the seminaries claiming to follow Sufism, have started teaching the political interpretation of Islam.”²⁷

Several Sufi orders all over the world aspire to political participation. A few years ago, during a big convention of Tijanis, one of the organisers stated that with more than 100 million followers all over the world, especially in North and Sub-Saharan Africa, they seek a political role. The Tijani Sufi order, for example, is influential in Sub-Saharan and West Africa, particularly in Chad and Senegal²⁸. While the Tijani order has political influence, the Muridiya orderⁱ has economic influence²⁹.

4.1. Political participation

In fact, throughout the history of the Muslim world many Sufi orders have been involved in politics either in a constructive way to build society and the state or as a tool in the hand of foreign aggressors or domestic authoritarian corrupt regimes.

In Algeria, Emir Abd-el-Kader ibn Muhieddine (1808–1883), a prominent Sufi figure from the Qadiriya order, is considered not only as a military leader who fought French occupation for 17 years (1830–1847), but also as the founder of the modern Algerian state. Some Algerien Sufi orders remained as a bastion of nationalism during French occupation. In Kabilia, Mohamed Brahim Salhi mentions the example of the *ṣawiyas*ⁱⁱ (Sufi Lodges) of Sidi Hadj Hesseyen (douar Djenane in

ⁱ Founded in 1883 in Senegal by Amadou Bamba.

ⁱⁱ “The term *ṣawīya* [pl. *ṣawaya*] literally means ‘corner’ (of a mosque). Throughout the Maghrib, the *ṣawaya* fulfilled a variety of functions in rural life: generally constructed around the tomb of a local saint, they served as teaching institutes of varying quality where the teachers of the village Qur’anic schools would be educated, as sites of pilgrimages, institutes of charity, hostels, and meeting places for religious brotherhoods” (Judith Scheele. *Op. Cit.*). Different terms

Soummam) and Tasslent (Akbou) which “were both strongholds of the nationalist element and closed between 1956 and 1957 [by the French army] for collaboration with the FLN [*Front de Libération Nationale*]”.³⁰ The *zawiya* of Sidi Yahia was closed in 1958.³¹

In Turkey, Said-i Nursi (1877-1960), and his followers of the Nur movement, who were influenced greatly by the Naqshbandi-Khalidi order,³² had an active political role; he openly opposed policies, notably in matters of education, of both the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II and the founder of the republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk¹. As mentioned by Zeki Saritoprak from the Department of Religious Studies of John Carroll University in a conference organised in 2003 by the Nixon Center, “despite being abolished in 1924, there are still a variety of Sufi orders who try to adapt to the challenges of modern life. The Naqshbandi order remains very popular in the politics and culture of Turkey.”³³ The Fethullah Gülen movement, according to Turkish political scientist Hakan Yavuz, is influenced by the ideas of Said-i Nursi,³⁴ to the point where it is considered as an offshoot of the Nur movement³⁵, and is sometimes described as a neo-Sufi movement.³⁶ In the past couple of decades and still today, to a lesser degree, it has an influence on Turkish politics. Even the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party – AKP) is considered to be well rooted in the Sufi tradition. Svante E. Cornell and M. K. Kaya from the Hudson Institute observe that religious orders and brotherhoods

constitute the deep structure of Turkish power and share a common ideological source: they belong to, or stem from, the Khalidi branch of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. While they differ from one another in interpretation and tone, the Naqshbandi-Khalidi groups have formed Turkish political Islam, and through the AKP, the Khalidi worldview has become the dominant political force in Turkey today.³⁷

In Iran, several leaders of the 1979 revolution, notably Ayatullah Khomeini the founder of the modern Islamic Republic of Iran, were deeply rooted in Irfan³⁸ (Iranian Sufism).

In Morocco, the *al-Adl wal-Ihssane* (Justice and Beneficence) movement, founded in 1973 and headed by Shaikh Abdeslam Yassine, from the Boutchichiya Sufi order, until his death in 2012, plays a major

are used in other other areas of the Muslim world: *tekyeh* in Turkey, *khanqah* in Iran and *dargah* in South Asia, which all may refer to seminaries or schools.

¹ Other Sufi Shaikhs from the Naqshbandi order led rebellions against Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, such as Shaikh Said of Palu and Shaikh Mehmet Efendi.

role in the political scene of the kingdom. In 2011, in the emergence of the Arab Spring, al-Adl wal-Ihssane was one of the main drivers of the '20 February' protest movement. For Vish Sakthivel, the author of 'Al-Adl wal-Ihsan Inside Morocco's Islamist Challenge', published in 2014 by the Washington Institute, Shaikh Abdeslam Yassine "cultivated a movement steeped in the Sufi mysticism that pervades Moroccan culture, linking political and social activism to personal spirituality."³⁹ In his article, 'The unknown Moroccan Islamists', published in *Foreign Policy* in 2011, Avi Spiegel observes that,

while the group [al-Adl wal-Ihssane] is organized, in part, like a traditional Sufi brotherhood, it also functions increasingly like a modern political party, replete with a political wing (or 'circle'), official spokespeople, complex organizational charts, internal elections, and multiple websites.⁴⁰

4.2. Political instrumentalization

According to several historians, throughout the history of Sufism, many Sufi leaders have been used as a political tool to assure a political control on the population. The French colonial administration in Algeria used a number of *ṣawīyas* to establish and consolidate its authority across the country and some of the leaders of these *ṣawīyas* are said to have attempted to disseminate among their followers the idea that colonialism is a destiny of God and as believers they should accept it. For researcher Judith Scheele, two effective measures were taken by the French to bring the *ṣawīyas* under their administrative control: "the conversion of all religious endowments into state property in the second half of the nineteenth century [and] the involvement of their heads in the French administration, which for a time enhanced their political influence and wealth, but in the longer run was detrimental to their spiritual prestige."⁴¹ In his introduction to the collective work *La Tijāniyya, une confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l'Afrique*, The Tijaniya, a Muslim Brotherhood Conquering Africa, Jean-Louis Triaud observes that

the history of the Tijaniya is marked, in its main segmentations, by a long 'concubinage' with the French colonial power: in Algeria first, where its networks supported the French progression [...], then in Africa where the Maison de Tivaouane, in conjunction with the Umari family, supported the colonial administration.⁴²

The emergence, in the 1920s in North and West Africa of an Islamic current influenced by Arabian Wahhabism, with a local agenda to emancipate the colonised Muslim societies, represented a real challenge

to the French authorities. On 24 April 1928, the Muslim Affairs Office of the French Minister of the Colonies, Léon Perrier, wrote a letter to the Governor General of French West Africa, based in Dakar, concerning the threat that the Salafis represented, where the support of Sufi congregations for the colonial power is acknowledged:

In recent years, there has been a movement for renewal in the Islamic world which seems to require our attention. This intellectual movement, called the 'Salafi' movement, aims to realize, within the religious order, reforms that should return cultural practices to the purity of primitive Islam. Although it is developing outside the influence of Ibn Saoud and the Ulema of Nedjd, it is not unlike Arabic Wahabism, and has sometimes been confused with it. It is already very active in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. It seems that the Communist agitators are interested in it, as they are interested in everything that can disturb the established order, exalt particularisms and achieve confusion. But, even if it is not used by European elements hostile to our influence, the 'Salafi' movement is not without, from the point of view of public order and the maintenance of our authority, serious dangers against which it is necessary to safeguard. Its action, as is the rule in Islam and in all religious schisms, will necessarily emerge from the theological field to become political. Furthermore, this religious reform in fact attacks all the religious personalities whose attachment to prevailing traditions and devotion to our cause have made it possible to occupy a leading position. It is also hostile to congregations which have such a large place in the religious life of Muslims in French West Africa and whose support we have enjoyed.⁴³

It should be noted, however, that many Sufi brotherhoods resisted the colonial enterprise, including the Tijaniya brotherhood. Some of the Sufi orders even engaged in armed resistance as indicated in the following section.

The instrumentalization of Sufi orders and other movements by political powers is not only a historical fact but also a reality today. The governments of several countries in the Muslim world, including secular ones, seek influence (soft power) in both their domestic and foreign policies through religious groups. In fact, secularity as a way to protect both the state from religious organisations and religious organisations from the state is today a mere illusion in most Muslim countries since the state has a tight control of religion (mosques, associations, schools, discourses, finance, networking, etc.). The various forms of control are achieved through the following official bodies:

- 1- *Security*: Ministry of interior;
- 2- *Political*: Islamic supreme council;

- 3- *Administrative*: Ministry of religious affairs;
- 4- *Religious*: 2 + 3 + State-controlled media;
- 5- *Education and research*: State-run Islamic universities;
- 6- *Economic*: Ministry of endowments;
- 7- *External*: Ministry of foreign affairs (religious diplomacy).

An example of the use of Sufism as a tool of soft power is the competition between Algeria and Morocco to gain influence in Sub-Saharan and West Africa through their Tijani networks. It is worth noting that there are two main Tijani shrines, one in Algeria and one in Morocco. Shaikh Ahmed Tijani, the founder of the Tijani order, was born in Aïn Madhi (Algeria) in 1737 or 1738 and died in 1815 in Fès (Morocco).

Isabelle Werenfels, head of the Middle East and Africa research division at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, counts among the reasons for fostering Sufism in Morocco the fact that Sufism represents “a diplomatic and economic tool in generating goodwill, the better to facilitate Morocco’s relations with West Africa, and also encouraging tourism.”⁴⁴ For Yasmine Ryan and Shadi Rahimi from the *Middle East Eye*, “Morocco’s Sufi revival is likely to mean Sufis will play a growing role not only in national political life, but also as a tool for furthering Morocco’s regional, and even international, influence.”⁴⁵ According to Bakary Sambe, from the *Centre d’Etude des religions* of Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis, Senegal, “since the Hasan II era, Morocco has relied on the Tijani order to build strong diplomatic relations with West African States, with the ultimate aim of countering the socialist block in Africa which had been supporting the independence of Western Sahara.”⁴⁶

When Abdelaziz Bouteflika was appointed as president by the Algerian intelligence/military establishment in 1999, he immediately engaged in a policy of empowering Algerian Sufi orders both politically and financially, particularly through the National Union of Algerian Zawiyas (*Al Ittihad al-Watani li-Zawaya al-Jaza’iriya*) established in June 2003 and headed by Omar Mahmoud Chaalal, as well as granting his patronage to Sufi international symposia organised in the country.ⁱ

ⁱ Such as the International Symposium of the Tijaniya Brotherhood organised in El Oued in November 2008, and the International Sufi Convention held in Mostaganem in May 2016. During the 2016 meeting an Algeria-based World Union of Sufism (WUS) was launched by the representatives of 50 countries.

According to a former Algerian minister, Bouteflika reactivated Sufism for both personal and foreign policy reasons;

he needed it to counter the lobbying of Morocco, which, excluded from the African Union because of the Western Sahara, found in the *zawiyas* the absolute weapon in the war of influence that it wages against Algeria among African countries. For this reason, both countries claim the parentage of the powerful Tijaniya, a Sufi brotherhood very widespread on the [African] continent.⁴⁷

Sufism is also used in Morocco and to a lesser degree in Algeria to control the population and to curb the influence of Islamic currents that oppose and challenge the Moroccan Makhzen and the militarist nature of the Algerian regime. According to researcher Fait Muedini from Eckerd College in Florida,

both Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria and Mohammed VI of Morocco have each emphasized Sufi Islam in a number of manners that include but are not limited to public media statements about the value of Sufism in society, as well as voicing support with regard to organizing conferences on Sufism. But while such actions are often carried out in the name of combating religious extremism, statements made about Sufism by such leaders also seem to suggest that they may be operating under the assumption that Sufis are either apolitical and thus are not seen as a threat, or that Sufism can be used to counter Islamist organizations that are politically challenging to the government.⁴⁸

In her recent paper published by the Foreign Policy Research Institute in December 2016, Vish Sakthivel notes that,

while the Moroccan and Algerian states often market Sufism as a U.S. interest, it is, in fact, mostly theirs. The potential (as yet unproven) moderating effects of Sufism is secondary to their wishes to 'upgrade' to softer authoritarian practices to contain dissent, generate clientelist networks, and strengthen religious legitimacy as well as their hegemonic aspirations in the North Africa/Sahel neighbourhood.⁴⁹

Yasmine Ryan and Shadi Rahimi correctly observe in their article published in July 2014 in the *Middle East Eye* how in Morocco, the

authorities have for several years been actively promoting Sufism, a strategy that has been aimed partly at taking some of the wind out of the sails of political Islam. The original idea was to counter the rise of political Islam since the 1980s. [...] Some see the strategy of building allies in the Sufi brotherhoods as just another form of clientelism.⁵⁰

In Algeria the instrumentalization of Sufism may be traced back to before the Bouteflika era. In Spring 1991, in the midst of what is known in Algerian as the ‘democratic parenthesis’, and a year after the victory of the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) in local elections, the Algerian government organized a conference on the *zawiya* tradition at the Club des Pins on the Algiers coast. Researcher Judith Scheele notes that “most Algerians saw this appeal to the *zawiya* at such a moment of crisis as a clearly political maneuver, a last desperate attempt to recapture religion, to ‘recycle’ its ‘traditional’ institutions in the state’s own image, and to affirm its inherent links, or rather its putative co-extensiveness, with the Algerian national government and state.”⁵¹

According to researchers Hamidi Khemissi et al., “since his first election in 1999, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria has encouraged Sufism as an alternative to more militant forms of Islam and he has actively solicited the support of Sufi orders in his presidential campaigns. Sufi orders have supported his presidential efforts and he has returned the favour by sustaining Sufi orders.”⁵²

Reporting on the Algerian context, in his 2008 note ‘Mystic Sufi: Bouteflika's Islamic Gambit’, released by Wikileaks, US diplomat Thomas F. Daughton, believed that “President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has begun raising the profile of Algeria's Sufi religious schools – the *zawiyas* – both as a tool for political mobilization and to counter Islamic extremism with a moderate, homegrown alternative.”⁵³ He further added that, “lately, Bouteflika has succeeded in rehabilitating and activating the *zawiyas* once again, for social and political influence. [...] Having the *zawiyas* on his side can only help Bouteflika maintain his grip on his political base in advance of the 2009 presidential elections.”⁵⁴ Researcher Vish Sakthivel elaborates further:

In Algeria, political figures seek blessings from and will even join Sufi *zaouias* to earn a veneer of religious legitimacy. Most recently, former Energy and Mines Minister Chekib Khelil embarked on yet another nationwide *zaouia*-tour ahead of his public return to the political scene, where his reputation has previously been marred by corruption scandals. His tour was widely mocked in the diverse Algerian press, and even certain *zaouias* were ridiculed for having received him. President Bouteflika notably focuses on *zaouias* in the run up to elections by going on country-round tours stopping at each *zaouia* along the way, showing deference to sheikhs, paying respects at mausoleums of passed marabouts before making large monetary donations and expressly asking for political support. This growth of joining a Sufi order as an elite/political trend further contributes to youth scepticism of Sufism.⁵⁵

In a survey conducted in Algeria in 2011 by Hamidi Khemissi et al. to assess how the youth view Sufism, Salafism and governmental policy towards religion in Algeria, “the majority of respondents [were found to] believe that the government’s support of Sufi orders involves a political effort to increase the ruling party’s chances of electoral success while deflecting Salafist critiques of government.”⁵⁶

The practice is not limited to Algeria and Morocco; the Egyptian military regime has also assigned a political role to Sufismⁱ. This started in Nasser’s era and continued with Sadat and Mubarak.⁵⁷ The control over Sufi orders is achieved through Al-Azhar Universityⁱⁱ whose identity “has been strongly associated with Sufism”⁵⁸, and the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders (SCSO), “a quasi-state leadership committee [...] responsible for managing Sufi affairs at a national level,”⁵⁹ and which “includes representatives of the ministries of interior, information, culture, local development, religious affairs, in addition to a representative of Al Azhar”⁶⁰. This political interference, especially in the era of president Hosni Mubarak who imposed Abd Al-Hadi Al-Qasabi from the ruling party as the scholar-in-chief (*shaikh al-mashayikh*) of the SCSO, fuelled dissatisfaction and anger among some Sufis groups who launched the Front for Sufi Reform (*Jabhat Al-Islah Al-Sufi*) aiming to gain independence from the political power.

Some Egyptian Sufis participated in the 25 January 2011 revolution and joined the protests in Tahrir Square⁶¹. In the aftermath of the revolution, a Coalition of Egyptian Sufis (*I’tilaf as-Sufiyyin al-Masriyyin*) and three political parties were established: Egyptian Liberation Party (*Hizb al-Tahrir al-Masri*), Liberty Voice Party (*Hizb Sawt al-Hurriya*), Sufi Victory Party (*Hizb an-Nasr as-Sufi*) to compete politically with other Liberal, MB and Salafi parties and to guarantee Sufi representation in the Parliament in order to safeguard the interests of the Egyptian Sufi community, estimated at 15-20 million (16-21% of Egyptian Muslim population). However, the performance of Egyptian Sufi parties in the elections was poor; they “have been clearly associated with [the] old-regime.”⁶²

ⁱ There are around eighty Sufi orders in Egypt, the main ones are the Shadhiliyya, the Burhamiyya and the Rifa’iyya.

ⁱⁱ Shaykh al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyeb and former Grand Mufti of Egypt Ali Gomaa, both Azhari scholars, are Sufis.

In October 2012, 37 scholars from Al Azhar launchedⁱ the World Union of Sufi Scholars⁶³ (*Al-Ittibaad al-Aalami li Ulamaa as-Sufiyya*) and in November 2013, 19 Egyptian Sufi sheikhs launched in Paris the World Federation of Sufi Orders⁶⁴ (WFSO) (*Al-Ittibaad al-Aalami liTturuq as-Sufiyya*) and appointed Sheikh Alaa Abul-Azayem, head of the Azamiya Order, as president of the WFSO.⁶⁵

Some of the Egyptian Sufi orders participated in the 20 June protests against president Mohamed Morsi that paved the way for General Abdel Fattah al-Sissi to take power⁶⁶. After the 3 July 2013 military coup, like the Salafi an-Nour Party, they supported General Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, who is said to be a Sufi⁶⁷, particularly in the 2014 presidential election⁶⁸, when the WFSO campaigned for Abdel Fattah al-Sissi⁶⁹. The WSFO organised on 20 April 2017 a conference on Violence and Terrorism. The conference urged Shaikh al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyeb to exclude from Al-Azhar University anyone linked with the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafi current.⁷⁰

Sissi's regime promotes Sufi groups and uses them as allies in the control of Egyptian society.⁷¹ "Egypt's government, observers say, is playing Sufis against Muslim Brotherhood and ultra-orthodox Salafists to get rid of the last two groups,"⁷² reported Ibrahim Ouf in February 2016 in *The Arab Weekly*.

In Turkey, the world-wide network of the Gülen Movement's Hizmet with its media outlets, financial institutions, schools and universities was used for years by the government to seek influence at the international level, mainly in Central Asia and Africa, before the relationship between Fethullah Gülen and the AKP's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan deteriorated a couple of years ago. Hizmet then became an opposition movement to the AKP and was renamed by the Turkish government as the Fethullah Gülen Terror Organisation (FETÖ) or Parallel State Organisation.

Another example of the political instrumentalisation of religious currents, including Sufism, is the frenzied competition between Gulf states to have political influence in the Arab and Muslim world. While Saudi Arabia traditionally makes use of Wahhabi-type Salafism, post-

ⁱ In order to counter the influence of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (*Al-Ittibaad al-Aalami li Ulamaa al-Muslimeen* – www.iumsonline.org) considered close to the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Muslim Scholars Association (*Rabitat Ulamaa al-Muslimeen* – www.muslimsc.com) and the International Organization of Muslim Scholars (*Al Hay'a al-Aalamiya li-Ulamaa al-Muslimeen* – www.iomsmwl.org) both considered close to the Salafi current.

1979 Iran engaged in a policy to export the revolution and promote Shiism beyond its borders. A fierce ideological battle is engaged between Iran and Saudi Arabia in various Muslim countries such as Senegal,⁷³ where Wahhabi-type Salafism and Shiism compete in a Sufi-majority environment. Qatar attempts to have some political influence in the Arab world through the Muslim Brotherhood, while the United Arab Emirates have chosen to use Sufi orders in their quest for soft power.

In fact, Abu Dhabi has been seen in the past couple of years as the spearhead of political Sufism. According to a report published in 2015 by Islam Affairs, titled *Abu Dhabi's Network of Political Sufism and its Implications on the Security of Saudi Arabia*:

the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi [Mohammed bin Zayed, MbZ] is actively seeking to integrate religion and politics and to consolidate the Sufi religious current in the face of the 'Wahhabi invasions', as he puts it. [...] He stands firmly behind the American project, launched in 2004, to establish a global Sufi political alliance. Emirati Sufi institutions continue to spearhead this project, whose religious figures openly target Saudi Arabia and its religious traditions.⁷⁴

In recent years Sufism is also being used by the Emirati government to counter the Muslim Brotherhood, on whom the United Arab Emirates has declared war.

The UAE strategy of promoting politically active Sufism relies on a number of scholars, most of whom are considered as being in favour of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world: Ahmed Al-Tayeb (Egypt), Abdullah Bin Bayyah (Mauritania), Habib Ali Al-Jifri (Yemen), Ali Gomaa (Egypt), Mohamed Said Ramadan Al-Boutiⁱ (Syria), Aref Ali Nayed (Libya), and Muhammad Hisham Kabbani (Lebanon) to name a few. Among the pillars of the Emirati project for empowering political Sufism are the Abu Dhabi-based Tabah Foundation, established in 2005 and headed by Habib Ali Al-Jifri, and the Muslim Council of Elders (MCE), established in 2014 and initially co-chaired by Ahmed Al-Tayeb and Abdullah Bin Bayyah. The launch of the MCE sparked hostilities in the media between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the new Council being viewed by Riyadh as an attack against Saudi religious leadership in the Muslim world. The Turkish government reacted to the MCE initiative by

ⁱ Shaikh Al-Bouti, a prominent Muslim scholar who was considered as an ally of Bashar al-Assad, was killed on 21 March 2013 in a bomb explosion while teaching at the Iman Mosque in Damascus. Both the Syrian government and the opposition accused the other party to be behind the assassination of Shaikh Al-Bouti.

convening at very short notice a “World Islamic Scholars Peace, Moderation and Common Sense Initiative”⁷⁵, a forum held in Istanbul on 17-19 July 2014, with the participation of more than 100 scholars from 32 countries and various schools of thought, including Salafis and MB. Egyptian and Emirati scholars were not invited. The final communiqué of the forum was released in Istanbul on 19 July 2014 (during the month of Ramadhan), the same day the MCE was launched in Abu Dhabi.

Another event came to escalate the intra-Islamic tensions, notably between the UAE and Egypt on one hand and Saudi Arabia on the other. That was the World Islamic Conference⁷⁶ that took place on 25-27 August 2016 in Grozny to determine “who are *Ahl as-Sunna wal Jama’a*”, i.e. to define who are Sunni Muslims. The Grozny conference, organised jointly by Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov and the Emirati Tabah Foundation, was supported by Russian president Vladimir Putin, UAE crown prince Mohammed bin Zayed and Egyptian president Abdelfattah Sissi. The latter sent his adviser on religious matters, Usama al-Sayyid Al-Azhari, Shaikh Al-Azhar, Ahmed El-Tayeb, and the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shawki Allam, to attend the meeting that gathered more than 200 scholars from 30 countries. Saudi and Turkish scholars were not invited. The final communiqué concluded that “*Ahlul Sunna wal Jama’a* [Sunni Muslims] are the *Ash’ari*, *Maturidi* in matters of belief, and the followers of the four schools in law and jurisprudence: *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi’i* and *Hanbali*, as well as the adherents to pure Sufism in matters of knowledge, morality and purification, following the path of Imam Junaid.”⁷⁷ The fact that the Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood were not invited to the Grozny conference and that the concluding statement mentioned explicitly the Salafis and implicitly the Muslim Brotherhood (referred to as a politicized organisation), as deviant currents in Islamⁱ, was viewed by many in the Muslim world as a fatwa excommunicating

ⁱ In the concluding statement of the Grozny Conference it is stated that: “Throughout history, erroneous ideologies have appeared that claimed to derive their beliefs from divine revelation. They rebelled against the sound scholastic methodology and tried to destroy it. They caused instability and threatened people’s safety. The first of these harmful waves was the Khawarij. They have once again appeared in modern times in the form of Salafi-takfirists, Daesh (so-called ‘Islamic State’) and similar extremist groups and politicized organizations. What these groups have in common amongst their adherents is distortions of the over-zealous, forgeries of the fabricators, and misinterpretations of the ignorant. This has given rise to dozens of false concepts and incorrect interpretations, the result of which has been takfir, destruction, bloodshed and distortion of the image of Islam leading people to show enmity to Islam and to attack it.” (http://www.tabahfoundation.org/ar/news/view_article/?id=84)

Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood and excluding them from the realm of Sunni Islam. The output of the Grozny conference was condemned by several prominent Muslim scholars⁷⁸ and prompted anger in Saudi Arabia⁷⁹ where many voices in the kingdom demanded that the Saudi government reconsider its relations with the governments of the UAE and Egypt.

There is a widespread belief in the Arab and Muslim world that the UAE government is using Sufi movements to serve its political agenda in several countries. In Turkey, Abu Dhabi is accused of providing financial assistance to the Fethullah Gülen Movement's Hizmet⁸⁰, allegedly behind the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. Palestinian Mohammed Dahlan, former leader of Fatah in Gaza and now security adviser to Mohammed bin Zayed, is said to have played a major role in this operation⁸¹. In the Libyan conflict, where the UAE do not hide their support to General Khalifa Haftar, Abu Dhabi instrumentalizes Libyan Sufi political actors such as Aref Ali Nayed, former Libyan ambassador to the UAE.⁸² In fact, Abu Dhabi supports any religious, political or military actor aiming at hampering the political transition in Arab countries, including armed *Madkhali*-type⁸³ Salafi groups fighting in Eastern Libya and Southern Yemen.

Outside the Arab world, Philip Jenkins has observed that "Sufi brotherhoods have emerged as critical supporters of government in several post-Communist regimes, including in former Yugoslav regions like Kosovo and Bosnia, and in Albania. [...] Even the Chinese government openly favors Sufism."⁸⁴ The Putin-backed government of Chechnya also relies on Sufi actors. One of them, former Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov made it clear: "We are Nakshband and Qadariⁱ and Sunnites, and there is no place for any other Islamic sect in Chechnya. [...] We cannot tolerate a situation where the enemies of Islam trample underfoot the century-old traditions of the Chechen people, [and] desecrate the name of our saints."⁸⁵

5. Sufism and violence

The approach of Sufis to violence is also diverse. While some of them are fundamentally nonviolent, others use lawful violence when justified. A third category engage in unlawful and even extreme violence.

ⁱ Nakshband and Qadari are Sufi orders.

5.1. Violence against occupation and oppression

The history of the Muslim world is replete with examples showing the involvement of Sufi religious leaders in the armed struggle against foreign aggression and invasion. As early as the 13th century, the “Great Shaikh”, Muḥyiddin ibn Arabi (1165–1240), was inciting to armed jihad against the Crusaders, and Shaikh Abu al-Hasan ash-Shadhili (1196–1258), founder of the *Shadhiliya* Sufi order, participated in the Battle of Al Mansurah in Egypt which stopped the Seventh Crusade led by Saint Louis of France. In the same era, in the eastern provinces of the Islamic world, the *Kubrawiyya* Sufi order, established by shaikh Najm ad-Din Kura, was fighting against the Mongol invasion. In the 18th-20th century period most of the uprisings and armed resistance to foreign occupation and colonial forces were led by prominent Sufi shaikhs who called for *jihad*. A few examples among many are shown in Table 3.

A more recent example is Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri. Although a former prominent Baath figure and Vice Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council under Saddam Hussein, he led armed resistance to US and Iranian forces in Iraq as the head of the “Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order”.⁸⁶

If several Sufi orders engaged in armed counter colonialism and in the fight against foreign aggression, some others were utilized in the colonialist enterprise. The French Army established corps of colonial infantry in their conquered lands, such as the Algerian Zouaves (in 1831) and the Moroccan Tirailleurs (in 1915) in North Africa, or the Senegalese Tirailleurs (1857) in Senegal, Western Africa and even Central and Eastern Africa. This African military force was used in France’s wars in Europe.ⁱ Cited by researcher Judith Scheele, French army officer Carret “pointed out wryly that during the First World War the command of the French army had seen the military hierarchy among Algerian recruits replaced by a religious one based on Sufi allegiances, and that recruits would follow the orders of their Sufi shaykh rather than those of their army commander.”⁸⁷

ⁱ Particularly World Wars I and II, where African divisions were sent to the forefront. Hundreds of thousands of Africans took part in these wars without even knowing why they were fighting. Tens of thousands of them were killed for the French flag.

Table 3: Sufi orders who fought foreign occupation in the 18th-20th centuries

Region	Leader	Sufi order	Invaders
Chechnya, Dagestan	Imam al-Mansur al-Mutawakil 'ala Allah (1760–1794) Imam Shamil (1797–1871)	Naqshbandiya	Russians
West Africa	Hajj Umar ibn Sa'id al-Futi Tall (1795–1864)	Tijaniya	French
Algeria	Emir Abdelkader ibn Muhieddine (1808–1883) Shaikh Mohand-Amezyan Aheddad (1790–1873); Shaikh Mohammed el- Hadj el-Mokrani (1815–1871); Shaikh Mohamed Bouamama (1833 or 1840– 1908)	Qadiriya Rahmaniya	French
Mauritania	Shaikh Mohamed Mustafa Ma al Aynayn (1830–1910)	Qadiriya	French, Spaniards
Indonesia	Imam Habib Abdurrahman Az-Zahir (1833–1896)	Ba 'Alawiya	Dutch
Sudan	Shaikh Muhammad Ahmad bin Abd Allah (1844–1885)	Samaniya	British
Palestine	Shaikh Farhan al-Saadi (1856–1937)	Jibawiya	British
Horn of Africa	Hajji Hafiz Sayyid Muhammad Abd Allāh al-Hasan (1856–1920)	Salahiya	British, Italians, Ethiopians
Libya	Shaikh Omar Al-Mukhtar Muhammad ibn Farhat Bredan (1858–1931)	Senussiyya	Italians

The African troops were also used for conquering other lands and for the repression of insurrections in colonised territories. The French military faced strong opposition from indigenous populations and resorted to forced recruitment. They also sought the help of some tribal and religious leaders in order to convince the local communities to let their children join the army troops. In Senegal for instance, a Sufi-majority environment, the role of some Sufi leaders was important in

facilitating the recruitment of Senegalese young men. In his work, *Sufism and Jihad in Modern Senegal: The Murid Order*, John Glover explains how

for the military recruitment of Murids [from the *Muridiya* Sufi order], the intercession and approval of Murid marabouts was necessary to the success of the program. As early as September 1914, the French were given evidence of the role that the religious leaders could play. [...] The breakthrough only came when the marabouts of the families, who were Murid, advised them to let the recruitment proceed.⁸⁸

The Senegalese *Tirailleurs* played a major role in crushing various uprisings⁸⁹ against the colonialist order in Algeria: for example, in 1916-1917, in May 1945, and during the 1954-1962 Liberation War. The repression of insurrections in several regions in the Aurès, notably Barika, Bélezma and Khenchela, in 1916-1917, were particularly bloody. The repression involved the air force which bombed the *djebels* [mountains] of Bosdaan and Mestaona, and a 14 000 strong force including Senegalese battalions. According to French historian Charles-Robert Ageron, that year would remain for the Chaouia peasants “the year of the Blacks”.⁹⁰ Ageron adds that “The collective memory of Muslim Algerians remembers the ‘Bélezma horrors, the action of the Black Senegalese who burned, raped and killed’.”⁹¹

It is worth noting that throughout Islamic history, several Sufi leaders neither engaged in armed resistance against foreign occupation nor supported it. They opted for a strategy of avoidance and resisted non-violently by contributing to the spiritual empowerment of society. One of them is Shaikh Ahmadou Bamba (1850–1927), known as *Khādim Ar-Rasūl* (The Servant of the Messenger), and called the “African Ghandi”⁹², because he opted for nonviolent struggle against French colonial forces. Another figure is Shaikh Mohand ul-Hosin in the Algerian province of Kabilya. According to Algerian scholar Omar Benaissa, he

left his adepts free to choose whether to take part or not in the revolt [against the French], adding that as far as he was concerned, he would not interfere. [...] Nevertheless, he remained close to the people; caring for them, comforting them, and re-establishing concord among them.⁹³

Some Sufi leaders and groups used violence also to challenge rulers who, in their eyes, did not comply with Islamic values. Pakistani researcher Naveed Hussain recalls that

in 1240, Baba Ilyas-i-Khorasani and Baba Ishaq, two popular Sufi shaikhs, mobilised nomadic Turkmen against the Seljuk rule in what is modern-day Turkey, demanding a revival of ‘pure’ Islam. And in the 15th and 16th

centuries, several Sufi masters led armed uprisings in the Ottoman Empire against the 'lax' official Islam.⁹⁴

5.2. Intra-Islamic violence

Another facet of the Sufi relationship to violence is the involvement of some Sufi armed groups in intra-Islamic violent conflicts. This may be illustrated by examples from the Horn of Africa, West Africa, Central Asia, and South-East Asia.

In Chechnya, according to researcher Bennett Clifford,

Sufi and Salafi Muslim institutions compete with one another politically in three separate ways: through violent attacks and campaigns; through establishment of mosques, schools, and public infrastructure; and through ideological competition. Of these three methods, violent interactions are the most visible and therefore measurable.⁹⁵

In the violent Sufi-Salafi confrontation occurring in the Chechen theatre where "there have been numerous attacks by the official Sufi institutions against Salafi adherents and vice versa", Ramzan Kadyrov, president of the Chechen Republic, uses his personal militia "mainly made up of [Sufi] Qadiri adherents, many of whom were former warlords and insurgents during the Chechen Wars."⁹⁶ Kadyrov's fighters referred to as the Kadyrovtsi "have a reputation for brutality"⁹⁷. Ramzan Kadyrov, like his father Ahmad who was killed in 2004, is considered by many in Chechnya as a 'puppet' in the hands of Vladimir Putin, used in the counterinsurgency war waged by Russia against Chechen independentists.

In the Horn of Africa, researcher Rashid Abdi explains how

many Sufi spokesmen are increasingly adopting the brutal polemical style of their Salafi adversaries. In Somalia, in particular, the standard discourse is one of mutual takfirism (denouncing the other as 'apostate'). To simply condemn Salafis, or even Salafi-jihadis, as deviants or apostates is unlikely to win over young Muslims.⁹⁸

Moreover, in the Somali Sufi-Salafi conflict, the Somalia Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a (ASWJ), a Sufi paramilitary group, took up arms against the Al-Shabaab movement⁹⁹ and cooperated with warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid¹⁰⁰. Intra-Islamic Sufi-Salafi tensions go beyond the Horn of Africa and threaten Muslim societies in several African countries. In Chad, if these polarizations are not dealt with properly, they may lead to intra-

Islamic violence and undermine the peaceful co-existence and positive interaction between Muslims and Christians in the country.

In post-independence West Africa, Woodward et al. observe that “given the high stakes in the intra-Sufi discourses and counter-discourses (i.e. spiritual salvation, religious authority, control of mosques, generating and controlling mass followings) there have been instances of intra-Sufi violence.”¹⁰¹ According to the authors, historically, “confrontations between different Tijaniya branches were also common during the 1950s and 1960s. Intra Sufi tensions and conflicts ended only after the Salafi threat against all Sufis became clear during the 1970s.”¹⁰² Woodward et al. warn that this calm is far from being sustainable since “with salvation threatened, validity of the worship questioned, and religious communal identity castigated, the stakes are high enough for the tension between Sufis and Salafis to erupt into violence.”¹⁰³

Other instances of violent Sufism in Southeast Asia are given in the work of Woodward et al. In Indonesia, Nadhlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Southeast Asian Sufi order founded in 1926, used violence despite its formal position against it. The authors explain how “NU leaders and the rank and file have resorted to extreme violence when convinced that the organisation and Islam were threatened,”¹⁰⁴ and how “in 1965 NU played a major role in the mass slaughter of Indonesian communists.”¹⁰⁵ Woodward et al. mention another Indonesian group, emanation of NU, the Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam* – an FPI) founded in 1998 by Sufi leaders Rezieq Syihab and Misbahul Anam, and

known for attacks on those it deems ‘deviant’ and for ‘sweepings’ (ransacking) of nightclubs, bars, massage parlours and other establishments promoting what it considers to be immoral activities, especially during Ramadan. FPI actions have yielded few fatalities but many victims have been severely injured.¹⁰⁶

In Malaysia, again according to Woodward et al., the Sufi armed group Al-Ma’unah Brotherhood of Spiritual Knowledge (*Persaudaraan Ilmu Dalam al-Ma’unah*) established by Mohammed Amin Mohammed Razali

carried out one of the most serious jihadi attacks in the country’s history. [...] In July of 2000, [Razali] and a group of 29 followers seized a military arms depot and proclaimed a jihad against the Malaysian government.¹⁰⁷

6. Conclusion

The myth of essentially pacifist Sufis recalls another one associating Buddhism with 'peace and love', while linking Christianity and Islam with violence, a myth that was debunked by the bloody events that occurred during the last two decades in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Tibet. The persecution of religious minorities by Buddhists, sometimes monks, has come to demonstrate that Buddhism is neither more, nor less violent than other religions. There is no peaceful or violent religion, culture, school of thought, race or nation. All human communities are made up of complex entities sharing the same inclination to violence and the ideal of peace.

A successful strategy for preventing and countering extremism and violence in the Muslim world must address their drivers comprehensively, associating all segments of the society in an inclusive way. Dividing the society into good and bad Muslims will only worsen the sectarian tensions and lead to more violence. All Islamic currents, including Sufis, Salafis, Muslim Brotherhood, Tablighi, and others have the right to be recognized and accepted as partners in the edification of a pluralistic society and in building a state governed by the rule of law. They also share the duty of joining their efforts and interacting positively to promote peace.

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