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Dangerous Liaisons: Sufism and the State in Syria

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After the terrorist attacks of September 11th in the USA, some scholars and policy makers tried to draw a boundary between openly political Muslim groups and Muslim communities, arguing that while the first constitute a potential threat to Western values of freedom and democracy, the latter are fundamentally apolitical and, therefore, unthreatening to the Western countries and their Middle Eastern allies. The problem with this kind of analysis is that it is based exclusively in the evaluation of the explicit ideology of the Muslim political groups, ignoring their diversity and social and political contexts of their practices.

The relations between Muslim identities and communities and authoritarian states are a central element for understanding the political dynamics of Islamic groups in contemporary Middle Eastern societies. Academic research on this topic has been centered mainly on the groups that construct and mobilize Muslim identities within an explicitly political project of social reform according to what they consider to be the basic tenets of Islam (Eickelman, 1996; Mitchell, 1969; Roy, 1992). However, this scholarship usually understates the fact that other expressions of Islam that do not have an explicitly political project, such as the Sufi communities, can also affect the balance of forces between state and society, sometimes even in a more durable and consistent way.

While it is true that many political Islamic groups are devoted to political violence and terrorism, such as the Egyptian *Hijra wa Takfir*, it is also true that others worked for the liberalization and normalization of the political system, such as the 'Muslim Brothers' in Jordan. Furthermore, the dynamics of political Islamic groups must be understood in a historical perspective, focusing on the sociological and political conditions for their radicalization or "normalization" in each political system. This political evolution can be seen in the incorporation of the Amal and the Hizbollah in the Lebanese political system (Norton, 1988), or in the progressive liberalization of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is the result of new sociological, intellectual and political conditions developed in the two last decades (Khosrokhavar and Roy, 1999; Adelkhah, 2000).

Sufi communities are usually portrayed as quietist and non-political forces (Gellner, 1993: 57-59) or as simple instruments of state domination (Luizard, 1991: 29). However, the important role that Sufi orders played in many revolts against the Ottoman State, the colonial powers, and the modern authoritarian states in the Middle East contradicts that point of view. Both collaboration and resistance to the state are present as political strategies among the Sufi communities in contemporary Syria. The collaboration is exemplified in the "official Islam" preached by the Naqshbandiyya Kuftariyya, and resistance by the engagement of branches of the Shadhiliyya in the armed struggle that the Islamic opposition launched against the Ba'th regime from 1979 to 1982. Therefore, the question is not if Sufism is inherently acquiescent or rebellious towards the state but rather what are the social and political conditions for each one of these articulations with the political authority.[1]

1. The Structure of Sufi Communities

Sufism is the mystical version of Islam, existing in both Sunni and Shi'i communities. The Sufi path is based on the quest for a direct experience of God. This goal is considered to be the end of a long a process of initiation into the mystical path (*tariqa*) done under the guidance of a Sufi *shaykh*. Sufi identities are based in the individual experiences induced by ritual performances. Although based in individual experiences, the Sufi path (*tariqa*) does not consist of a completely subjective religious trajectory free of external constraints. Each individual experience can be

[1] The data used in this article were collected during 16 months of fieldwork in Sufi *zawiyas* of Aleppo and the Kurd Dagh, in northern Syria, from 1999 to 2001.

claimed legitimately to be one of the mystical states (*hal,* pl. *ahwal*) of the Sufi path only if it is connected to the doctrines and practices transmitted by the texts, rituals, and oral teachings that compose the various Sufi traditions.

The necessity of an external measure for one's mystical experience makes the submission to a master a fundamental element of the Sufi path, because only those who had a direct experience of the divine reality (*haqiqa*) can guide others in the mystical quest for God. According to Sufi tradition, religious knowledge has two dimensions—an exoteric (*zahiri*) and an esoteric *(batini*) one, with the latter being closer to the divine truth (*haqiqa*). The experiential character of the Sufi path means that its knowledge becomes embodied in those who have traversed it, and its transmission is necessarily achieved through the guidance and life example of a master. Therefore, the master/disciple relationship between the Sufi and his *shaykh* provides the framework in which Sufi identities and communities are constructed and expressed.

2. Historical Connections between Sufism and the State

Sufi orders have established strong connections with the state apparatus since their beginnings in the 12th century, when they were actively supported by Sunni dynasties in their struggle against Ismaili Shi'ism (Trimingham, 1998: 7-10). Despite having an important role in the policy of conversion of Middle Eastern populations to Sunni Islam, the vast networks of *zawiyas* (lodges) and *ribats* (fortified monasteries) that composed the Sufi orders were never centralized under an institutional authority until the 19th century. In the early decades of the 19th century the Ottomans reorganized the Sufi orders into centralized and hierarchical structures, incorporating them as administrative structures in the major urban centers of the Ottoman Empire, such as Aleppo[2] (Geoffroy, 1995: 267). However, even when the Ottoman centralization was still in place, many rural *zawiyas* escaped the authority of the *shaykh al-mashaykh,* a religious position created by the Ottomans to be the supreme leader in each Sufi order, and worked as social institutions independent from the state.

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2 This model of centralized and official Sufi orders was continued in khedival and republican Egypt, where even today the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders attempts to control all mystical activities. It is important to note that in this aspect Egypt constitutes an exception, for no other country created legal and administrative regulations for both recognizing and controlling the Sufi orders (Luizard, 1990: 43-49).

The balance between autonomy and state interference was dramatically changed with the policies of nationalization of the pious endowments (*waqf,* pl. *awqaf*), which guaranteed the economic independence of all religious establishments by the newly independent Arab countries.[3] This measure was intended to put the institutional expressions of Sunni Islam under the control of the state (Bottcher, 1997: 18-19).

However, the nationalistic idea that Sufism was simply a folkloric remnant of the past that would eventually disappear with the modernization of society led to the fact that it was completely overlooked by the legal and bureaucratic apparatus created to control religious activities in Syria. As a result of these religious policies Sufi activities were able to escape from the tight control of religious activities imposed by the Syrian state exactly because they were not legally recognized as religious activities within Sunni Islam. Even in the old *zawiyas,* which fell under state control because they were constituted as *waqfs*, there was little direct control of the Sufi activities.[4] The *shaykhs* of the *zawiyas* under state control continue to be the members of the families that are beneficiaries of the act of foundation of the *waqf*. The Ministry of *Awqaf* pays for the activities of Sufi *shaykhs* as *imams* (prayer leaders) or *khatibs* (preachers), because many of these *zawiyas* also serve as little mosques, but it does not pay for any of their specifically Sufi activities, such as the weekly *hadras.* Sufi religious activities in Syria are always privately sponsored by the *shaykhs* or by their followers.

3. The Dynamics of Confrontation: Sufi Opposition to the Syrian State

The high degree of autonomy that Sufi communities have from state control in Syria allowed them to become centers of resistance to the authoritarian regime that was installed after the conquest of power by the Ba'th party in 1963. Despite the

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3 In Syria this process began in 1949 and took decades to be accomplished. Since 1961 the pious endowments are controlled by the Ministry of the *Awqaf,* which uses their revenues to maintain the religious buildings and to pay stipends to its religious functionaries (Bottcher, 1997: 18-19).

4 The term 'direct control' refers here to an active interference of the state bureaucracy into Sufi activities, such as the one that takes place in the *khutba* (Friday sermon), where preachers generally have to read texts prepared by the Ministry of Awqaf. Of course there are other forms of control of the Sufi activities by the state, such as the presence of agents of the secret police (*mukhabarat*) during the ritual gatherings (*hadras*).

secular institutional framework of the Ba'thist[5] regime, the fact that Hafez al-Asad, who occupied the presidency from 1970 to 2000,[6] was a member of the Alawi sect[7] made the regime to be perceived as sectarian to many Sunni Muslims. In fact Asad's rise to power was accompanied by an overrepresentation of Alawis in key positions of the party and the regime, such as in the security forces[8] (Perthes, 1995: 182-183; Van Dam, 1997: 118-135). The traditional commercial, industrial and agrarian elites were badly affected by the economic measures of the Ba'thist regime—for instance, the nationalization of industries and land reform—and became the main focus of political resistance against it.

The traditional elites had strong social and familial links with various sectors of the Sunni religious establishment, such as the 'Muslim Brotherhood' or Sufi communities, allowing them to capitalize on the discontent against the regime in both religious and political terms (Batatu, 1988: 112-119; Perthes, 1995: 103-104). After the Ba'th regime took repressive measures against the secular political organizations, the Islamic groups became the major force still active in the opposition to the regime. The lack of channels for political expression made Islamic opposition more and more radicalized and led to violent actions against state agents and members of the Alawi community, which were invariably followed by repressive measures taken by the State.

The political and military aspects of the Islamic opposition were capitalized on by the 'Muslim Brothers,' in particular after the unification of all Islamic groups

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5 The Ba'th Party is an Arab nationalist party with socialist inspiration, which was founded by Michel Aflaq, a Christian, and Salah al-Din Bitar, a Sunni Muslim. Two rival branches of this party govern respectively Syria, since 1963, and Iraq, since 1968. For a more detailed analysis of the contemporary Syrian history and politics see Batatu, 1999; Heydemann, 1999; Seale, 1988; Wedeen, 1999.

6 After his death, Hafez al-Asad was succeeded by his son Bashar al-Asad, the current president of Syria. He continued Hafez's policies of gradual economic liberalization, together with the maintenance of the political monopoly of his circle of relatives and allies over the higher levels of the regime.

7 The Alawis are a Shi'i sect that has the 11th imam (descendant of Muhammad) as its last holder of the hidden nature of prophetic message, while the Jafari Shi'is, who are the majority of the Shi'is, recognize twelve imams as their sacred leaders. They equal the figure of Ali with the divine logos and don't follow the ritual "pillars" of Islam, rather centering their worship on *shaykhs* initiated in the secret doctrines of the sect.

8 The military participation of Syria on the side of the Maronites in the Lebanese Civil War in 1976 reinforced the image of the Ba'thist regime as an anti-Sunni sectarian alliance of different religious minorities (Perthes, 1995: 103-104).

that were fighting the regime under an 'Islamic Front'[9] (Abd-Allah, 1983: 190-192). Sufi *shaykhs* had a fundamental role in recruiting members for the 'Islamic Front' by mobilizing their followers to join the fight against (what they perceived as) a political threat to the Muslim community, the *Umma.* The involvement of some Sufi *shaykhs* and their followers in the armed resistance was not ignored by the regime, which targeted prominent Sufi *shaykhs* and sometimes disbanded their communities, as it was in the case of the murder of the *shaykh al-mashaykh* of the Rifa'iyya in Aleppo (De Jong, 1986: 215-216)

This cycle of violence spread throughout Syria, with true massacres happening in Jisr al-Shughur and Aleppo, which culminated in the armed confrontation between the military forces of the Syrian state and the Islamic militants in the city of Hama in 1982. The conflict ended with the military defeat of the 'Islamic Front' and the massacre of around 20,000 civilians in Hama[10] (Abd-Allah, 1983: 192; Batatu, 1988: 129; Seurat, 1989: 15). The tragedy of Hama and its repercussions led to a decline of political Islam as a model for social and political change in Syria (Abd-Allah, 1983: 194-195). It also affected the Sufi communities in Hama and Aleppo, where many Sufi *shaykhs* and their followers took arms and joined the 'Muslim Brothers' in their fight against a state they saw as anti-Islamic. The violence of the confrontation and the subsequent defeat brought the destruction of Sufi *zawiyas* and the death or exile of many Sufi *shaykhs*; such was the case of Abd al-Qader 'Issa, a Shadhili *shaykh* from Aleppo who died in exile in Jordan (De Jong, 1986: 216; Geoffroy, 1997: 17-18).

The result of this conflict was a change in the use of religious identities as a framework for social action. There was a clear shift among the Sunni population from an articulated social and political project, centered on the conquest of the state, towards the intensification of public display of individual signs of piety and religiosity, such as mosque attendance or veiling, as an individual practice. This new social movement, which has strong connections to Sufism, also aims at the creation of an Islamic society as the cumulative result of the moral reform of each individual, instead of proposing a social reform imposed by an Islamic state. In this sense, it is possible to say that the state faded in importance as a goal in the Islamic discourse

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9 The 'Islamic Front' was founded in 1980, assembling all the Islamic groups that were fighting the Ba'thist regime in Syria (Abd-Allah, 1983: 114).

10 The actual number of victims is unknown, but 20,000 seems a credible estimate, as several neighborhoods of Hama were totally destroyed by the military attack.

in Syria. This matched well with the Sufi emphasis on individual responsibility and morality as the path towards a "real" Islamic community.

4. Co-optation and Compromise: Sufism and the State in the Aftermath of Hama

After the disaster that marked the confrontation with the 'Islamic Front,' the Ba'thist regime changed its policy towards the role of Islam in social life, shifting from confrontational secularizing measures towards an accommodating relationship in which certain forms of Islam were discreetly sponsored and others were repressed or tightly controlled. The best example of this policy is the Kuftariyya, a branch of the Naqshbandi Sufi order lead by *shaykh* Ahmed Kuftaru, the Mufti of Syria (Habash, 1996). The Kuftariyya has a strong presence among popular and middle class strata of Damascus, as well as among the new bourgeoisie that developed from economical privileges acquired through personal ties with the state apparatus.[11] This order preaches a form of Sufism very centered on individual morality and on the public legitimization of the regime (Bottcher, 1998: 128-138). Despite its connections with the state, the Kuftariyya has limited success outside Damascus as it does not have mechanisms to control religious or institutionally local *zawiyas* affiliated with other forms of Sufism, even within the Naqshbandi order.

Nevertheless, the regime's greater tolerance of public expressions of Islamic identities also allowed the integration of Sufi *shaykhs* into the clientelistic apparatus of the state. It is not uncommon for Sufi *shaykhs* to have connections with state institutions, in particular with the secret police (*mukhabarat*), which were vaguely known both inside and outside the community of their followers. These relations included the exchange of favors and information and were reflected in various forms of social privileges—for example, a cooperative *shaykh* could easily receive permission to build a *zawiya* or a mosque on state land. This exchange of favors connected the local Sufi communities to the networks of clientelism, allowing selected fractions of social groups to have access to state resources and at the same time co-opting them as supporters of the political and social projects of the Ba'thist regime. Volker Perthes lucidly points out that the regime promotes clientelistic arrangements with different groups because it needs a broad social base from which it can draw support and resources (Perthes, 1995: 188). His description of the position of

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11 On the origins of the "new bourgeoisie" see Seurat, 1980: 124-128.

the village notable in this network could be easily applied to some Sufi *shaykhs,* who also "comply with the demands of the government and regime, and participate in the organizational structure that the state and regime provide" (Perthes, 1995: 189). In the blurring of the borders between state and society through the building of clientelistic networks Perthes sees a sign of the growing grip that the state apparatus has on civil society.

However, this is not necessarily true in the case of Sufi communities. The authority of the Sufi *shaykh* depends on his capacity to lead his followers towards a mystical transformation that will take them beyond the limits of ordinary existence. Therefore, he must also show that his authority is superior to any source of earthly power, including the state. The complete submission to the logic of state patronage would harm the legitimacy of the *shaykh*'s authority in the eyes of his followers—despite all the material, social and political gains that could result from it—for it would reveal the socio-political origins of his power. Therefore, the compromise achieved between the *shaykh* and the state apparatus must allow both parts to be satisfied, yet the *shaykh* and his followers must remain distinct and above the logic of overt submission and control that organizes the webs of clientelism connecting different fractions of Syrian society with the structures of the authoritarian state. This means that any action from the state apparatus that discloses a subordinate relationship or challenge the religious and social privileged position of the *shaykh* or his community can break this rather fragile alliance.

Indeed, protests and public demonstrations done by the *shaykhs* and their followers against specific state policies or actions do eventually happen. These confrontations end in most cases with a compromise by the state authorities. The political and social power of the Sufi *shaykh* is particularly strong in popular areas of Aleppo, where they act as local leaders who regularly and effectively dispense justice and mediate conflicts beyond the limits of their religious communities. Despite their limited and pragmatic character, these protests remind the state that a general mobilization is always possible if its policies become perceived as a threat to society or, even better, to the religious community as such, putting limits on its capacity on intervention in social life.

5. Conclusion

On the basis of what was exposed above, it can be said that Sufi communities have an important social and political role in contemporary Syria, since they are one of

the few public social institutions that can have a large degree of autonomy from the state. While many Sufi *shaykhs* were co-opted into the state clientelistic networks, the performative nature of their authority over the Sufi communities creates clear limits to their subordination to the state logic. Their collaboration can easily be transformed into open rebellion if the boundaries of the Sufi communities are not respected by the state. This brief overview of the relations between Sufi communities and the state shows the importance of understanding the internal functioning of religious communities in the Middle East if one is to appreciate their social and political dynamics, which always escape static classifications into one or other form of political pattern.

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