

The Promotion of Sufism in the Politics of Algeria and Morocco

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the promotion of Sufism by government leaders in Algeria and Morocco. Specifically, this paper finds that 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.

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Islam has been incorporated in the domestic and foreign policies of government leaders for quite some time (Esposito 1998). However, since the

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September 11, 2001, terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (Philpott 2002), the teachings of Islam have become a major point of examination. Significant media and policy attention has been directed towards not only understanding Islam, but also discussing how individuals use religion in their political objectives.

And within this discussion is the idea that governments and other actors have aimed to address how to halt the spread of specific Islamic interpretations, in the name of preventing future terror attacks. Because of the worry of particular interpretations of Islam and the effect that they may have on individual actions, many have been quick to try to find other interpretations of Islam (or specific groups of Muslims) to promote. But while such interpretations of Islam have been supported by governments in hopes of preventing future terrorism, Mamdani (2002, 766) argues that within these actions the emphasis by policy-makers has not been on “distinguishing terrorists from civilians,” but rather, the “talk has turned religious experience into a political category,” and that in order to understand why individuals act, one should not just examine one’s religion, nor should religion be viewed in a vacuum (Mamdani 2002). And because of this, a detailed understanding of a range of factors that play a role in an individual’s actions is needed. Yet, Mamdani (2002) argues that some are quick to believe that whether one interprets religion itself “literally” compared to “metaphoric or figurative” is the difference in distinguishing whether one will commit acts of terror (767). Applying this specifically to the case of Islam, what he believes is happening is that “we are now told to distinguish between good Muslims and bad Muslims. Mind you, not between good and bad persons, nor between criminals and civil citizens, who both happen to be Muslims, but between good Muslims and bad Muslims”(767).

This last point is important to understand, because with the intention of some to pigeonhole different interpretations of Islam, there has come a move (by some) towards promoting one specific form of Islam, namely Sufism, in the efforts to fight religious extremism. Sufism itself is understood as the mystical branch of Islam (Heck 2007b), although the term “Sufism” is much more complex than just Muslim mysticism¹ (Heck 2007b). And while speaking out against extremism is obviously necessary, within this discussion of attempting to categorize and preempt individuals’ actions (and even intentions) based solely on religion, not only has this inaccurately stereotyped Muslims who do not belong to the Sufi teachings of

¹ For a detailed discussion of the term “Sufism,” see Heck (2007b).

Islam, but this line of discussion has also led to some suggesting that Sufis themselves are not concerned with politics (and thus are dismissed as any sort of political [violent or nonviolent] challenge to a government).

In fact, this categorization of Sufism as a separate (and non-threatening) entity of Islam has played out recently in the United States with the debate surrounding the construction of the “Park 51 Mosque” in New York City. What is interesting about this case is that here the “good Muslim” was seen as “good” specifically because of an affiliation with Sufism (Safi 2011). Safi (2011) explains that in attempts to show that those individuals who were tied to the creation of the mosque—including Imam Feisal Rauf, the leader of the proposed mosque—were not a threat, news sources, among others, pointed out that he was a Sufi Muslim. The statements by New York leaders such as those of Governor David Patterson fit within this framework of categorizing Islam. Specifically, Safi (2011) quotes Governor Patterson, who when speaking on the mosque construction issue, stated that “this group who has put this mosque together, they are known as the Sufi Muslims. This is not like the Shiites . . . They’re almost like a hybrid, almost westernized. They are not really what I would classify in the sort of mainland Muslim practice.” By including the “Sufi” in this categorization, this seems to portray the inaccurate picture that Muslim individuals can either be a “Sufi” (and thus the “good” Muslim), or if not a Sufi, an “Islamist” (Safi 2011).

But while this is a recent example of the use of Sufism in politics, this is far from the only case where Sufism has been advocated by governments to counter any potential threat to their political system. In fact, we find evidence where different states have specifically been promoting Sufism, not only because of a positive message that Sufism may provide,² but also because Sufism and Sufis are seen as a minimal “political threat” to the current system. This paper will focus primarily on the cases of Algeria and Morocco to illustrate the point of leaders promoting Sufism with the intent to combat not only extremism, but also because of a perception that Sufism is not concerned with politics, and thus not a legitimate political concern to the respective political leaders. However, we are in no way implying that Sufis have only been limited to such a role, as history suggests a far different picture. Many cases exist in which Sufi leaders and groups

² It must be noted that even if Sufism does bring a positive message, this does not mean that non-Sufi Muslims, within this false dichotomous framework, do not also offer positive contributions.

have challenged political authority. Furthermore, in many cases, Sufi leaders have had (and continue to have) a great deal of influence compared to political leaders. This paper is merely examining specific cases of where leaders are working under the assumption of “apolitical” Sufis.

Sufism in Politics

As previously alluded to, an underlying belief of Sufism by some has been the idea that Sufis are apolitical, and thus not concerned with either political power, or with those who govern politically. Pinto (2003, 2) explains that “Sufis are usually portrayed as quietest and non-political forces” (citing Gellner 1993, 57–59), “or as simple instruments of state domination” (citing Luizard 1991, 29). But while some may espouse such beliefs towards Sufism and Sufis, the idea of Sufis showing little concern for politics (and only being focused on spiritual matters) is far from accurate (Islam 2002, in Rozehnal 2004; Pinto 2003; Safi 2011). For example, Sufi orders have had a long history of involvement in politics and community affairs (Heck 2007a) that include specific political campaigns against colonialism and authoritarian regimes (Heck 2007a; Pinto 2003, 2). Sufis have also participated in “call[ing] for equality and democracy” (Werbner 1996, 116), and have had a history of political influence in places such as the Sudan (al-Shahi 1979; Collins 2008; Seesemann 2007), Senegal (O’Brian 1975, in Ellis and ter Haar 1998; Clover 2007, in Clark 2009), Morocco (Mojuetan 1981; Zeghal 2009), Lebanon (Hamzeh and Dekmejian 1996) Libya (St. John 2008; Wehrey 2011), and Syria (Weismann 2005). We also find historical examples where political leaders themselves have had connections to Sufi orders (Tarzi 1991). Political leaders have often aimed to establish ties to Sufi leaders (sheikhs) because, as Seesemann (2007) explains, having “good contacts with well-known Sufi leaders may enhance a politician’s credibility and give religious legitimacy to his agenda” (32). For this article, the cases of Algeria and Morocco will be used to illustrate how the leaders of these respective states have attempted to promote Sufism in order to combat extremism, but as well to highlight this “apolitical” religious perspective that in turn is seen as a minimal to nonexistent threat to the stability of the leadership currently in power. But while this is the case, it is not the only time that political leaders are approaching Sufism, nor is the use of Sufism limited to just these two states. For example, Seesemann (2007) provides a detailed account of relations between the state and various Sufi groups in Sudan. Specifically in the case of Sudan, the Islamist

government attempted to use Sufism and Sufi groups for political gain by working towards dividing the Sufis. Seesemann (2007) explains that

the distinction between “real” and “false” Sufis is primarily the result of a pragmatic choice guided by political and religious rationalities. In religious terms, al-Turābī’s Islamic Movement sees itself as embracing all Muslims, including Sufis qualified as “true” from the Islamist perspective. On the political side, once in power, the Islamist government had to deal with Sufi orders as political lobbies. Here, the Islamists opted for the strategy of courting the “real” Sufis, a strategy that enabled them to achieve two objectives at the same time: 1) the support of several influential Sufi leaders; and 2) a split within the Sufi ranks. (33–34)

What is interesting is that the leadership in Morocco is using what looks to be a similar strategy of dividing different religious groups with the goal of maintaining political strength (Cavatorta 2007).

In another example of the use of Sufism by the state, in the case of Libya, Muammar Qaddafi also appealed to Sufism for specific political goals. Qaddafi, having had a history of attempting to influence religion in Libya (Athanasiadis 2010), for years monitored the activity of religious groups—including Sufis—by controlling funds of Sufi groups, banning Sufi shrines from operating, and the limiting activity of Sufi organizations, because of a belief that they would pose a challenge to his political hold on power (Wehrey 2011). Upon establishing power in 1969, Qaddafi “dissolved the main brotherhoods and persecuted particularly fiercely the Sanussiyah order, which possessed extended charity and economic networks” (Athanasiadis 2010) and was a key organization in anti-colonial efforts against Italy and its colonialism in Libya (Wehrey 2011). However, later a shift occurred in Qaddafi’s position on Sufism, where Qaddafi “bolster[ed] Sufi charitable networks as a buffer against radical Salafism” (Wehrey 2011) due to a concern with an increase in Wahhabi interpretations of Islam in Libya. Specifically, some believe that the increase in Libyan fighters in Iraq, as well as the establishment of military training camps in Libya by violent Islamist groups such as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat led Qaddafi to advocate Sufi Islam (Athanasiadis 2010). In explaining the increase of attention to Sufism in Libya, Kahlifa Mahdaoui, a military officer, quoted in a 2010 *Global Post* article, says that [Qaddafi] “abolished the *zawāyā* [Sufi prayer halls] but they’re now rebuilding them because they realize Wahhabism failed and this is the only

way to fight the influence of the U.S. . . . Sufism decreases passions while Wahhabism inflames them.”

But while Qaddafi promoted Sufism to counter Islamist groups, he also advocated Sufi thinking towards asceticism in order to challenge what he saw as current actions of “Western colonialism.” Qaddafi, speaking on these issues, said:

Because if we allow ourselves to pursue these and other needs we will be in need of them and their products. We will make ourselves a consumer market. So when Islam calls for Sufism, a rough life and asceticism, it is, in fact, a call which should make us come to our senses and be happy with less, with only the necessary and the good, so that we might be able to do without the many things which are not good for use and which might kill us and gives strength to the enemy . . . Sufism should spread. By Sufism, I do not mean dervishism. Sufism and its modern meaning are not clearly understood in the Islamic world. I do not mean here Sufism as it was portrayed in the old books. For me, Sufism, which is an essence of Islam, should spread . . . In place of the spread of the veil and of preventing women from working, which means treating women with contempt and doubting their ability and their resistance in comparison with men, Sufism and Islamic principles should spread. It should spread instead of the misuse of religion, instead of the jugglery, distortion of religion, Muslim Brotherhood, Takfir Wal-Hijrah . . . and all other calls which have harmed Islam as much as Western Christian colonialism. (BBC 1998)

Algeria

Sufism has had a strong presence in Algeria for centuries. One of the first appearances of Sufism in Algeria was related to Abū Madyan Shu‘aib al-Andalusī (Mackeen 1971, 405), who traveled extensively to Morocco, as well as Mecca for religious study, and upon “his return to North Africa he made Bougie the centre of his activity until the year 594/1197, when the reigning Muwahhid sovereign Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb al-Mansūr (reigned 580–595/1184–1199), disconcerted by the growing popularity of this preacher, ordered his transfer to Marrakesh for trial” (Mackeen 406). The Sufi orders continued to grow extensively after this time, with a number of Sufi orders established throughout North Africa from the sixteenth century onwards (Andezian 2002).

One of the larger Algerian Sufi orders, the Tijāniyya Sufi order was established by Ahmed b. Muhammad al-Tijāni (Wright 2005). Al-Tijāni moved to Fez, Morocco, in the year 1799 due to the Ottoman invasion (Benaissa 1997). The Tijāniyya have had (and still have) a large following throughout North Africa (Seesemann 2009). Sufi groups such as the Tijāniyya were a main force against the colonial efforts of France in Algeria. In fact, many Sufi leaders played key roles in the anti-colonialist movement. At the time of French colonialism throughout many parts of the Maghreb, a number of Sufi orders were already in existence (Benaissa 1997). In the earlier nineteenth century, we witnessed one of the first Sufi-led resistance movements by Emir ‘Abd al Qadīr of the Qādiriyya order (Ruedy 2005). In 1834, an agreement was then established between the French government and ‘Abd al Qadīr, giving him control in parts of western Algeria. However, the fighting between these two figures continued, and ‘Abd al Qadīr eventually lost control to France, and was captured in 1847 (Ruedy 1992, 65).

What is interesting to note about this is the way that the French government attempted to use ‘Abd al Qadīr’s name for political purposes. As Ruedy (1992) explains,

throughout the colonial period, the French were at considerable pains to manipulate the legacy of ‘Abd al Qadīr in such a way as to limit its value for Algerian reformers or nationalists. One line of this manipulation focused on what appear to have been the Amir’s rather good relations with the French after he left for the Near East: his friendship with Napoleon III, the contention that the resistance leader in his later years believed the French occupation to be beneficial for Algeria, and in particular the claim that he condemned the massive Kabylie insurrection of 1871. (65)

But even after ‘Abd al Qadīr, the Sufi resistance to French colonialism continued into the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Benaissa (1997) cites Sufi sheikhs whose emphasis during colonialism was to increase the faith and “piety” of citizens, as this was seen as one aspect of anti-colonial resistance. Benaissa (1997) explains that “this piety . . . was the best form of the [defense] against the more insidious, because less visible, forces of the secularization that underlay the French *mission civilitrice*; colonialism as stressed at the outset, was not just an assault on external liberty, it was, much more, an attack on the traditional Muslim mentality and way of life.”

However, not all Sufis were opposed to French activities in Algeria.

For example, some within the Tijāniyya order continued to maintain a relationship with political leaders of the state, and in the case of the twentieth century in Algeria, with the French colonial power (Seesemann and Soares 2009). For example, Seesemann and Soares (2009) explain that France attempted to shore up support from Muslims in their colonies during both World War I and World War II, with a goal of establishing backing from Sufi leaders during these periods of time (94–95). One major Sufi leader who had a close relationship with the French government was Sidi Benamor, a leading figure in the Tijāniyya order. The French government, aware of “Sidi Benamor’s known pro-French proclivities” (Seesemann and Soares 2009, 98), allowed him to travel to other areas of North Africa to meet with fellow Tijāni Sufis. They backed this trip because of a belief that having ties to Sidi Benamor would help in terms of continuing their work as a colonial power in areas of heavy resistance. Seesemann and Soares (2009) go on to explain that “Sidi Benamor seems to have been traveling on a semiofficial mission, at least in French colonies” (99). Thus, this trip benefited France since some speeches given by Sidi Benamor were quite supportive of French actions, and ran counter to many of the anti-colonialist movements (Seesemann and Soares 2009).

Following colonialism, the Sufis were mostly pushed out of any control of power due to the Salafi influence in Algeria (Andezian 2002). But while Sufi leaders may have had limited direct access to national governance, Sufi orders were still prevalent in Algeria, continuing to function as religious institutions (Andezian 2002). Fauque (1961) (in Trimmingham 1971, 256) reported that the Khalwatiyya, the Shādhiliyya, and the Qādiriyya orders combined had a total of 500,000 adherents, whereas other figures suggest that right before independence (in 1961), it was believed that four of the larger Sufi groups (Khalwatiyya, Shādhiliyya, Qādiriyya, and Khalwatiyya) had roughly 500,000 members (Benaissa 1997). However, we saw that it was after Boumediene when Sufi orders had more room to operate; some who were previously seen as a challenge to the government now had more freedoms within the state (Andezian 2002).

Islamism, Sufism, and the Algerian State

In Algeria, the government has historically experienced violent confrontations with Islamist organizations. The rise of the Islamist groups intensified in the 1980s with a range of protests in Algiers and other areas within Algeria related to what was seen as ineffective economic policies, as well

as Chadli Bendjedid and his government's inability to address the political concerns of citizens. In 1989, after Bendjedid adopted a new constitution that allowed for new political parties to form, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) decided to enter the electoral political system. In the 1990 local elections, the rules for the elections stated that if no party won a majority, the party with the most votes would gain the majority of seats. And although it became obvious that the electoral rules "[were] clearly designed to favor the largest party which all presumed to be the FLN [National Liberation Front]" (Ruedy 2005, 253), the FIS came away victorious, successfully winning a majority of seats (Ruedy 2005).

In response to this, the government had a number of FIS leaders arrested. In addition, to counter any potential victory, the state redrew electoral districts, and limited where the Islamists could campaign. Nevertheless, in the first part of the 1992 elections, "the FIS won absolute majorities in 188 of the 430 electoral districts" (Ruedy 2005, 255). Because of the overall expected FIS victory, military leaders put pressure on Chadli Bendjedid to resign, formed the High State Council (HCE), and banned the FIS as a political party. In response, the FIS and police both engaged in acts of violence where thousands of individuals, including many innocent bystanders, were killed. The total number of those killed in the civil conflict between the government, FIS, and other Islamist groups is said to be as high as 150,000 persons (Ruedy 2005).

It is from this historical context that we should examine the use of Sufism as related to government domestic policy. Specifically, due to the prolonged conflict with Islamists in Algeria, "since the early nineties of the last century, the authorities have found a different way of stemming the influence of the Salafi jihadist ideology which is espoused by the armed hardliners" (BBC 2009). The government has attempted to highlight Sufism to counter any interpretation of Salafi Islam that has been seen as problematic to the state (Al Jazeera 2008). Algerian President Abdul Aziz Bouteflika specifically has emphasized the spread of Sufism as a counter to Al Qaeda (*World Tribune* 2009), and the government has taken a number of steps to promote Sufism as an attempt to counter extremist ideologies. For example, Francois Burgat (2003) explains that

in 1990 and 1991, a number of analysts tried to pretend that the old guard of the Algerian [*Zāwiyas*], who had been erased from national history because of their alleged collaboration with the colonial authorities, would save the country from the growing threat of the FIS. From a Sufist perspective, the

Islamists are regularly described as “foreign,” excluding themselves from a “political system based on Sunni principles,” which is itself a continuation of “Ottoman influence.” The fact that brotherhoods would often ignore national boundaries is often conveniently forgotten, so that a “good,” “endogenous” Sufism is promoted, as opposed to an imported Islamism. (66)

Burgat (2003) goes on to explain how Sufism was seen as the “good” Islam in Algeria due to the belief that Sufis had a political loyalty to the state compared to Islamists who were counter to the state authorities by saying:

For Algeria, the picture of “good” Maliki Sufis, and “good” North Africans threatened by the bearded Wahhabis from faraway Arabia, is passed off as scientific observation. This type of political skullduggery is not always condemned. The author of a study on the (good) “religion of the people” was happy to note that “if such an amount of information and facts about the Algerian [*Zāwiyas*] had been made available to the general public over a period of not more than three months (May to July 1991), it was only due to the ‘democratic wind’ that was beginning to sweep the country.” The [*Zāwiyas*] program seemed, unsurprisingly, to consist of “pledging allegiance to the President of the Republic” and “confronting anyone who, in the name of Wahhabism, or Shiism, or of any other imported rite, has attempted and is attempting to tamper with the Maliki rite, held in common by most of our population.” (66)

More recently, Bouteflika has attempted to use the mosques in regard to Islam, and has also looked to the help of Sufi groups such as the Tijāniyya for support (Porter 2008). Porter (2008) argues that

Algiers augments its projection of hard power with a comprehensive soft power campaign. In particular, it is building a large mosque complex on Tamanrasset’s highest point. The mosque succinctly conveys the state’s intention to exercise influence, if not outright control, over Islamic activity in the city. Beyond the mosque, the state also promotes the activities of Sufi religious orders. These orders have historically been powerful in the region and the Tijāniyya in particular has proven to be a valuable supporter of Bouteflika’s National Liberation Front (FLN). (15)

In 2006 Abdelaziz Belkadem, the prime minister of Algeria, spoke at a colloquium held by the Tijāniyya order, saying that “he wanted “to use

this meeting and the [zaouias] (religious centre) both as a centre of influence and as platforms from which the precepts of our religion can be propagated” (Aflou 2006). Along with the comments by the prime minister, Abdelaziz Bouteflika also sent a message, part of which was a call to “emphasize the spiritual, human and aesthetic values of Islam when we explain it to non-Muslims and show them the true nature of this great religion” (Aflou 2006).

Along the lines of past approaches by leaders emphasizing Sufism against political Islamist groups because of a belief that the Sufis would be a counterforce to Islamism—and loyal adherents to government authority—the Algerian government more recently has continued to operate under this assumption of Sufism as a possible ally. For example, “the authorities have created a television and radio station to promote Sufism and the [zawais] or religious confraternities that preach and practi[c]e it, in addition to regular appearances by Sufi sheiks on the stations” (Chikhi 2009). The government has taken this approach after an increase in violent conflict with the Islamist groups who have challenged the government. In fact, the government has actually suggested that the *zawāyā* increase their level of involvement in civil society by providing various social services (Chikhi 2009). An Algerian sheikh by the name of Belabes Lazhari was quoted in a report (Ramzi, Ali, Arfaoui, and Wedoud 2010) as saying that “the current wager rests on the ability of Sufis to give expression to Islam and present it in a sound manner, and the extent of their contribution to cultural exchanges and renouncing violence, extremism and terrorism.”

In July 2010, the BBC (2009) reported that the government of Algeria has specifically organized events that highlight the message of Sufism. This specific event brought together over 5,000 persons to participate in “lectures and seminars calling for moderation and shunning hard-line behavi[or].” In addition, “the Islamic Affairs Ministry was also prepared to allow Sufis to distribute literature, CDs and books to schools and mosques. Officials said the Sufis were expecting to appeal to young Muslims” (*World Tribune* 2009). The aim was to increase the message of respect for others, ideas that are found in Islam (BBC 2009). The government believes that these actions will appeal to the youth in Algeria (*World Tribune* 2009).

Morocco

Examining the political and religious history of Morocco, we also find strong Sufi influences in the realm of politics, both in terms of Sufi saints

(Cornell 1998, 114–15) and Sufi orders. Sufism seemed to first be present in Morocco in “the beginning of the eleventh century” (Cornell 1998, 4), but continued to expand. Throughout the centuries Sufi orders were very much involved in religious, political, and economic issues, at times becoming major threats to other religious and political leaders. For example, Sufi orders in Morocco such as the Nāsiriyya and Dilā’iyya served a critical role in local trade issues in Morocco in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. The level of Sufi influence was a major issue for the ruling political leaders. As Gutelius (2002) explains, the Sufis

“ . . . challenged the legitimacy of the emerging ‘Alawi family as the true leaders of the faithful, to which ‘Alawi leaders responded with force. In 1668, Sultan Mulay Rashid forced the leaders of the Dilā’iyya into exile in Fez and destroyed the *zāwiya* of Sīdī Ahmed ū Mūsā in 1670, the center of one of the most powerful religious families south of the Atlas mountains. He also repeatedly threatened the Nāsiriyya, though he did not live long enough to carry out these threats. (31)

However, state leaders well before this time not only took notice of Sufi influence, but also “courted urban and rural [S]ufi orders, hoping to gain their allegiance to an otherwise politically fragmented state, and they relied on populist Sufi movements in organizing jihads against the Portuguese” (Gutelius 2002, 31). And while it was not always the case that Sufis were involved in such activities,³ many orders were involved in politics (Gutelius 2002).

In the case of the Nāsiriyya, the order was popular for spiritual reasons, as well as for the economic benefits that the order could deliver for individuals. For example, as the order expanded, they had connections to “credit and to its property holdings, including land, water resources, [and] *zawāyā* and granaries” (Gutelius 2002, 32). This economic influence elevated to a point where such leaders were “mediators” (Gutelius 2002, 33) for the society. Nāsiri leaders also aided individuals in trade. For example, they would often collect a tax called the “*zattāt* (passage toll or protection toll)” (Gutelius 2002, 34) that would be used to help the traders make it to their

³ For example, in the mid- to late seventeenth century, the Nāsiriyya order “gained a reputation for remaining aloof from the struggles of temporal authorities over the throne—a position that attracted many followers and allied, and helped to protect the order from makhzan persecution” (Gutelius 2002, 31).

destination without issue. And because of that influence, the Nāsiri leaders aimed to establish political clout within the broader community. However, “this political influence spread far beyond local affairs . . . The ‘Alawi sultans themselves occasionally relied on Nāsiri leaders to solve political difficulties and recognized the order’s wide appeal” (Gutelius 2002, 38–39). For this reason, many members of the government made sure that the Sufi leaders were not bothered. It must be noted, however, that the role of the Nāsiri Sufi order was not always as influential politically as it was in the later seventeenth century and early eighteenth century. The reason for this is that during the mid-eighteenth century, Morocco began to increase trade with outside actors, and this had an effect on the Nāsiriyya. New agreements with Europe, as well as increased roles by a whole host of other Sufi orders (such as “the Darqāwiyya, the Wazzāniyya, the Kuntaled Qādiriyya and the Tijāniyya”) altered the role of the Nāsiriyya (Gutelius 2002, 40).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an influence of Salafi and Wahhabi Islam began to take hold in Morocco, much of which was often at the expense of Sufi orders, with many Wahhabi leaders looking to have the government move away from the *shirk* or “polytheism” of Sufism as they saw it (Zeghal 2008, 17). This attitude towards Sufi orders was taken up by leaders such as Mawlay Sulaymān who

denounced aspects of the conduct of some brotherhoods but did not reject Sufism in principle. The doctrine turned out to be politically useful to him because it enabled him to criticize the brotherhoods threatening his authority, such as the Sharqawiyya and the Tayyibiyya—allied to Berber tribes that the [*Makhzen*] could not control—and the Darqawiyya, which represented a real challenge to the Sultan. (Zeghal 2008, 17)

Salafi Islam began to influence leaders’ decisions about Islam, which ultimately affected the treatment of Sufi orders (Zeghal 2008, 18).⁴

But while Salafi beliefs gained support among many religious and political leaders, many Sufi orders still existed in Morocco from 1900 onwards (Geertz 1979, 155). In fact, Sufi orders not only continued to exist, but also maintained a presence in the political sphere of society, often challenging colonialism, as well as the domestic political leaders. For

⁴ What is interesting, however, is that a number of former political leaders, after being removed from office, would often join a Sufi order (Zeghal 2008, 18).

example, Sufi sheikh Muhammad bin ‘Abd al-Kabīr al-Kattānī was a major challenge to not only French colonialism, but also to the sultan (Bazzaz 2010). Because of his position against the Moroccan leadership—who were threatened by his influence—al-Kattānī was accused of heresy in 1896, and in the year 1909 was arrested, and eventually died under custody. In addition, the sultan also went after the Kattāniyya order that remained (Bazzaz 2010). One reason why al-Kattānī and the Kattāniyya order were seen as a major challenge to the political authority in Morocco was because they said they were “descendants of Muhammad” (Bazzaz 2010, 11), “which the Khattāniyya leadership deployed to articulate its sense of political legitimacy in its efforts to reassert the leadership role of *shurafa* lineage” (Bazzaz 2010, 11).

However, it would be incorrect to suggest that the Moroccan political leadership, the “*makhzan*,” always took such a contrary approach with al-Kattānī. In fact, at one point, they attempted to establish an “alliance” with al-Kattānī (Bazzaz 2010, 66). Bazzaz (2010) explains that “from the state’s perspective, an alliance with the shaykh of an active and expanding Sufi movement held many possibilities. By drawing on Muhammad al-Kattānī’s gaining spiritual and social authority among the people in Fez, the *makhzan* stood to bolster its waning legitimacy there” (66). This ultimately affected the *makhzan*’s influence negatively, with al-Kattānī gaining further support by many in Morocco (Bazzaz 2010).

Sufi groups continued to be influential in various aspects of Moroccan society throughout the twentieth century, not only in terms of religious issues, but in the economic sectors as well (Geertz 1979). For example, Sufi *zawāyā* were key in terms of serving a political (Bazzaz 2010) and economic role in relation to local trade in Morocco, with significant influence in the marketplace (Geertz 1979). But along with this major presence in the markets, the *zawāyā* were also influential in politics. For example, the *zawāyā* were involved in a number of political actions during French colonialism (Geertz 1979). They began to lose power, however, with the rise of the Istiqlal party, which saw itself as “opposed to the existing *zawias*” (Geertz 1979, 162–63). In fact, the post-independence leaders of Morocco wanted “simultaneously to divide its representatives to weaken them and also gather them around the throne to control them” (Zeghal 2009, 31). They aimed to dictate and monitor religious action by controlling funding in many cases, or the supervision of the *zawāyā*. They also attempted to monitor religious activity by placing the Ministry of Religious Affairs under the watch of the top leaders (Zeghal 2009).

Islamism, Sufism, and the Moroccan State

Similar to Algeria, governments in Morocco have had an interest in establishing control over religion. As mentioned, this was evident during the early years after independence (Zeghal 2009), as well as in later decades, which can be seen when examining the threat of political Islam to the monarchy and the different responses taken by the government to this threat. For example, government interest in the control of religion was quite evident under Hassan II, who came to power in 1961. In an attempt to gain religious legitimacy, Hassan II stipulated in the constitution that the leader of the state would be seen as the “commander of the faithful” (Zeghal 2009, 44). Hassan II also showed interest in attempting to speak on matters of religion (Zeghal 2009). But while the government had a strong control over religion in Morocco, the presence of Islamists was not completely absent (Howe 2005). For example, Hassan II continued to enforce his commitment to Islam through the support of Islamic family law, which showed the influence of non-governmental religious groups (Howe 2005).

But despite this earlier influence, Islamists generally took a back seat to secular and modernization policies up until the 1980s. Historically, Islamist groups in Morocco became more active during Nasser’s reign in Egypt, and in attempts to counter Gamal Abdel Nasser’s policy of socialism, the Moroccan government of Hassan II allowed Islamists to operate, with the help of the Saudi Arabian government (Howe 2005), which funded these groups. However, “by the mid-1980s, the palace had realized that Islamic radicals were a potential threat. King Hassan openly encouraged so-called moderate Islamists, that is, those who recognized his authority as Commander of the Faithful, and tightened controls on the others” (Howe 2005, 126). Similar threats by both extremist and also non-violent Islamists continued into the 1990s with the establishment of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in 1997. The PJD, with its emphasis on nonviolence and claims to want to “work within the system” (Howe 2005, 134), as well as their goal of establishing shari’ah or Islamic law as a political system of Morocco, was seen as a challenge to Hassan II (Howe 2005). This concern intensified when the PJD, running in less than the full list of districts, managed to place third in the 2002 elections.

But while the PJD posed a nonviolent threat to Mohammed VI—who in 1999 took power after the death of his father Hassan II—violent Islamist groups were also active at this time in Morocco. In 2002, individuals with ties to Al Qaeda were found to be operating in the Moroccan city of

Casablanca (Howe 2005). On May 16, 2003, Morocco experienced a major terror attack “in which 14 suicide bombers identified as Salafiya Jihad-*iy*a adherents linked to the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) and Al Qaeda attacked five Western and Jewish targets in Casablanca, killing 45 and injuring more than 100” (Migdalovitz 2010, 2). Another terror attack was carried out “in April 2007, [when] two suicide attacks occurred near the U.S. Consulate and the American Language Center in Casablanca; the bombers killed only themselves” (Migdalovitz 2010, 3).

In response to these attacks, Mohammed VI went after terror organizations in Morocco, and has shared information with other states about terror groups in an attempt to halt their activities (Migdalovitz 2010). In addition to this, Mohammed VI has also taken a number of steps to influence the role of religion in Morocco. Migdalovitz (2010) explains that

to counter radical Islamism, Morocco also has exerted greater control over religious leaders and councils, created new theological councils, retrained imams, deployed supervisors to oversee their sermons, closed unregulated mosques, retrained and rehabilitated some individuals convicted of terror-related crimes to correct their understanding of Islam, and launched radio and television stations and a website to transmit “Moroccan religious values” of tolerance. In 2005, the king launched a \$1.2 billion National Initiative for Human Development to redress socioeconomic conditions extremists exploit for recruitment. (3)

It is within this approach that we see that Mohammed VI has been attempting to use Sufism within his domestic policy to counter Islamist groups (and specifically Salafi Islam) (Al Jazeera 2009), although the level of “success” in such policies is unclear (Mostapha El Khalifi, in Al Jazeera 2009). Specifically, because the attacks were “perpetrated by Jihadist groups inspired by the literalist interpretations of Salafi Islam, the Moroccan regime closed dozens of Quranic schools that were believed to be the cent[er]s of Salafist preaching and pushed to kindle public interest in Sufism” (Habboush 2009). The Moroccan government has found an interest in using Sufism in its domestic religious policies because of what it sees as Sufism’s “flexibility, clearly in comparison here with the rigidity of radical forms of religious interpretations” (Maghraoui 2009, 206). In fact, even some Sufis themselves blame the increase in Islamic extremism in Morocco on the fact that Sufism has not played a larger role in society (Habboush 2009).

What is interesting about this policy approach is that the Moroccan government has not been consistent on its position towards religion, as it has advocated the role of the mosque, while at the same time establishing other policies that are seen as being against religion (El Khalifi, in Al Jazeera 2009). In discussing the use of Sufism in Morocco before and after the September 11, 2001, terror attacks, Mohammad Zarif (Al Jazeera 2008) explains that “the significance of Sufism is determined by the nature of religious activists. This means that before the September 11 attacks in 2001, Sufism had a limited role to play . . . But after September 11, the state became aware of the danger of the Salafi movement and started to make use of Sufism to create the desired balance.” In terms of his support for Sufism, Mohammed VI has specifically “brought together local Sufi leaders [in Morocco] and offered millions of dollars in aid to use as a bulwark against radical fundamentalism (*U.S. News and World Report* 2005).

One of the main Sufi orders that Mohammed VI has worked with has been the Bushishiyya order. The Bushishiyya, which came out of the Qādiriyya order (Zeghal 2009), was “first established among the Berber tribes of the Beni Snassen Maasif (Northeast Morocco) in about 1942 by Abū Madyan ib Munawar al-Budshish” (Sedwick 2004, 133). The order’s numbers have risen since the 1960s, with overall membership said to be at around 15,000 persons (Zeghal 2009, 89). In addition, the Bushishiyya are said to be increasing membership among “elites” in Morocco (Sedwick 2004). In terms of Mohammed VI reaching out to the Bushishiyya Sufi order, Mohamed Zarif, in an interview with Al Jazeera (2008), explains that

in 2002, the government appointed a member of the Buchachiya order—the strongest Sufi order in the country[,] as the minister in charge of Islamic endowments. More importantly, before 2002, we used to say that Morocco’s Islamic identity was made up of two components: the Ash’ari creed and the Maliki Islamic doctrine. But since 2002, a third component has been added to our Islamic identity, that is, Sunni Sufism of [the] Al-Junaid al-Salik order. Thus Sufism has become an integral part of the religious identity . . . (Al Jazeera, 2008)

Sedwick (2004) explains that one key point about Bushishiyya Sufism is that one doesn’t see “the function of the *shaykh* as patron and intermediary in political and economic affairs (though it remains to be seen how well

this will resist the pressures created by increasing Bushishi presence in government)” (139). This allows political leaders to continue to have their authority unchallenged by Sufi leaders.

Along with the support of the Bushishi in the context of a state position, Mohammed VI has also taken other steps to promote Sufism. For example, the government has supported a number of different Sufi music events. In addition, different Sufi festivals have brought together a host of academics and performers “around a variety of themes such as Sufism, human rights, intercultural dialogue, religious tolerance and human development” (Maghraoui 2009, 207). In 2009, Mohammed VI organized a Sufi conference entitled the “Second World Sidi Chiker Gathering” (Sidi Chiker 2011) in Marrakech, Morocco, which over 1,000 Sufi Muslims attended. Here, Mohammed VI wrote a letter that emphasized the historical relationship between the Moroccan leaders and Sufi sheikhs. In his remarks, read at the event (by the “Moroccan Minister of Religious Affairs” [Sidi Chiker 2011]), Mohammed VI stated that:

You are all aware of the symbolic relationship which has always existed between Imarate Al Muminin (Commandership of the Faithful) in this nation and the chief Sufi leaders. They have endeav[or]ed together to preserve the country’s Sunni creed and its doctrinal orientations. (Sidi Chiker, 2011)

In Mohammed VI’s letter, he continued to reiterate the importance of Sufism in regards to issues in Morocco, specifically stating that “in addition to their ability to identify the roots of the problem and propose solutions, . . . the great perspicacity of the Sufis has helped them to identify a way forwards whenever the interests of our community have been at stake” (Touahri 2009). In addition, Mohammed VI has funded various Sufi *zawāyā* in order to continue the visibility of this approach in Islam (al-Ashraf 2010). Sufism has been given a spotlight in Morocco, where the government has helped highlight Sufi groups’ ability to teach others about their beliefs (al-Ashraf 2010). The idea behind this promotion of Sufism is that Sufi “teaching can provide a remedy for problems currently faced by states, such as terrorism and extremism” (Touahri 2009).

But while this idea of promoting Sufism has been partly used to counter violent extremism, the reason for this approach does not seem to be limited to just countering violent extremism. This seems to be the case

because Mohammed VI has used Sufism to counter challenging political parties such as the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) (al-Ashraf 2010), which is seen as “a major political force” (McFaul and Wittes 2008, 22), and the biggest political threat to Mohammed VI’s regime. In fact, “Islamist parties and organizations [operating within the political system] pose the most serious challenge to the king’s power. They could inject a new dynamic into Moroccan politics, possibly leading to political reform” (Ottaway and Riley 2006, 14). The PJD has gained in popularity by running on an anti-corruption platform, all the while being an active provider of a range of social services in the state (McFaul and Wittes 2008).⁵

Sufism has therefore been used as a critical tool by the Moroccan government because the leadership seems to want individuals to practice a religion that does not emphasize becoming involved in the political system, and their belief seems to suggest that Sufism falls under this structure of not emphasizing political action (Al Jazeera 2008). For example, in a 2008 speech that Mohammed VI gave to the Sidi Chiker National Gathering of Sufi Partisans (Maghreb Arab Presse, 2008), he seemed to advocate the message of Sufism refraining from politics by saying:

Although mysticism is mostly about communion and spiritual refinement, it also impacts society in several ways; for example, through acts of solidarity, mutual assistance, by wanting good things for others, through forgiveness and tolerance, and by addressing the minds and the hearts to cleanse them. It is important to stress, in this respect, that Sufi [*zāwīyas*] should seek to remain true to the concept of purity upon which they are based. They should forego earthly pursuits. Sufi disciples should steer away from acts and attitudes which do not become them, give up any quest for worldly rewards and, instead, seek higher, loftier goals. (Magreb Arab Presse, 2008)

⁵ Secular parties in the past have joined to support Mohammed VI in order to counter any Islamist challenge, and some suggest that such parties could either side with the Islamists against the King, or become part of the government, thus gaining some political power, but at the expense of advancing a democratic system against the political repression of the king (Ottaway and Riley 2006). This has helped the PJD, as it was not seen as being aligned with the undemocratic leadership of Mohammed VI (McFaul and Wittes 2008).

He highlights the importance of Sufism to Moroccan culture by further saying:

As for service to the nation, it is accomplished through the observance of your duties and obligations towards the ultimate Imamate, namely the Commandership of the Faithful, and the keen desire to preserve the cultural specificities of Morocco and protect them against alien trends and influences. (Magreb Arab Presse, 2008)

Dr. Abbas Boughanem, in an interview with *Al-Arabiya*, emphasizes this idea that Mohammed VI has promoted the idea of Sufism not just to combat religious extremism, but also because of the belief that Sufis will teach others “who follow them some kind of political passivity” (al-Ashraf 2010). Maghraoui (2009) explains this dual use of Sufism in Morocco when he explains that

through the organization of the famous Fez spiritual festival as well as through special TV and radio [programs], Sufism is now experiencing a significant revival in the Moroccan public sphere as part of a religiosity that encourages interfaith dialogue, universalism, tolerance, love, peace, harmony through a language that is effectively depoliticized. (206)

What is important to note, however, is that in the promotion of Sufism, the government is attempting to “divide” the religious groups in Morocco (Cavatorta 2007). In fact, the king has been able to pin two major Sufi-influenced religious groups—Jamait al-Adl and the Bushishiyya order—against one another. Cavatorta (2007) explains that because of not only the popularity of Jamait al-Adl (led by Shaykh Abdelsalam Yassine), but also due to their strong protest against the political system within Morocco,

the monarchy entertains privileged relations with the *Tarīqa* and its leaders. This alliance is possible because the *Tarīqa* does not challenge the *imarat al mouminine* and does not believe that the association should be directly engaged in politics, but should instead only be concerned with the betterment of the individual members. The King therefore supports the *Tarīqa* in order to strengthen his religious legitimacy and to have privileged access to the religious bourgeoisie that the association represents. In exchange, the *Tarīqa* enjoys freedom from scrutiny and, occasionally, obtains political [favors] like the royal appointment of the

leader's son to the post of governor of the Berkane province. (Jamai 2005, in Cavatorta 2007).

Conclusion

This essay has examined the use of Sufi Islam by the North African governments of Algeria and Morocco in attempts to challenge other interpretations of Islam. We have shown that one main reason why governments seem to have promoted Sufism is not solely to appreciate what Sufism has to offer as a religious approach, but rather because with the promotion of Sufism, some suggest that those who follow Sufism will have little concern for politics, thus possibly reducing the political threat to the state, despite evidence to suggest that Sufis in both the history Algeria have been involved in politics. Furthermore, evidence of Sufi involvement in politics is still taking place today.

We find that in the cases of Algeria and Morocco leaders have promoted Sufism through state-sponsored programs such as support for religious buildings, as well as showing their support by allowing Sufis to be active with conferences, and also allowing Sufis the ability to distribute information. In addition, we find that some of the most challenging political opponents to the regimes in Algeria and Morocco are Islamist parties. Thus, the governments seem to use Sufism in attempts to influence individuals on Islam, while aiming to challenge other Islamist organizations. Future research will explore how other leaders of both Muslim and non-Muslim majority states aim to promote Sufism as a counter to Islamist movements, as this approach is not limited to just a few cases.

This article does not suggest that one cannot highlight Sufi contributions in society. In fact, studies have looked at Sufi approaches to international affairs, setting the discussion within the tradition of Islam, and how Sufism, for example, can offer *another* perspective into Muslim arguments of global justice (Said and Funk 2001; 2004) and human rights (Muedini 2010). But this in no way means that Sufism is the only approach from within Islam that offers such ideas. This is far from the case. But to suggest that religion itself is the sole variable in predicting one's beliefs and actions is problematic. Namely, attempts to understand one's level of political involvement cannot be understood by solely reducing explanations to one's type of religious affiliation; political interests and positions (or the lack thereof) should not be divorced from socioeconomic issues, as well as historical and political contexts.

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