

Politicized Sufism in Islam: A Double-Edged Sword

Written by Sayed Hassan Akhlaq

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/05/17/politicized-sufism-in-islam-a-double-edged-sword/>

SAYED HASSAN AKHLAQ, MAY 17 2023

Many intellectual currents have flourished in the Islamic civilization throughout history, however, Sufism and Sharia law have stood out among others. Some even claim that Islamic civilization is comprised more of Sharia and Sufism than of any other strands e.g. philosophy (falsafa) and theology (kalam). Sufism addresses the esoteric and inner aspect of faith, appealing to elites, whereas Sharia, professionally known as Fiqh (jurisprudence), addresses the exoteric and outward aspects of faith dealing with the daily lives of masses. The former teaches how to practice faith, the later how to feel. However, many scholars developed a perennial conflict between legal and mystical strands of Islam dividing Muslims into good versus bad Muslims. Hence a stereotype that the proponents of Sharia inclined to religious fundamentalism with a harsh attitudes and practice, and of Sufism inclined to a universal private inner experience open to inclusivism. This simplification evades theological controversies, local contexts, historical complexities, and dynamism of everyday life.

There are three elements connecting Sharia and Sufism to politics in Islam. First, there are verses in the Quran that are more or less interpreted in a political context. Secondly, alongside his spiritual leadership, the Prophet Muhammad acted as a legislator, political leader, and judge during his time in Medina. And finally, some religious duties in Islam such as criminal law, prescribed punishment (Hadd), and Jihad, are applicable through government rule. Neither Sufism nor Sharia can ignore these elements. They rather use them as mediums to meddle in politics. Sharia scholars put their jurisprudential hopes in politics, while Sufis emphasize their mystical culture.

There is, however, no politically homogeneous accord between Sufism and politics. Many ethical aspects of Sufism, emphasis on sacrifice, forgiving, tolerance, humility, free consciousness, high aspiration, spontaneity, anti-idolatry, selflessness, and seeing the positive aspects in any event, are highly celebrated by free thinkers. Sufism has always fought against religious radicalism and superficiality, condemning the enforcement of religious values on people. All these features make Sufism a plausible ally for pro-democratic and pluralistic systems.

There are other elements which pull in an opposing direction. Sufis' perspective of the oneness of God (Tawhid) considers all worldly affairs an illusion and recommends avoiding them. The core Sufi concept of love transcends all limits and boundaries necessary for social contracts in open societies. The ideal of annihilation in God does not facilitate self-development. Devotion to asceticism and austerity does not provide support for daily joy and entertainment. Sufism centers around a master-disciple relationship requiring full submission of the disciple to the master, which in political terms can translate into totalitarianism.

Sufis read the Quran and Sunnah in a way consistent with their pre-religious perspective. They interpret religion based on their personal spiritual experiences and their existential status. These are affected by their psychological, educational, social, cultural, and even historical backgrounds. The development and division of Sufism into schools of Eastern Islamic (Khurasan) and Western Islamic (Iraq and Syria) offers a comparative context.

In his commentary on verse 28, Sura al-Hadid (57) of the Quran in "The Bezels of Wisdom," the renowned Sufi and mystical philosopher of Islam, Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), also called the greatest Shaikh, states clearly that there are two kinds of religion: that which is revealed by God, and that which is initiated by the wise. Both forms are valid equally before God. Also, since Sufi teachings change depending on audiences and circumstances, any political change in Sufism will be perceptible.

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As a first example, we can look at the Safavid empire, which defined itself in contrast to its rival Ottoman empire. The Safavids are known for their Shia identity, and as such were seen as heretics by the Ottomans. Being originally Sunni, their name derives from a Sufi brotherhood founded by Sheikh Safi (d. 1334). Professor John McHugo argues that they saw “adopting Twelver Shiism as a neat solution, a middle way between the Sunnism of the cities and agricultural areas, and the Gnostic ideas of the nomadic Turkmen.” Later, they adopted an ancient Iranian title of Shahanshah, or “king of kings.” They went so far in sectarian establishment that Shah Ismail ordered the ritual cursing of the first three caliphs, despite the great respect which Sufis traditionally had to the Righteous Caliphs. As we see, this is a great example of how the malleable nature of Sufism can lead toward opposing directions in politics. Known and welcomed for its tolerant nature, this Sufi movement established a dogmatic regime institutionalizing a sectarian ideology.

Sufis did not work only to promote Shiism. The same sectarian work was initiated by Sunni Sufi Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (1703–1762) in India, the land of mystics and enlightened ones. His son, Shah Abdul Aziz Dehlawi (1746–1824), also of the Naqshbandi Sufi order, institutionalized sectarianism in his *Tuhfa Asna Ashariya* in 1789 during the age of reason and enlightenment in the West. He also declared India as the Dar al-Harb (the abode of war). Both father and son are considered the spiritual fathers of the Deobandi school in India, which has served as the ideological wellspring of the Taliban in today’s Afghanistan. However, the grandson of Shah Waliullah, Shah Muhammad Ismail (1779–1831) and his Sufi master, Sayyid Ahmad Barelavi (1786–1831) are celebrated as Shahid (martyr) by the Deobandis, waged the North Indian jihad movement against the Sikhs 1826–31. Also, the current polemical battle that has shaped South Asian Islam and Muslim identity is a product of rivalry between the Balrevli and Deobandi schools. Both share reading practices, common scholarly genealogies, textual reference points, and “both Barelvi and Deobandi scholars were major Sufi masters as well as prominent scholars of law.”

Both Dehlawis are called Mujaddid (Muslim revivalists). The Afghan Jihad against the Soviet invasion was not isolated from the concept of revivalism. Four types of networks join each other in Jihad: Islamists, clergy graduated from madrasas, tribes, and Sufis. Afghan Sufism consists of two opposing directions: orthodox Sufism and Marabout Sufism. While the first identifies the master “pir” with an *alim* (religious scholar) and sees harmony between Sharia and Sufism, the second distinguishes between the two and is marked by anti-clericalism. The first emphasizes individualism, while the second replaces spiritual individualism with the collective allegiance of a clan or tribe to a family of “saints.”

Disciples of Sayyad Ahmad Gaylani, who founded the Islamic Front (Mahaz-ı Islami), and the followers of Mujaddadi established the National Liberation Front (Jabha-yi nejat-ei milli,) two of the seven Afghan jihadi groups, both from Maraboutic Sufism. A third jihadi party was the Revolution Movement (Harakat-i inqilab), which was mostly supported by traditional ulama and orthodox Sufis. Sebqahtullah Mujaddidi (1926–2019) served as acting president of the Mujahidin after they occupied Kabul in 1992. He also became the chairman of the upper house of the national Assembly of Afghanistan (2011) and the head of a reconciliation committee. The Mujaddadi family took their last name from their ancestor Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624) a Naqshbandi Sufi described as a Mujaddid (reviver) for his work to revive Islam. Here we see how Sufism played a great role in both supporting secularism as well as Islamization in recent Afghan history.

Sufi Revivalism appeared in a different form during the Iranian revolution and in the Islamic government that followed. Ayatollah Khomeini was not a regular Shia pacifist ayatollah. His spiritual charisma was rooted in Sufism, which was the subject of his first scholarly publications. Khomeini maintained his Sufi perspectives throughout his life. In his famous 1989 letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, he recommended that Gorbachev read Ibn Arabi’s book to learn the true meaning of Islam. Khomeini’s innovative and foundational theory of Vilayat-e Faqih was a disastrous marriage of Jurisprudence and Sufism, a tenuous link between Sufi elitism and jurisprudential populism.

This Sufi element of Khomeini’s thought proved costly to him as well, for it put him on the wrong side of other powerful Shia clerics and of much of the Iranian population. It eventually separated him from his designated, then resigned, heir Ayatollah Muntazeri. And Khomeini’s Sufi orientation prevented him from continuing to deliver his weekly commentary on the Quran on Iranian TV. Here again is the double-edged sword of Sufism in the political arena: developing a more spiritual and non-sectarian Islam vs. justifying Islamic totalitarianism.

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The modernist Mustafa Kemal Atatürk prohibited any orders (tarikats) of Sufism, but it did not demolish Sufi's impact on politics in the contemporary Turkey. Instead, a new form of Sufism arose; cemaats, religious communities less structured than classic orders. Here, the traditional relationship between the disciple (murid) and the master (pir/murad) transferred to a modern structure. Traditionally, the master's presence in critical and the personal encounter is unavoidable. The totality of the disciple is matter. But, in cemaat, the adherence of heart and mind is matter. The master and disciple can live far from each other. Turkish naqshbandiyyah (naksbendi) in this transformation divided in many subgroups, a diverse range of spectrum from the most liberal to the most conservatives. Many different branches of cemaat naksbendi are existing together, some looking for a compromise with modernity, some open to adapt to the modern world. This helps us to better understand the nature of the failed coup against Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government, June 15, 2016, attributed to Fathullah Gulen and his Hizmet movement. Hizmet and Justice and Development Party (AKP) both use Sufism and cemaats (the Naqshbandi-Khalidi groups) to promote their politics.

While marriage of Sufism with politics in Iran and Turkey, intentionally or unintentionally, paved the way toward sectarian war in the Middle East, particularly proxy war in Syria, the most prestigious university for learning Islam, al-Azhar University went to build bridge between Sunni and Shia. Al-Azhar has highly a Sufi identity. Its current rector, Grand Imam Ahmed Mohamed El-Tayeb, is from a Sufi family and expressed support for a global Sufi league. He is known for his loyalty to Sisi regime in Egypt and for his harsh criticism of the Muslim brotherhood. Imam El-Tayeb supported the military coup against Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi in 2013. Al-Azhar represents a Sufism consistent with traditional theologies of al-Ash'ari and al-Maturidi. There is no passion for Mutazila theology and intoxicated Sufis. The later Sufis shares ecstatic experiences of "losing self" in the Divine. To be clear, dominant schools of theology (kalam) in Sunni Islam consist of these three: Mutazila, Maturidi, and Ash'ari. Mutazila theology prefers reasoning (aql) and rational religion over scripture (wahy), revealed religion. Ash'ari strongly opposes to Mutazila liberalism and rationalism. Maturidi theology attempts to find a way between Ash'ari and Mutazila theologies.

In conclusion, there are no statistics on the number of Sufis living in the Middle East; neither can we deduce the exact impact of Sufis on current politics. This is not only due to a lack of information, but because of the nature of Sufism too. The diversity and complexity of Sufism on the one hand, and its secret and mystical nature on the other, make it more sophisticated and diffuse in Islamic culture. Sufism is an essential part of Islam, and many Muslim intellectuals and politicians utilize it to address problems of modernity. Both Sufi theory and practice throughout Islamic history and across Islamic lands prove that minimizing its impact to simple negatives and positives would be an oversimplification. The convolution of politics in the Middle East is mirrored in Sufism, which produces yet a new form of Sufism. This last point is reminiscent of what Friedrich Hölderlin said when he wrote, "But where the danger lies, also grows the saving power."

About the author:

Sayed Hassan Akhlaq teaches Religion in The George Washington, and Philosophy in both Marymount University and Coppin State University. He specializes in philosophy and religion and contributes to comparative study, dialogue among civilizations, and inter and intra-faith dialogues. He published five books in Iran and Afghanistan and co-edited "The Secular and The Sacred: Complementary and/or Conflictual?" (Washington DC., CRVP, 2017). His works in Farsi focuses on the comparative study of Islamic Peripatetic philosophy and the Enlightenment Philosophy, Rumi, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Mulla Sadra, and modernization. His publications in English are on the comparative study of Christianity (Orthodox, Catholicism, and Protestantism) and Islam (Sunni and Shia), Political Islam, and Sufism.