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Sufi Religious Leaders and Sufi Orders in the Contemporary Middle East

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Abstract (200 words): This article examines the authority of the Sufi shaykh, which it divides between the esoteric and the exoteric (which includes the social implications of esoteric authority) and analyses with help from Weber. In principle Sufi shaykhs are among the most important leaders of the Sunni faithful. In practice, however, the Sufi shaykh now has much less power and authority than might be expected. This is partly because modern states have, in general, reduced the power of Sufi shaykhs, and because decline in the power of the ‘ulama’ has included the decline of the power of Sufi shaykhs who are also ‘ulama’. It is also because there is an inverse relationship between the power of the shaykh and the size of his *ṭarīqa* (order). The most powerful shaykh is the one with primarily charismatic authority, but his *ṭarīqa* will be small. The largest *ṭarīqa* is led by a shaykh whose authority depends on tradition and heredity; his power is not so great. This paradox is not changed by the

availability, for political reasons, of new sources of state support for the leadership role of Sufi shaykhs as an alternative to Salafi and *ikhwāni* Islam.

For those looking at the role of Sunni religious authorities in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Sufi religious leaders (shaykhs) and Sufi orders (*ṭarīqas*) present something of a paradox. On the one hand, Sufi shaykhs and their *ṭarīqas* have historically been among the most important leaders of the Sunni faithful and the strongest religious authorities in Sunni Islam, and Sufism presents a well-grounded and coherent theological and ideological alternative to Salafism, Salafi jihadism, and the *ikhwāni* Islam of the Muslim Brothers and their affiliates. On the other hand, Sufi religious leaders and their orders have, with occasional exceptions, made little impact on the wider religious and political scene in the MENA region in recent years. Confusingly, one of those occasional exceptions has been the Jaysh rijal al-tariqa al-naqshabandiyya (Army of the men of the Naqshbandi order), a jihadist group in Iraq.

As this article shows, one reason for this apparent paradox is that it is in the nature of Sufism that there is an inverse relationship between the power of a Sufi shaykh and the size of his (or occasionally her) *ṭarīqa*. When a *ṭarīqa* is very small, the power of a Sufi shaykh may often be absolute, as recommended by the famous saying—generally attributed to Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali—that the individual Sufi *murīd* (seeker) should be to his shaykh like a corpse in the hands of its washer (*ghāsil*) (Schimmel 1975: 103). When a *ṭarīqa* is very large, however, either it has no organizational structure at all, and so cannot act as a single entity, or the power of its shaykh is so weak that it is almost impossible to mobilize more than a few *murīds* at one time. This is what happened in 2011 in Cairo, in one of the greatest fiascos in the recent history regarding Sufism and politics. Shaykh Muhammad ‘Ala’

al-Din Abu'l- 'Aza'im (b. 1943) of the 'Azamiyya *ṭarīqa* promised a major demonstration against Salafism in Tahrir Square, and there was talk of hundreds of thousands of Sufi demonstrators, but although the 'Azamiyya may indeed have many followers throughout Egypt, only a dozen or so actually appeared at Tahrir (Sedgwick 2015: 115).

As this article discusses, another reason for this apparent paradox is that the role of the Sufi *ṭarīqas* in the MENA region changed fundamentally during the twentieth century. Much of the former power and authority of the Sufi shaykhs derived from the way in which their function and position overlapped with that of the 'ulama', and as this ceased to be the case, and as the power of the 'ulama' itself also declined, so did the power of the Sufi shaykhs. Today, however, there are signs that this process may be reversing, as some shaykhs are beginning to move into the void left by the decline in the influence of public-sector 'ulama' institutions.

Despite the institutional weakness of individual Sufi shaykhs and their *ṭarīqas*, however, there are signs that Sufism as a whole is becoming more attractive to some MENA Muslims in the aftermath of the disappointments of the Arab uprisings, a development that is giving increased influence and authority to individual Sufi shaykhs beyond the context of their own *ṭarīqas*.

This article is arranged into three sections, which correspond roughly to what Marc Gaborieau (2010: 1–2) has argued are the three main sources of authority in Islam, the three “lines of delegation” through which God’s commands are made known to the Faithful: the esoteric (*zāhiri*), the exoteric (*bāṭini*), and the political. Arthur F. Buehler emphasizes the first two of these sources, which he calls “person-centered” and “scripture-centered” (1998: 17), and Rachida Chih (2004: 90) makes a comparable distinction, between person-centered Sufi doctrine and its more scriptural “social implications.” There is, then, a fair measure of agreement between this article and earlier scholars who have considered the authority of the

Sufi shaykh. Where this article departs from earlier treatments is in its investigation of the paradoxical lack of impact of Sufi authority, in a more systematic application of Weberian categories, and in a clear distinction between the varying bases of the shaykh's authority in different spheres.

The first section of the article looks at the bases and nature of the primarily esoteric, person-centered authority of the Sufi shaykh in the context of the *ṭarīqa*, including Sufi doctrine, and explains the inverse relationship between the power of the shaykh and the size of the *ṭarīqa*. The second section looks at the bases and nature of the primarily exoteric, scripture-centered authority of the Sufi shaykh beyond the *ṭarīqa*, which includes the social implications of the authority considered in the first part of the article, showing how this diminished during the twentieth century. The third section looks at recent developments: the political, namely the promotion of Sufism as an alternative to other forms of Islam by particular MENA states, notably Morocco; the expansion of Sufi-aligned “Traditional Islam” in the MENA region and in the transregional global sphere that many Muslims now inhabit; and the growing interest in Sufism on the part of MENA Muslims in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, notably in Egypt.

The Sufi Shaykh in the Context of the *ṭarīqa*

The *ṭarīqa* has been the characteristic organizational form of Sufism over recent centuries, and is therefore often taken to constitute Sufism as such. This is not correct, however, as Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) existed before the *ṭarīqa*. The earliest Sufis in the ninth century combined Sunni Islam with asceticism, a distinctive theology that drew on emanationist philosophy, and a set of distinctive practices that included *dhikr* (repetitive prayer), sometimes in groups (as *ḥaḍra*), and *irshād* (guidance) (Karamustafa 2007). The *ṭarīqa* itself came some three hundred years later, in the twelfth century. The literal meaning of the word *ṭarīqa* is “path,”

and *ṭarīqa* does not always denote an organizational form: it may also indicate a spiritual path in the abstract, independent of any organization. It is possible to follow a spiritual path outside the organizational form of the *ṭarīqa*, and this may be what many do, perhaps especially women. Sufism outside the organizational form of the *ṭarīqa*, however, lies beyond the scope of this article, as it does not involve Sufi religious leaders, who are the focus of this article.

Asceticism and Sufi theology are the bases of the authority of the Sufi shaykh. In a religious society, the ascetic is clearly worthy of respect. More importantly, Sufi theology follows late antique models (Sedgwick 2016a) in making a distinction between the ordinary person and the person whose soul has succeeded in returning to the One (the source of emanation, God), who becomes *al-insān al-kāmil* (the perfected person). *Al-insān al-kāmil* is normally a *wali* (saint, friend of God), though a *wali* may also be anyone chosen by God. A *wali* is a source of *baraka* (blessings), and has access to the *ghayb* (unseen). As noted by Gaborieau (2010: 1–2), Buehler (1998: 18), and Chih (2004: 80–81), this is the first of the sources of authority of the Sufi shaykh. As Chih says, “sanctity in Islam is not a virtue, [but] denotes the possession of real power” (92).

The bases of the authority of Sufis shaykhs have sometimes been understood in terms of the Weberian model of rational (legal), traditional, and charismatic authority (Weber 1978: 215–16). In these terms, the authority of a *wali* is charismatic. It depends on him being seen to have what Weber called supernatural or superhuman “powers or qualities” that are “not accessible to the ordinary person” and “of divine origin” (241–43). This results, in the view of contemporary sociologists, from “a social, dynamic, interactive process by which individuals come to perceive certain qualities of a person as extraordinary and worthy of authority” (Corcoran and Wellman 2016: 309). These persons are generally male, in line with

the general structures of public and religious authority in the Muslim world, but may sometimes also be female.

There are many examples of charismatic authority in the history of Sufism. The great Sufis after whom *ṭarīqas* are named, from Abu Hasan al-Shadhili (d. 1258) to Nazim al-Haqqani (d. 2014, see Böttcher 2006), were all seen to have supernatural and superhuman powers and qualities of divine origin that are not accessible to the ordinary person. Other less famous shaykhs have also had charismatic authority. A list of *karāmāt* (miracles) is a standard section in the hagiography of a shaykh, and stands as the proof of charisma.

One of the sources of the charisma of a Sufi shaykh is that Sufis believe in it: they believe that there are *walis*, that *baraka* exists, and so on. Another is that one person is more likely to see charisma where another has already found it. Alexander Knysh reports how a Yemeni shaykh, Habib ‘Umar bin Ḥafiz (b. 1963), traveled around Yemen preaching during the late 1990s, “accompanied by busloads of companions and disciples, whose ostentatious display of loyalty to, and admiration for, their leader made a great impression on the masses who flocked to Habib ‘Umar’s lectures by the hundreds” (2001: 407). Charisma is not only constructed by those who perceive it, however. As Knysh also reports, one of the main points about Habib ‘Umar was that he was a talented and energetic preacher (407). Weber (241) mentions sources of charisma that are not purely constructed, such as prowess in hunting or warfare, and to this one might add prowess in preaching, or what a contemporary sociologists calls crafting “front stage performances” (Corcoran and Wellman: 312). One may also add other varieties of prowess, such as in composing poetry: many shaykhs have been poets, and this has served as a further proof of their status. The names of the greatest Sufi poets, from ‘Umar ibn al-Fariḍ (1181–1235) to Jalal al-Dun Rumi (1207–73), are very well known, but many less famous shaykhs have also been poets, sometimes composing verse and sometimes

composing prayers, among the more recent of whom was Shaykh Salih al-Ja‘fari (1910–1979) (Dajani 2013).

It is *ḥaḍra* and *irshād*, not asceticism and theology, however, which give rise to classic Sufi leadership. Asceticism does not imply leadership, though later Sufi theory distinguishes between the ascetic exercise that is adopted voluntarily and the ascetic exercise that is prescribed by another, seeing the latter as more effective. Similarly, Sufi theology does not actually imply leadership, even though it may imply authority. A *ḥaḍra*, however, needs someone to lead it, and *irshād* requires a *murshid* (guide). Both then provide the main bases of the *ṭarīqa*, membership of which can be defined either in terms of attending a *ḥaḍra* or following a *murshid*. The *ṭarīqa*, ultimately, is what the Sufi shaykh leads directly.

Ideally, the shaykh also leads the *ḥaḍra* and acts as a *murshid*, and ideally the *murshid* has previously succeeded in returning to the One. In practice, however, some shaykhs depute the leading of the *ḥaḍra* to others, do not act as *murshids*, and are not known to have returned to the One. The actual bases of the authority of such shaykhs, then, differ from the theoretical, doctrinal sources that have just been outlined, and are emphasized by Gaborieau, Buehler, and Chih.

In principle, as Weber notes (1978: 246, 248), charismatic authority dies with the charismatic individual. In practice, however, charismatic authority tends to be “routinized” so that the community (*Gemeinschaft*) can survive the death of its founder, and a new leader is chosen or appointed, or the charisma is understood to have been “transmitted by heredity.” In the case of Sufism, hereditary transmission of the office of shaykh is the norm. According to Weber (248), hereditary transmission can transform charismatic authority into either rational or traditional authority, and, in the case of Sufism, the authority of some shaykhs may indeed be traditional, not charismatic. It is documented by the *silsila* (chain) that links the shaykh with his own shaykh, or very occasionally with her own shaykh, and his (or her) own

shaykh's shaykh and so on, and thus ultimately to the Prophet, and is the Sufi equivalent of the *ijāza* (permit) in exoteric learning. As Arthur Buehler notes (1998: 18), this is one of the main sources of a Sufi shaykh's authority, in addition to charisma. It may also be combined with charisma: Knysh reports how Habib 'Umar's followers stressed that he came from a respected family with a long tradition of producing Sufi shaykhs, for example by organizing visits to their tombs, "reviving the sacred geography and pilgrimage calendar of the region, which fell into disuse under the [former] Socialist regime" (2001: 408). It should be noted that the hereditary transmission of charismatic authority is not purely Sufi. It is also found in the case of the Ahl al-bayt and the *ashrāf* (nobles, descendants of the Prophet) and also, of course, outside Islam.

Care must be exercised, however, as what appears to be traditional-hereditary authority sometimes may not be. The successors of charismatic shaykhs may prefer to talk of what they learned from their own shaykhs rather than to teach on their own authority. This is one aspect of what Roy Mottahedeh has called "*silsila* mindedness" and what Jonathan Berkey has called "*isnād* mentality," which Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (2006: 7) define as "the marked tendency to refer to the normative and authoritative traditions in order to justify their own thoughts, no matter how thin the connection and how far-fetched the analogy." This tendency also corresponds with Sufi *adab* (proper conduct) as it avoids the risk of the teacher stressing his own status. It may result in what is actually charismatic authority appearing to be traditional-hereditary authority.

Authority in Sufism is not only traditional-hereditary and charismatic, however. There is also rational-legal authority, as some *ṭarīqas* have developed hierarchical structures, where the shaykh grants an *ijāza* (permit) or *idhn* (permission) to a senior follower to serve as his representative (*muqaddam* or *khalifa*). Such a representative typically runs a branch *zāwiya* (lodge) of a large *ṭarīqa*, often acting as a *murshid* in his own right. In Weberian terms, a

representative might be understood to have rational-legal authority, as it derives from an appointed position in a visible structure. In practice, however, some representatives acquire charismatic authority of their own, and non-hereditary successors to a deceased shaykh are often former representatives. The Weberian ideal-types are separate and distinct in principle, but in reality may often merge and combine.

In Weber's terms, then, two main varieties of authority may be found in Sufism: charismatic, and routinized charismatic or traditional. In practice, there is some traditional element to the authority of any shaykh who operates within the Sufi and Sunni traditions, as location within those traditions itself confers traditional authority. Beyond this, most shaykhs then also draw traditional authority from their particular *ṭarīqas*, as documented by their *silsilas* and family trees, very often from charisma that has been routinized in hereditary form. A number of hereditary shaykhs draw their authority not from this source, but from their own charisma. They are, however, normally in the minority.

Both types of shaykh, those with primarily traditional-hereditary authority and those with primarily charismatic authority, are to be found at the same time. Two different types of *ṭarīqa* are associated with these two different types of shaykh, and can be best understood in terms of the distinction made by another early German sociologist (or *Kulturphilosoph*), Ernst Troeltsch (1931 [1911]: 340), drawing on Weber, between the church and the sect. It is important that the term "sect" does not here denote a fragment of something greater, but rather a sociological form. The church is large and institutional and well established, and demands relatively low commitment from its members. The sect is small and intense and new, and demands high commitment from its members (Wilson 1960: 1–2; and Sedgwick 2004a: 283–312). Many years of observing *ṭarīqas* in the MENA region indicate that the shaykh with primarily traditional-hereditary authority normally leads a well-established and institutionalized *ṭarīqa* that has had time to grow large, and demands relatively low

commitment from its members. The shaykh with primarily charismatic authority, in contrast, normally leads a new and intense *ṭarīqa* that demands high commitment from its members, and for those reasons remains small.

This is the origin of the inverse relationship between the power of the shaykh and the size of the *ṭarīqa*. The most powerful shaykh is the one with primarily charismatic authority, but his *ṭarīqa* will be small. The largest *ṭarīqa* demands relatively low commitment from its members and is led by a shaykh whose authority depends on tradition and heredity; his power is not great, especially if he attempts to do anything out of line with tradition. The followers of such a *ṭarīqa* are not looking for *irshād* but for companionship, ceremony, and liturgy. The shaykh with primarily charismatic authority will be obeyed when he tells a wealthy *murīd* to go begging through the streets (Pinto 2017), and this obedience is itself a spiritual practice. The shaykh, whose authority depends on tradition and heredity, will be treated with respect, but will not be obeyed by most of his *murīds* when he tells them to turn up for a political demonstration. Some *ṭarīqas* are so large and well established that they have no shaykh or organizational structure at all. The Shadhiliyya, for example, has had no one shaykh for many centuries: only individual branches of the Shadhiliyya have any organizational existence.

In principle, different varieties of authority might come into conflict. A representative who has rational-legal authority, for example, may accrue charismatic authority and challenge the routinized charismatic or traditional authority of a hereditary shaykh. In practice, however, such conflicts are rare. After the death of a shaykh, different representatives may compete with each other for leadership, and perhaps even with the son of the dead shaykh, but once such competition has been resolved and a new shaykh chosen, further disputes are rare. Even if a shaykh becomes old and infirm, or fails in some other way, there is unlikely to be a “coup” against him. What happens instead is that a member of a well-established and institutionalized *ṭarīqa* who accrues significant charismatic authority

may leave, perhaps with a few other followers who have high commitment to him, and start a new and intense *ṭarīqa* of his own. For such a shaykh, what matters is committed followers, not the institutional form of an existing *ṭarīqa* full of less committed followers. This minimizes internal conflict.

The Sufi Shaykh beyond the *ṭarīqa*

The most important leadership and authority exercised by a Sufi shaykh is in the context of his own *ṭarīqa*, but Sufi shaykhs have historically also been important beyond this context, as Gaborieau, Buehler, and Chih have all noted. During the colonial period, when European states destroyed structures of state authority in much of the MENA, the popular authority of some Sufi shaykhs, which was independent of state and tribal structures, became so great that three of them became rulers of internationally recognized countries. ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri (1808–83) ruled the Emirate of Mu‘askar (Mascara, now in Algeria) from 1837 until 1847 (Danziger 1977); Muhammad ibn ‘Ali al-Idrisi (1876–1920) and his successors ruled the Emirate of ‘Asir (now in Saudi Arabia) from 1915 until 1934 (Bang 1996); and Muhammad Idris al-Sanusi (1889–1983) ruled the Kingdom of Libya (now a republic) from 1951 until 1969, as King Idris I (Paoletti 2011: 313–19). Politically, both ‘Abd al-Qadir and Al-Idrisi succeeded in uniting local tribal forces against imperial powers—French and Ottoman, respectively—as had King Idris’s cousin and father-in-law, Ahmad al-Sharif al-Sanusi (1873–1933), between 1900 and 1916, an achievement on which Muhammad Idris built to become King Idris. Al-Idrisi and King Idris also succeeded in obtaining the support of rival powers—British and Anglo-American, respectively. Socially, all three shaykhs advocated conservative Islamic positions, including the application of the shari‘a. Al-Idrisi specifically opposed the codified statute law (Mecelle) adopted by the late Ottoman state (Bang 1996: 94,

96). None of the three, however, advocated any position that was identifiably Sufi, though King Idris did publish a book of Sufi prayers.

These were unusual cases, but demonstrate quite well how effectively some Sufi shaykhs have historically been able to mobilize supporters and advocate political and social causes. They also illustrate how this has been achieved by building on the consequences of their status as Sufi shaykhs or, in the case of ‘Abd al-Qadir, as the son and designated representative of a Sufi shaykh. Al-Idrisi, to take one example, obtained the financial and military support of the British not because he was a Sufi shaykh but because his position in ‘Asir enabled him to promote British war aims. He had achieved this position as a result of leading a successful rebellion against the Ottoman government, harnessing local discontent with the Ottomans to the cause of establishing the shari‘a. He could do this because he was a talented politician, because was a respected shaykh, and because he was of Moroccan origin and thus outside local tribal structures (Bang 1996). That he was a respected shaykh was, in turn, due in part to his *‘ilm* (learning), and in part to his position as a grandson of Ahmad ibn Idris (1760–1837), a Sufi who had considerable charismatic authority and had led a small *ṭarīqa* that Troeltsch would have classified as a sect.

Al-Idrisi was unusual among Sufi shaykhs for leading a rebellion, but not for combining Sufism and *‘ilm*. Although many Sufi shaykhs have not been ‘ulama’, and many ‘ulama’ have not been Sufis, the two varieties of Sunni leadership have often been combined and numerous individual studies have shown the overlap between Sufism and the ‘ulama’. It is often said among Sufis that the shari‘a is needed to hold the *ḥaqīqa* (divine truth), and this was one of the main messages of Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1111). The two careers of *‘ālim* and *murshid* also go well together in practice, both at the beginning, as a student of the shari‘a has the time and motivation to work on disciplining his *nafs* (lower self), and at the end, as a teacher of the shari‘a has students whom he can lead on the Sufi

path, and as a preacher who is known to have disciplined his *nafs* and succeeded in returning to the One will be especially convincing when explaining the shari‘a. Although it is difficult to compare the significance of fundamentally different activities, the role of many Sufi shaykhs in providing general Islamic education to large numbers of people outside their *ṭarīqas* may have been more important in some ways than their role in providing *irshād* within their *ṭarīqas*. This importance was one reason that rulers in the MENA region often extended patronage to shaykhs and their *ṭarīqas*, which both increased their own legitimacy and also provided useful allies.

Especially in rural areas, Sufi shaykhs have also provided other services, notably arbitration, both between individuals and, in tribal areas, between tribes. In addition, Sufi *zāwiyas* have been centers for the collection and distribution of charity (Chih 2004: 92-93). These local functions may or may not be combined with general Islamic education. When they are not, they support the picture of the rural Sufi *marabout* (the term used for a shaykh in North Africa) as the opposite of the ‘ulama’ that Ernest Gellner famously painted (1969). In some cases, the rural *marabout* can indeed be contrasted with the ‘*ālim*’, but in more cases, the two roles are combined.

As is well known, the ‘ulama’ were one of the most powerful groups in pre-modern MENA societies, given their dominant role in intellectual life, their economic strength as beneficiaries of *waqf* (charitable foundations), and their control over education and the judiciary. As is also well known, the construction of modern centralized states in the MENA region involved the reduction or elimination of all these sources of strength. State legal systems ended most of the role of the ‘ulama’ in the judiciary, and state schooling systems ended most of their role in education. The *waqf* was seized by the state, and the ‘ulama’ became *muwazzafīn* (*fonctionnaires*, state employees). Intellectual life broadened to include newspapers and journalists, and finally television stars. The consequent decline in the power

of the ‘ulama’ has included the decline of the power of Sufi shaykhs who are also ‘ulama’. This decline has been most marked in countries where modern centralized states are strongest, and so is more pronounced in Cairo than in Yemen, and more pronounced in the core of the MENA region than in West Africa. A discussion of contemporary Sufi leadership in Senegal, for example, would require a very different article. There are, however, some signs that this process may be reversing, as some shaykhs associated with “Traditional Islam,” discussed below, are beginning to move into the void left by the decline in the influence of public-sector ‘ulama’ institutions.

The construction of modern centralized states also weakened the popular authority of Sufi shaykhs in other ways. For Michael Gilsenan (1967: 14), the loss of charitable and social functions was one major cause of the decline in the *ṭarīqas* that was so noticeable in 1960s Egypt. Further, the curriculum of modern state schooling systems is not one that encourages belief in *karāmāt*. MENA society has not been as thoroughly disenchanted as Western society, but the signs are that skepticism has increased somewhat, and the lists of *karāmāt* that once supported the authority of the Sufi shaykh within the *ṭarīqa*, and also beyond it, are no longer found. As both Salafis and modernists have rejected Sufism, fewer ‘ulama’ than before are also Sufis and, in the view of Gaborieau (2010: 2), the esoteric and exoteric channels of authority in Islam have partly separated.

These developments are the origin of the decline in the power of Sufi shaykhs and the *ṭarīqas* during the twentieth century. Gilsenan’s analysis of this decline is now often criticized for uncritically accepting the paradigm of secularization through modernization, and his conclusion that the *ṭarīqas* were “in danger of following the guilds into oblivion” (1967: 17–18) were it not for the illiterate, has proved wrong, but Gilsenan’s main point was quite right: in comparison with their central position in earlier centuries, Sufism by 1967 had

become peripheral. That position has improved somewhat since then, but there is still no real prospect of Sufism regaining the position it occupied two hundred years before 1967.

Even though Sufi shaykhs no longer have great authority beyond the *ṭarīqa*, there are some exceptions to this in the form of groups such as the Tablighi Jamaat and the Gülen Movement—which fall beyond the scope of this article—that draw on one or more aspects of Sufism but differ in important ways from the classic *ṭarīqa*. Turkey as a whole also forms something of an exception, not only in the case of the Gülen Movement, but also in the case of classic *ṭarīqas*, which exist even though they remain technically illegal, and may have more authority than almost anywhere else in the Middle East. The outcomes of Turkish elections are not generally known in advance, as they are in Arab countries, and so *ṭarīqas* matter politically because of their ability to deliver blocks of votes. Changes in Turkish law between 1967 and 1983 that allowed the formation of new *waqfs* made possible the resumption of the charitable and social functions that had contributed to the importance of the *ṭarīqas* in earlier centuries (1996: 10–15). Some *ṭarīqas* also became centers of political and economic networks. The most famous among these is the İskenderpaşa Cemaati (community) in Istanbul, a branch of the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya *ṭarīqa* to which at least three Turkish prime ministers and numerous other politicians have belonged (Ozdalga 2010: 78–79). These include, Necmettin Erbakan (1926–2011, in office 1996–97); Turgut Özal (1927–1993, in office 1983–89); and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (born 1954, in office from 2003 to present). Süleyman Demirel (1924–2015, in office five times between 1965 and 1993) was also associated with the İskenderpaşa Cemaati.

The İskenderpaşa Cemaati also became the center of a powerful business network, some of the profits of which were used to fund charitable projects (Henkel 2009: 105). The political power of the İskenderpaşa Cemaati, which owed much to the combined charisma and political vision of its leading shaykh, Mehmet Zahid Kotku (1897–1980), was at its peak

during the 1970s, however, it declined after 1978 when different politicians in its political network began to compete against each other, and especially after the death of Kotku in 1980 (Cornell and Kaya 2015: 12; Ozdalga 2010: 78-79; Zubaida 1996:12). That the power of the state is supreme even in Turkey was shown when Kotku's successor Esad Coşan (1938–2001) was forced into exile in Australia, where he died in a car accident, after the military “intervention” of 1997 (Henkel 2009: 103–05). Many Turkish politicians today have some connection to a *ṭarīqa*, but no other *ṭarīqa* has ever become as powerful as the İskenderpaşa Cemaati once was.

In addition to popular authority and occasional political influence, a Sufi shaykh may have authority or legitimacy in other contexts beyond his own *ṭarīqa*. One of these is the context of the broader *ṭarīqa* milieu: what does one shaykh think of another shaykh? Sufi *adab* discourages one shaykh from criticizing another, and open criticism of one shaykh by another is rare, but occasionally one shaykh is obliged to judge another, for example in Egypt, where many *ṭarīqas* of the well-established and institutionalized variety are regulated by al-Majlis al-A‘la li’l-Turuq al-Sufiya (the Supreme Council for Sufi *ṭarīqas*), a body staffed by government-recognized Sufi shaykhs that ratifies the appointment of new shaykhs to the leadership of registered *ṭarīqas*. There is little or no research into the functioning of al-Majlis al-A‘la (De Jong 1978), but it seems not to be particularly respected—and even subject to “contempt” (Hoffman 1992: 631)—outside government circles, and since its prime function is the political one of securing Sufi loyalty to the state, it can be assumed that it makes its decisions primarily on political bases; Issues that fall beyond the scope of this article.

Recent Developments

Although Sufi shaykhs no longer have great authority beyond the *ṭarīqa* in comparison to their position before the twentieth century, there are still signs of new sources of support for the leadership role of Sufi shaykhs within the *ṭarīqa*. One of these is political: having first reduced the authority of Sufi shaykhs, many MENA states are now attempting to promote Sufism. Another is social: there is a growth of interest in so-called “Traditional Islam,” and this is contributing to a strengthening of Sufi leadership. Both of these trends are supported by the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, which has encouraged interest in some circles for alternatives to Salafi and *ikhwāni* Islam.

State Promotion of Sufism

Although the rise of modern centralized states has generally weakened the position of Sufi shaykhs, some MENA states have in recent years begun to promote Sufism, which has involved the support of individual *ṭarīqas* and shaykhs. Examples include the promotion of the Naqshbandi *ṭarīqa* of Shaykh Ahmad Kuftaro (1915–2004) in Syria by President Hafez al-Assad (1930–2000) (Böttcher 1998), the promotion of the Alawi *ṭarīqa* of Shaykh Khaled Bentounès (b. 1949) in Algeria by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (b. 1937) (Muedini 2015: 61–62), and the promotion of the Boutchichi *ṭarīqa* of Shaykh Sidi Hamza al-Budshish (b. 1922) in Morocco by King Mohammed VI (b. 1963). There are also examples from outside the MENA region, including in the West.

Patronage of Sufis by MENA rulers historically benefitted both Sufis, who received resources and influence, and rulers, who enhanced their legitimacy. This arrangement reflected the power and prestige that Sufi shaykhs then enjoyed. Recently, however, Sufis have attracted state support not because of their actual power and what they stand for but because of their potential power and what they stand against. The three MENA regimes

mentioned, like many others in the region, were all concerned about the threat posed to them by *ikhwāni* Islam. The Syrian regime was particularly concerned by the 1981 uprising of the Muslim Brothers in Hama; the Algerian regime by the 1991 success of the Front islamique du salut (FIS, Islamic Salvation Front) and the 1992 uprising of the Groupe islamique armé (GIA, Armed Islamic Group); and the Moroccan regime by the success of the Jama‘a al-‘adl wa’l-ihsan (Justice and Spirituality Group) and the 2003 Casablanca bombings by Al-Qaeda sympathizers. Each regime followed a policy of repression of the groups that opposed it, which were labeled “radical,” and promotion of alternatives to these groups, which were labeled “moderate.” These labels in practice denoted the presence or absence of opposition to the regime, not whether opposition was radical or moderate. “Moderate” groups were those that did not oppose a regime, or even supported it, not those that opposed it in moderate fashion. Each regime concluded that Sufism provided such an alternative.

Sufism is not, in fact, inevitably “moderate,” as the examples of the Sufi-led colonial-era rebellions already discussed indicate, and as is also indicated by the contemporary example of the Jaysh rijal al-tariqa al-naqshabandiyya, an Iraqi jihadist group led by former Ba‘thists, notably ‘Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri (b. 1942). Sufism can oppose regimes as well as support them. Sufism does, however, also present a well-grounded and coherent theological and ideological alternative to Salafism, Salafi jihadism, and *ikhwāni* Islam. Firstly, given that Salafis and many *ikhwāni* groups condemn Sufism as *bid‘a* (innovation), Sufis generally condemn Salafism and *ikhwāni* Islam in return. Secondly, there is an important difference of emphasis between Salafism, *ikhwāni* Islam, and Sufism. While Salafism emphasizes the shari‘a as an end in itself, Sufis see shari‘a as a means to *ḥaqīqa*. While *ikhwāni* Islam emphasizes the social and political, Sufis emphasize the personal. Certainly, Sufis may also care about the social and the political, but it is not their prime objective. The states that are

seeking to support Sufism as an alternative to Salafi and *ikhwāni* Islam, then, are following policies that make sense.

In general, state promotion comes in three forms: funding, often for improving *ṭarīqas*' physical infrastructure or for educational activities; state jobs for shaykhs' associates (Werenfels 2014: 284); and reduction in or cessation of harassment and disruption on the part of security services. All of these potentially strengthen a shaykh's leadership and authority. The relative importance of funding and of reduction in or cessation of harassment varies between states, but both of these support activities within the *ṭarīqa* (*irshād*) and beyond it (Islamic education). Where other shaykhs and *ṭarīqas* remain subject to harassment and disruption on the part of security services, its absence can be especially valuable. State jobs for his associates strengthen a shaykh by giving him powers of patronage. In some cases, they also allow him to use state machinery to promote his own objectives. Senior jobs in the state Islamic hierarchy have been given to Sufis in all three countries discussed above, and also in Egypt. The holders of these jobs have of course supported the interests of the regime in question, as have the holders of any other senior state job, but they have also been able to promote policies that correspond with their own understanding of Islam.

The promotion of Sufism by modern states in one sense simply carries forward the pre-modern practice of rulers extending patronage to shaykhs and their *ṭarīqas*. Modern states, however, are stronger than pre-modern rulers were, and modern shaykhs are weaker than pre-modern shaykhs were. It might therefore be assumed that the promotion of Sufism by modern states benefits the states more and the Sufis less. Promotion of Sufism by unpopular regimes might even harm Sufism by association. In practice, however, the arrangement does not often seem to have harmed particular Sufis. In general, those who condemn Sufi shaykhs for their relationship with regimes were probably never going to have followed those shaykhs anyhow. There are, however, occasional exceptions, as when in 2015

Yemeni Shaykh Habib ‘Ali al-Jifri (b. 1971) became publicly closely associated with Egyptian President ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi (b. 1954). This attracted widespread criticism, for example from Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962), who condemned those who “instrumentalize both Islam and Sufism for political ends and personal interest” (2015). This may have harmed Habib ‘Ali, as some of those who might follow him also pay attention to Tariq Ramadan. In general, however, state support can be seen as a trend that is strengthening Sufi leadership.

The final impact of state promotion of Sufism is hard to judge. Of the three *ṭarīqas* considered, Sidi Hamza’s Boutchichiyya achieved a dominant position in Morocco; Ahmad Kuftaro’s Naqshbandiyya achieved an importance in Damascus that is hard to interpret given the restrictive environment of Ba‘thist Syria; and there is little information on the success of Khaled Bentounès’s Alawiyya in Algeria. The success of the Boutchichiyya is clearly due to a number of factors, not just state promotion, including its successful recruitment of certain prominent intellectuals, its work among university students, and its effective internal structures (Sedgwick 2004b). The success of the Damascus Naqshbandiyya clearly owed much to the fact that rival Sunni organizations were unable to operate there, but may well have had other important causes. State patronage of the Damascus Naqshbandiyya may even have resulted in long-term harm to that *ṭarīqa*.

Traditional Islam

A second recent development that is strengthening Sufi leadership is the growth of interest in so-called “Traditional Islam.” The phrase is an English one, and there is no exact equivalent in Arabic, where reference is made instead to transmission of knowledge *bi’l-sanad al-muttasil*, or by uninterrupted chain (Tabeh Foundation, n.d.). The proponents of Traditional Islam, like the proponents of Salafi Islam and indeed of most forms of Islam, look back to the original revelation and to the Prophet. While Salafi Islam seeks to find these in the earliest

written sources, ignoring most subsequent Islamic scholarship, Traditional Islam seeks to find these in the accumulated wisdom of the scholarly tradition, stressing subsequent Islamic scholarship. In one sense, this is no more than what the ‘ulama’ have done for many centuries. What makes the proponents of Traditional Islam modern is the conscious stress on the scholarly tradition, on the ‘Ashari *‘aqīda* (creed) and the *madhhabs* (schools of law), deliberately contrasted with the approach of Salafi and *ikhwāni* Islam. The Islam in Traditional Islam may indeed be traditional, but its proponents operate in the contemporary world and use contemporary tools, notably the internet, to address contemporary concerns. They, then, are modern.

Traditional Islam has a growing following among young intellectuals, both in the MENA region and transregionally. There is no formal Traditional Islam movement, but there is a network of teachers who share similar perspectives and refer to each other, and are often followed by the same students (Sedgwick 2016b). One of the most prominent of these in the MENA region is the Habib ‘Ali who was so criticized for his closeness to President al-Sisi. Habib ‘Ali is an *‘ālim*, a Sufi shaykh in the old and respected Ba ‘Alawi line, and a polished media performer. He appears frequently on Arab satellite television, travels and speaks widely, and has a following in the West as well as the Arab world. He works with another Ba ‘Alawi shaykh, the Habib ‘Umar described by Knysh, who directs a pair of educational institutions in Tarim (the Hadramut, Yemen)—the Dar al-Mustafa for men and the Dar al-Zahra for women—which take local, Arab, South Asian, and Western students. One of the most prominent Traditional Islam teachers outside the MENA region is Hamza Yusuf Hanson (b. 1960), an *‘ālim* with a Sufi background who is also a polished media performer and has an educational institution in Berkeley, California. One measure of his online popularity is that a search for him on YouTube currently returns 245,000 hits. This is more

than Yusuf al-Qaradawi (70,000) or Tariq Ramadan (179,000).¹ Just as Habib ‘Ali has been criticized for his closeness to al-Sisi, Hamza Yusuf was criticized for his closeness to President George W. Bush (b. 1946) in the aftermath of 9/11, a relationship from which he has since distanced himself (Sedgwick 2016b).

Habib ‘Ali and Hamza Yusuf exemplify a new kind of Sunni leadership, operating outside any *ṭarīqa*, and deriving authority from new sources. Weber’s understanding of charisma stresses “powers or qualities” that are “not accessible to the ordinary person,” and “of divine origin” (1978: 241–43). As media performers, Habib ‘Ali and Hamza Yusuf have qualities that are not accessible to the ordinary person, in which they can be compared to the Egyptian television preacher Amr Khaled (b. 1967), but these qualities are not thought to be of divine origin. There is no discussion of the *karāmāt* of Habib ‘Ali, Hamza Yusuf, or indeed Amr Khaled. The authority of Habib ‘Ali and Hamza Yusuf is charismatic only in the sense of Weber’s more prosaic powers (prowess in hunting or warfare). Further, they do not draw significant authority from the Sufi tradition. While it is known that Habib ‘Ali is a Sufi, he does not reference this in his public talks to the Ba ‘Alawi *ṭarīqa*. Hamza Yusuf does not publicly self-identify as a Sufi, is not known to lead a *ṭarīqa*, and discourages the use of labels such as “Sufi” and “Salafi,” which he considers divisive. The Sufi direction of this thought is clear, but only to those who already know Sufism.

Despite this, the success of the teachers of Traditional Islam does represent a strengthening of Sufi leadership, as they are Sufis, even if their public authority does not depend on Sufism, and their teachings are in accordance with Sufi perspectives. To what extent the success of the teachers of Traditional Islam also represents the success of state promotion of Sufism is unclear. Although there is no evidence of this, some of them may receive funding from state sources, and such funding might assist addressing a global

¹ YouTube searches were carried out in May 2017, in Latin script for Hamza Yusuf and Tariq Ramadan, and in Arabic script for Yusuf al-Qaradawi.

audience. To some extent, it also represents the unmet demand for the product that they are offering: classical *‘ilm*.

Sufism in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring

Although it is still too early to see the full impact of the Arab uprisings, it seems likely that it will appear in retrospect as a major turning point in MENA history, comparable to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, or even decolonization. There are already indications that one consequence, in countries such as Egypt, has been the growth of antipathy to Salafi and *ikhwāni* Islam. On the one hand, there are reports of an increase in atheism, and, on the other, there is evidently increased interest in the Traditional Islam discussed above, and also in “Sufism” in general. This resembles the reaction to the Algerian Civil War, after which Isabelle Werenfels observed a “growing social demand for ‘traditional’ spirituality” in “a reaction to the violence and insecurity of the 1990s” (Werenfels 2011: 3).

One major impact of the aftermath of the Arab uprisings has been to strengthen the other two recent developments noted, state support for Sufism and interest in “Traditional Islam.” Another impact has been to introduce a new type of Sufi leader, the Western or Western-informed author. Given the extent of the disruption of Egyptian Sufism during the twentieth century, members of the Egyptian elite who develop an interest in Sufism cannot simply turn to the *ṭarīqas* that have been present in Egypt for centuries, as those *ṭarīqas* no longer have any significant presence in elite social networks. No major Egyptian *ṭarīqa* has followed the Moroccan Boutchichiyya in learning how to appeal to members of the elite. The situation is such that many of the books on Sufism currently on sale in elite neighborhoods such as Zamalek are translated into Arabic from English or French.

Conclusion

In principle, then, Sufi shaykhs are among the most important leaders of the Sunni faithful. Religious authority in Sunni Islam may be divided between the esoteric (*ẓāhiri*) and the exoteric (*bāṭini*), as Marc Gaborieau suggests, or between the “person-centered” and the “scripture-centered,” as Arthur F. Buehler suggests. The esoteric and the person-centered authority of the Sufi shaykh is Weber’s charismatic authority, and is supported both by Sufi theology and by the expectations of many MENA Muslims, who look to the *wali* to provide *baraka*. In principle, the individual Sufi *murīd* should be to his shaykh like a corpse in the hands of its washer.

In practice, however, the Sufi shaykh has much less power and authority than might be expected. Although some shaykhs do have great charisma, their *ṭarīqas* are generally small, corresponding to the formation that Ernst Troeltsch identified as the sect. The authority of the majority of shaykhs within their *ṭarīqas* depends on routinized charisma, often hereditary, always traditional. This variety of authority is less strong, and is the authority on which most shaykhs depend. Sufism differs from the norm in complex human societies, where authority tends to reside in institutions, not individuals. Because the Supreme Court of the United States is important, Justice Clarence Thomas is important. In Sufism, a *ṭarīqa* is important because its shaykh is important, not the other way around.

Sufi shaykhs also perform functions outside their *ṭarīqas*, and the successful performance of the functions is also a source of authority. Many teach, and are also members of the ‘ulama’. They thus add exoteric and “scripture-centered” authority to esoteric and person-centered authority. Others act as arbitrators, especially in rural areas, or collect and distribute charitable contributions. It is these other functions that were once the basis of the considerable power that Sufi shaykhs wielded—power that even allowed three shaykhs to become heads of state. This exoteric and “scripture-centered” authority builds on esoteric and person-centered authority. Today, however, it has been much reduced: Sufi shaykhs and the

‘ulama’ are less united than they once were, and the ‘ulama’ have anyhow lost much of their power as a result of the construction of centralized modern states. These states have also taken away some of the shaykhs’ other functions as arbitrators and organizers of charity.

Although modern states have, in general, reduced the power of Sufi shaykhs, they are now often also increasing this power through deliberate policies of support for Sufism as an alternative to Salafi and *ikhwāni* Islam. The final impact of this support is unclear, but extends to the growing trend of “Traditional Islam,” a trend that is associated with Sufism. Both of these trends have been increased in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, which has led to some individuals, not only states, looking for alternatives to Salafi and *ikhwāni* Islam.

Sufi religious leaders and Sufi orders, then, remain important in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa, representing one way in which non-state actors continue to lead the faithful. They are important within their own communities, and also in engagement with broader social and political forces.

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