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The Flawed Hope of Sufi Promotion in North Africa

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North Africa



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Sufism has been repeatedly invoked in U.S. foreign policy circles as a possible ideological counterbalance to extremist ideologies in the Middle East and greater "Islamic world." On a superficial level, for those who view politics as a "battle of ideas," the imagery of pacifist whirling dervishes provides a compelling contrast to that of weapons- and black flag-wielding anti-American extremists. On a more profound level, such a strategy seems to build off centuries-old home-grown institutions with which states like Morocco and Algeria are eager to engage. But will it work?

Sufi orders have played a critical role in the intersection of politics and religion in North Africa for hundreds of years. Founded around wise and charismatic preachers seen to have special blessing, Sufi orders have functioned as groups of religious learning and practice which meet on occasion and pay respects to their patron saints (*marabouts*). Their political influence increased in both Morocco and Algeria during the colonial period as the French sought to politically marginalize more centralized religious infrastructure (Algeria) and extend control over rural areas (Morocco). More recently, Morocco and Algeria have promoted Sufism in a top-down manner as a proposed counterweight to political Islam (whose many formal movements have a model, structure, and religious interpretation based to varying degrees on Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood) and to violent and/or Salafist ideologies.

But Western optimism about Sufi promotion policy rests on several fundamental misunderstandings. First, as countless examples show, there is nothing inherently pacifist about Sufism or Sufi orders. Second, many North African youth—the oft-assumed audience for most counter-extremism initiatives—have well-defined opinions about Sufism; many of them are not positive. It is difficult to imagine a policy or social mechanism by which Sufi ideas or organizations somehow win over their ideological "opposite." And finally, 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^[1] as well as their hegemonic aspirations in the North Africa/Sahel neighborhood.

Sufism & Extremism

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, with some analyses erroneously asserting that "[Sufi] victimization by Salafis and Wahhabis, [render] traditionalists and Sufis natural allies of the West" (RAND 2007). These assumptions should be scrutinized not only because of an imperative of academic rigor, but also because these binaries mislead our understanding of the violent potential of the region's various movements.

To clarify, there is nothing inherently moderate about Sufism, and scholars have long warned against the moderate Sufi/radical Salafi binary. According to [Omar Ashour](#), senior lecturer at University of Exeter, “What makes the Sufis seem moderate is that they often promote the status quo [...] but the idea that they are more moderate than the Salafis is ridiculous. Both of them are regressive, anti-liberal and to a certain degree anti-democratic.” Perhaps emblematic of this false dichotomy is that while the Muslim Brotherhood is painted as Sufism’s foil, its founder, Hassan al Banna, was heavily influenced by his membership in a Sufi order.^[2] And so it remains unclear whether Sufism actually functions as an alternative to political Islam. There is little data as to whether Sufism has, in fact, won over supporters that would otherwise be drawn to the latter. And in my own field research in North Africa, I have encountered numerous Sufi members who are card-carrying Islamists and Islamist party-members who express support for certain Sufi schools, known as *zaouïas*.^[3]

While there are Sufi teachings that can be interpreted as promoting non-violence, the fact that many Sufi movements developed as armed responses to colonial presence contradicts the assumed separation of Sufism and ideas of armed militarism. To be sure, several Sufi organizations have displayed radical proclivities and vigorously supported armed groups, notably in the violence of the anticolonial struggles in North Africa and other regions. Algeria’s Emir Abdelqader of the Qadiriya order and his violent (if justified) revolt against French occupation in the 1800s as well as the militarized reaction by the Sanussi order against Italian colonialism in Libya are exemplary cases. In Kashmir, the ubiquity of Sufism in the region did not prevent the pivot to armed militancy. And the Naqshbandi Army, the Iraqi militant insurgency formed in the early 2000s to fight coalition forces and to reinstate the previous Ba’athist order, likewise stemmed from a Sufi order. (Indeed, the austerity and strictness of the Naqshbandi order and its resulting extremism and violent tactics date to the 1800s.)

Another contemporary case of Sufi violence is Indonesia’s Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defenders’ Front). Founded in the 1990s by Sufi leaders, its ranks are composed of ex-members of the *Nadhlatul Ulama* (NU), the largest Sufi movement in Southeast Asia dating to the 1920s. In spite of an opposition to terrorism and violence under new leadership in the 1980s, NU’s theology did not always condemn violent martyrdom, and various NU leaders and members used violence to defend their organization (and in their view, Islam) against the perceived threat of communism in the early 1960s, playing a large role in the murder of pro-Communist civilians. The extreme Salafi versus moderate Sufi dichotomy thus glosses over myriad tendencies in either practice.

Additionally, the focus on ideology in counter-extremism discourse itself obscures the fact that violence is itself a political calculation and tool of expediency (often when peaceful modes of bargaining have been exhausted), as often as it is ideological. Studies on political violence indicate that theological alignment is not the chief causal factor leading to acceptance or rejection of violence as a bargaining strategy. As I have said [before](#), it is not clear that ideology is the only factor in radicalization and recruitment into extremist networks—many other incentives are at work. In this sense, the Sufi gambit works to oversell to what extent *zaouïas*, can curb the attractiveness of violent movements.

Appeal to Youth on the Ground

If one talks with Algerian and Moroccan youth (the regimes’ presumed target for these religious moderation efforts), the distaste for Sufism as “un-Islamic” and as a political expedient is prevalent. In Morocco, townspeople notice when the local mausoleum (around which many *zaouïas* are organized) expands with state funds, while their own lot does not improve.^[4] The town where I lived in Morocco neighbored a small town that had a mausoleum and an annual *mousem* (festival) which put Sufi rituals on display. Without fail, each year, townspeople would complain about the ostentatious award of local state funds for an event which many families refused to attend, citing the magic and gore involved in some of the rituals.^[5]

In Algeria, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s ‘*zaouïa*-tours’ have received great publicity, as do the swathes of money thrown at select *zaouïas* which display their loyalty—and in the case of Morocco, a sort of ‘fealty’—to the regime. One Algerian friend whose mother is Sufi and is sympathetic to Sufism critiqued, “we see all this promotion doesn’t go further to guard [Sufi] identity and diversify our country’s values, it’s all about disputing some ‘other’ inconvenient Islamic teachings. There is still marginalization and stigma, our histories and identities preserved only so long as it is convenient. At one time there were many government efforts to eliminate it.” This logic is isolating to increasingly religious Algerian youth, resistant to the tendency to bifurcate good versus bad Islam. The populace in either country is becoming increasingly aware of the developing clientelist dynamics discussed above, which fuels existing resentment.

Beyond its perceived politicization, Sufism’s lackluster contemporary spiritual appeal to many mainstream North Africans has rendered attempts to construct a Sufi rampart against radicalism quite fruitless, especially in Algeria. A majority of Algerian citizens do not see Sufism as falling within the strictures of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and many see it as *bida’*, or heretical innovation. The extent to which Sufism is disliked is exemplified in government figures’ use of the term “traditional Islam,” avoiding the “Sufi” appellation as it carries complex (often negative) connotations in the public imagination. To many, its promotion is seen as contrary to Sunni-Maliki^[6] practice, as well as emblematic of the very nepotism, clientelism, and corruption that extremist ideologies often emerge to critique. The widespread feeling that Sufism is in opposition to the Sunnah (traditions about the Prophet Muhammad) and the Qur’an is an important obstacle to its promulgation as a spiritual alternative.

It is quite easy to understand the appeal of some strains of Sufism to a Western audience. When I visited the Alawiya Zaouïa in Mostaghanem, Algeria, one of various Sufi orders that dominate the informal political sphere—particularly in the western region—the coeducation, the (very visibly) emboldened role of women, a flexible, scholarly approach to Quranic interpretation, and according to one of the *zaouïa*’s librarians, “the pursuit of unity with the divine, the equality of all faiths, and abiding love for God” all appealed to my Western sensibilities. But indeed, these attributes are part of a larger pattern where Sufis’ mysticism leads them to downplay or de-emphasize the importance of stricter, more traditional interpretations of Islamic law, something many in the West often see as aiding in liberalization.

If we thereby understand Sufism chiefly through such a lens, it would naturally appear a most suitable antidote. But I quickly recalled during my visit that it is not Sufism alone that emphasizes internal spiritual purification as the “greater *jihad*” as the librarian did. Indeed, my initial feelings resulted from a curated—and incomplete—picture of Sufi practice, as do many of the policy analyses that sing the praises of Sufi moderation and uncritically reproduce the narratives of our authoritarian friends. What all of this shows is that the U.S. is rarely in a credible position to be condoning or

sanctioning particular ideologies, and when we do, we have little control over their consequences or derivations. Recall in 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry was ruthlessly mocked on social media as a “takfiri” for declaring that ISIS adherents were not real Muslims. And this imprecision and shallow grasp of Sufism, Islamic religious tendency more broadly, and the (often calculated and irreligious) appeal of certain violent movements comes as a critical flaw in Western optimism about Sufi-promotion. Without public buy-in, how effective can this Sufi “antidote” be?

Perks of Sufi Promotion

While Sufism as an ideology may have a limited horizon for expansion among youth within North Africa because of political baggage and religious connotations, Sufi orders are still an important political constituency in certain localities in Morocco and Algeria, and these governments have worked to leverage—and even market—the Sufi “promise” to several concrete political ends, which often have little to do with countering extremism:

First, to expand (or maintain) their sphere of influence and curb threats to the state: especially in the rural areas, they provide religious legitimation to state policies, mobilize constituents/voters, fragment local oppositional actors, help get buy-in to reconciliation processes, and in certain cases, act as a conduit for state services.

Second, to boost religious legitimacy domestically. In Morocco, King Mohammed VI aimed to use Sufism in an effort to revamp religious nationalism in the wake of the 2003 Casablanca bombing and in attempts to counter the Islamist tendency. In attempting to battle for popularity, various political parties, including even secular parties like the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP),^[7] try to harness religion and align with Sufi orders. Though personalities within parties surely may join for personal and spiritual reasons, the highly publicized nature of their joining hints at other, more opportunistic motivations. In fact, in Morocco, one order in particular, Boutchichiya, seems to be the go-to for many politicians; not coincidentally, it is the same to which the king has shown a good deal of favor in recent years. Likewise 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^[8] 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 skepticism of Sufism.

As a result, several Sufi orders themselves are faced with a new set of political incentives, and increasingly engage in rent-seeking behavior. Orders compete for patronage and resources, which are selectively distributed: building *zaouias*, giving media coverage, and assigning political roles in domestic politics (enhancing tourism, mysticism, myth, occult and folklore) or in foreign relations to some, while leaving out others. It is in this milieu that, in Morocco for example, the Boutchichi order has risen as the spiritual arm of the political class, and another order, the Tijaniya, has been charged with religious and foreign relations in both countries. This has bolstered patron-client dynamics where political figures, in turn, join for self-promotion and signaling of fealty to the regime. (Of course, all orders are different, and it would be imprudent to argue that *all* Sufi orders are necessarily political tools or coopted by the respective regimes).

Third, to emphasize religious-spiritual links to—arguably even consolidate hegemony over—Sahel allies. Where Algeria has long been the military, economic, and all-around diplomatic powerhouse in Northwest Africa, Morocco has been vying, for various reasons, for improved relations with Sahel and sub-Saharan African countries. (For more, see “[Morocco’s New Africa Policy](#).”) To this end, many of Morocco’s oft-sung efforts to spread its brand of “moderate Moroccan Islam” throughout the Maghreb and Sahel hinge both on the centrality of the Moroccan King, his dynasty, and on the Sufi networks shared across the region. Algeria’s own 2013 creation of the League of Sahel Ulemas similarly emphasizes shared Sufi history between Algeria and the Sahel in its religious education initiatives for Sahel and sub-Saharan African students. This dynamic must also be understood as a contest between Morocco and Algeria for influence over this region, exemplified, in part, by the disagreement between Moroccans and Algerians as to the birthplace and headquarters of the trans-national Tijaniya Order (Morocco maintains it is in Fez, while Algeria argues it is in Ain Madhi).

Last, and perhaps most relevant for the U.S., the promotion of Sufism as a cure-all against extremism has attracted Western governments’ attention and has aided Maghreb countries’ broader objective of signaling their counterterrorism credentials in Western counterterrorism efforts. While the shift from Sufis’ violent repression to their cooptation/utilization began in the 1990s for domestic political purposes, the opportunities for geopolitical rents made themselves apparent after 9/11 and the subsequent U.S.-led “War on Terror.” As counterterrorism thereafter became a [new \(and more public\) prism](#) through which the U.S. (and Europe) engaged the oft-overlooked Maghreb countries, the latter became eager to position themselves as allies uniquely suited to handle the ideological component of counterterrorism vis-à-vis the West (and in the case of Morocco and Algeria, in vis-à-vis one another). These dynamics have had the ancillary effect of allowing these regimes to subordinate reform efforts and political liberalization to counterterrorism under the auspices of maintaining stability; undemocratic governance in either country has gone largely overlooked as a result.

Implications for U.S. Engagement

Morocco and Algeria are important U.S. allies in the region on various, diverging fronts. Algeria takes a more military, security-based approach toward counter-terror and counter-radicalization where intelligence, surveillance, infiltration and other methods keep violent extremism at bay, relying also on the failure of the jihadi promise after the 1990s bloody conflict as a key dissuasion. Whereas Morocco, a much more significant exporter of jihadists abroad as of today, takes an approach intersecting theological efforts, media outreach, and social development programs combined with surveillance and policing, all of which should be supported and observed for effectiveness. In the process, it will be key not to put too many eggs in the Sufi-promotion basket and to hedge against false expectations. There are innumerable ways to identify moderate teachings and interpretation that do not rely on the Sufi panacea, and also consider the non-ideological drivers of recruitment into violent movements.

It is moreover curious that for decades Sufism, much like Salafism today, was perceived as a threat to the social and political order and suffocated by various regimes: Algerian president Houari Boumediene wished to contain Sufi influence in the 1970s, having considered them antiquated, primitive, and a threat to the state’s consolidation, its monopoly on religious discourse, and its modernization project. The state aggressively suppressed,

stigmatized, and economically disenfranchised Sufi *zaouias* only to later instrumentalize them as “local” counters to the “foreign” Islamist ideology of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS).[10] Similarly, in Morocco, Sufism was selectively repressed and coopted toward purposes of statecraft. During the Cold War period, Morocco’s King Hassan II even promoted Salafi/Wahhabi interpretations in order to counter Sufis, leftists, and the Moroccan Islamist opposition which drew upon Sufi influence,[11] a move whose effects these regimes are now struggling to contain.

It is therefore worth remembering that bolstering one “-ism” to counter another “-ism” has often had unforeseen negative consequences; further east, this strategy has stoked more catastrophic sectarian conflict. Instead, the U.S. should work to understand Sufism in all of its variations, its role in North African societies and in authoritarian politics, and how it is understood by the local population. If Sufi promotion works after all these considerations, it is worth throwing diplomatic weight behind it. But there is no evidence thus far of any impact. The U.S. should maintain its focus in the meantime on tried and tested strategies that address not only extremist thought, but *all* (often interacting) drivers of radicalism: political disenchantment, lack of economic prospects, unemployment and boredom, and widespread perceptions of state-led humiliation abetted by the West.

[1] Steven Heydemann pioneered and elaborated this concept in 2007, which he termed *authoritarian upgrading*, wherein regimes “re-organiz[e] strategies of governance to adjust to new global, regional, and domestic circumstances.” (See “Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Middle East” (2007) S. Heydemann. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/upgrading-authoritarianism-in-the-arab-world/>) Morocco and Algeria have done so by shifting from classic authoritarianism with absolute rulers, single party systems, military dictatorships, to “hybrid regimes” which often tend not to crack down violently on dissent, but instead co-opt and fragment opposition while in a perpetual state of ‘gradual reform,’ allowing them to feign democratization. In addition to the Arab Spring uprisings, other sources of internal and external pressure around since the late 1990s have given new impetus to the authoritarian bargain in both countries.

[2] Seeing the lack of uniformity of Sufi ritualism around the Muslim world as a challenge to its authenticity and agreement with Islamic orthodoxy, he set out to reconcile various aspects with Salafi thought as well.

[3] These are Sufi schools/seminaries, some of which center around mausoleums of local saints, whereas others are parts of larger transnational *turuq* (s. *tariqa*, or school/order of Sufism).

[4] Although some benefit from boosts in tourism during times of local festivals.

[5] Not all *moussems* are like this, and many are much more family-oriented. Nevertheless, the existence of these more “adult” *moussems* generate a distaste for the concept.

[6] The Maliki school is one of the four orthodox legal schools of Sunni Islam. It is prevalent in North Africa.

[7] USFP: a social-democratic party which broke away from a breakaway of the (conservative, monarchist) *Istiqlal Party* in 1975. The party has vacillated between opposition and participation in the governing coalition. Once comprised of renegade opposition personalities who posed legitimate threats to the king’s hold on power, the party has morphed into one that is widely seen as coopted. For more see, “Morocco: Prospects for Civil Society,” (2015) Vish Sakthivel. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/morocco-prospects-for-civil-society>.

[8] We also should not discount individual political figures’ own sympathies for Sufism. Algerian President Bouteflika’s mother was an active member of a Sufi *zaouia*, and it is rumored that Bouteflika increasingly turned to Sufi faith after a serious illness in 2005. His favorite *tariqa* is rumored to be the Belqaidiya *tariqa* in western Algeria.

[9] Writing about the reach of the Moroccan/Algerian born Tijaniya order into Mali, Professor Cheikh Anta Babou at the University of Pennsylvania argues, the “dynamism of the Tijaniya is rooted in its leaders’ political acumen, their capacity of religious innovation and adaptation, and their ability to respond to disciple’s changing spiritual needs across space and time.”

[10] The Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, FIS in French) is the Algerian Islamist movement-cum-party which emerged in the 1980s and managed to appeal to various strata of Algeria society at the time when the public had grown tired of the Algerian political system that had built its legitimacy, and justified its autocracy as well as its economic policies, on its anti-French revolutionary credentials. The FIS has been the most significant Islamist challenge to the state to date. It was dissolved in 1992 after its electoral victory was cancelled in a military coup, after which thousands of its leaders and members were imprisoned in remote jails. Elements of the newly illegal FIS went on to form guerilla groups whose subsequent armed conflict with the state plunged the country into unspeakable violence throughout the 1990s, a period often referred to as the “Black Decade.”

[11] Such as the Jama’at ‘Adl wal-Ihsan, or Justice and Charity Organization, headed by former Boutchichi, Abdeslam Yassine. For more, see “Al Adl wal Ihsan: Inside Morocco’s Islamist Challenge,” (2014) Vish Sakthivel. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-adl-wal-ihsan-inside-moroccos-islamist-challenge>

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