

Violence of Non-Violence
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Sufism and Anti-Colonial Violent Resistance Movements: The Qadiriyya and Sanussi Orders in Algeria and Libya

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Abstract: In this article, I examine the role of Sufism (and Sufi leaders) as they relate to anti-colonial political and military resistance movements. Sufism is often viewed as a non-violent and non-political branch of Islam. However, I argue that there are many historical examples to illustrate the presence of anti-colonialist Sufi military movements throughout the “Muslim World,” and I give particular attention to the cases of ‘Abd al-Qadir of the Qadiriyya movement and his anti-colonialist rebellion against France in Algeria in the 1800s, as well as that of Italian colonialism in Libya and the military response by the Sanussi order. Thus, while Sufism clearly has various teachings and principles that could be interpreted to promote non-violence, Sufi political movements have also developed as a response to colonialism and imperialism, and thus, one should not automatically assume a necessary separation from Sufism and notions of military resistance.

Keywords: Sufism; North Africa; Middle East; Colonialism; Jihad; Resistance Movements

Introduction

In recent years (and arguably more so since the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the United States), there have been extensive discussions about the relationship of religion and violence in the academic and policy literatures, as well as in the media. And while this question of religion and violence has been asked within the context of many different faith systems, it seems that the question has been more heavily proposed with regards to Islamic traditions. The media seem to be focused rather extensively on Islam, Islamic law, and Islamic communities and societies in their attempts to understand religiously motivated violence, even while often ignoring questions about socio-economic issues, as well as violence with relation to Western imperialism, neo-imperialism, policies that support authoritarian allies (at the expense of human rights), or foreign interventions for what has been viewed as non-justified reasons (e.g. the 2003 Iraq War). Instead of discussing these various potential causes of violence, rather, the framing has often surrounded Islamic religious teachings and their relationship to violent behavior.

And thus, despite the nuances of what leads one to commit acts of violence, many have been quick to place blame on Islam as a religion for such violent actions. In fact, many often have criticized the faith, arguing that somehow the religion itself is much more violent than other religious traditions, and/or other cultures in the world today. Sadly, it seems that almost anytime there is a violent event that involves a Muslim such as the U.S 9/11, some are quick to point to the religion itself as the problem, without investigating the whole set of possible causes or motivating factors for the said action. Thus, Islam has been presented by

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many in the media as a violent faith, as well as a religion that is incompatible with ideas of human rights and democratic political systems.

Related to this, it is often the case that when a terror attack in the name of Islam takes place, a number of pundits are quick to ask “where are the moderates?” almost without missing a beat.¹ Such responses have not only become quite predictable, but these sorts of statements show how some are unwilling (or unable) to actually research and find repeated statements by Muslim scholars, activists, and community members condemning the very same attacks. In fact, in relation to the recent attack at the Charlie Hebdo office in Paris, France, pundits were bringing up the statement about Muslim moderates and the condemning of terrorism once again. These sorts of questions led Islamic scholar Reza Aslan to state that if someone doesn’t know that moderate voices exist in the Muslim community, then that person “doesn’t own Google”.²

Yet, sadly, this anti-Islamist discourse has been prevalent throughout the recent years, and continues to be so. However, what has also been noticed in the media, and among some who want to oversimplify Islamic communities and understandings, is the idea that there is one particular “saving grace” within the Islamic faith with regards to teachings of peace. Now, of course Islam has within it numerous references to peace and acceptance. But in recent years, many individuals have begun to argue that Sufism (or “mystical Islam”) is an element of the faith that always denounces violence and speaks only of peace. In many cases, the arguments extend to suggest that Sufis themselves are apolitical and friendly towards the West. This sort of narrative has been used by those in the West as well as by leaders in Muslim majority societies, even though this framing simplifies a rather complicated discourse on ideas of violence, and the relationship between religion, politics, and economics with notions of conflict. With regards to Islam, the argument by some has been that if one only follow or promote Sufism, acts of violence would be mitigated, and/or Sufism itself is not a threat to the state or to society. For example, in Morocco, the King Mohammed VI has continued to advocate Sufism, which he saw as less of a threat to his regime. And in Libya, Muammar Qaddafi espoused Sufism as a contract to Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. And even in the United States, when the Park 51 Mosque was being built, then New York Governor David Patterson, in responding to those concerned about the mosque construction, was quoted as saying “[t]his group who has put this mosque together, they are known as the Sufi Muslims. This is not like the Shiites... They’re almost like a hybrid, almost westernized. They are not really what I would classify in the sort of mainland Muslim practice”.³

Now, this is not to say that Sufism itself does not have teachings that are clearly supportive of ideas of human rights, as well as other ideas of peace and acceptance. In fact, I argue that while there are clearly elements of Sufism that promote human rights, peace, etc...,⁴ those very same characteristics are also quite prevalent in non-Sufi Muslim interpretations of the faith. In fact, Islam has a rich history of peace and non-violent movements.⁵ And there are many examples within Sufism and the Sufi tradition that further established this notion of non-violence. But along with the point that these qualities exist throughout various branches or elements of the faith, it is also important to note that this idea that Sufism – and Sufism alone in Islam – has the ability to contribute to peaceful movements is often perpetuated by leaders who are looking to work with Sufi leaders, all the while minimizing other Islamist movements.⁶ And while some of their motivations for such arguments are attempts to eliminate extremism in their respective states, other motivations are political. For instance, by sponsoring Sufism, state leaders strive to minimize the influence of other non-violent (and often politically popular) Islamist parties in civil society.⁷ What I argue in this article is that there are many historical cases which show that Sufi leaders (and Sufi orders), who are seen as peace-makers, have in fact been quite active in military campaigns. Again, this in no way suggests that Sufism lends itself to violence, but rather, that faced with oppression and colonialism by forces such

1 Cf. Schneider, “Why don’t more.”

2 Conner, “Reza Aslan.”

3 Safi, “Good Sufi.”

4 Muedini, “Examining Islam.”

5 Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peacebuilding*.

6 Muedini, “The Promotion.”

7 Muedini, *Sponsoring Sufism*.

as those of France, Britain, Italy, etc., in the 1800s and early 1900s, Sufi leaders and groups used military approaches to defend themselves against these occupying powers.

Thus, in this article, I briefly discuss the nature of Sufism and then historical examples of Sufi groups willing to use violence for self-defense, most notably against colonialist powers. Primary attention will be on Sufi military movements in Algeria and Libya in the 1800s and early 1900s. As I shall argue, the popular view of nonviolent Sufism had spiritual, political, social, and economic influence on these different anti-colonialist movements. For these reasons, the anti-colonialist leaders in Algeria and Libya were shaped by Sufism, and used their Sufi influence to help wage military jihad against the French and Italian colonial forces.

What is Sufism?

Sufism is best understood as the “mystical branch” of Islam. Sufism has a long tradition in Islam, and throughout the centuries different Sufi communities have provided extensive contributions to Islamic thought. It is often difficult to define Sufism given the different communities assigned to this term. As Elias argues, “Sufism is one of the most dynamic and interesting dimensions of Islamic religious and cultural expression.”⁸ It is an umbrella term for a variety of philosophical, social, and literary phenomena occurring within the Islamic world. In its narrowest sense, the term “Sufism” refers to a number of schools of Islamic mystical philosophy and theology.”⁹

One reason that Sufism has often been portrayed as non-violent (and non-political) is Sufism’s historical emphasis on asceticism. Many early Sufis questioned whether one could simultaneously focus on an immediate and direct relationship with God, and still be involved in the affairs of the material world (Heck, 2007). Thus, many early Sufi ascetics devoted their entire life solely to God, all the while removing themselves from the affairs of their society. But there are also many examples in history where Sufis, whether Sufi sheikhs or Sufi adherents, would devote their life to reaching God on Earth, but did so while still very much involved in their respective communities. As Paul Heck explains,

Given its role as divine agent, sainthood in Islam cannot be characterized by moral apathy. In other words, the mystical experience nurtured by Islam did not lead to the conclusion that the world was an illusion and action in it senseless. An early architect of Sufism, al-Junayd (d. 910), offered an expansive interpretation of the oneness of God affirmed by the Quran. It did not mean simply that there were no other gods but God, but rather that here was nothing else but God. It was thus with Sufism that Islam was given a deeper understanding of the world. While true that Sufism has the tendency to view this world as source of temptation and thus to be renounced, also as ephemeral existence and thus to be endured until death, it is no less true that at a more fundamental level Sufism views the world as a manifestation of the divine, creation as a mirror in which the supreme jewel of divinity— in echo of a canonical hadith – could be reflected and thus known.¹⁰

Thus, Sufis throughout the centuries have viewed Islam and their relationship with God differently. Sufis not only debated the role of asceticism, materialism, and *Shariah*, but as I shall argue, many Sufis also became involved in political (and anti-colonial military) campaigns as a way to not only get closer to God, but also to emphasize the importance of notions of justice in Islam. And thus, given this complexity of Sufism has led scholars such as Heck to say that

There are so many sides to Sufism that it is difficult to get a handle on it all. For example, although focused on other-worldly sanctity, Sufism has had important socio-political dimensions. The saints of Islam have been both counselors and challengers of sultans, at times extending their blessing to legitimate rule and at other times asserting their spiritual authority over the temporal powers of the day.¹¹

⁸ Elias, “Sufism.”

⁹ Ibid, 595.

¹⁰ Heck, *Sufism and Politics*, 255.

¹¹ Heck, “Sufism – What is it exactly?”, 150.

Sufism and Anti-Colonialist and Anti-Imperialist Resistance Movements

Having illustrated some of the problems with trying to define Sufism as a non-violent and non-political tradition, I now want to focus on historical examples where Sufi movements used force to challenge colonial powers. When looking at this history of colonialism in Muslim-majority states, one finds multiple examples of Sufism and Sufi orders as centers of political and military resistance movements. Speaking on this issue, Heck states that “Networks of Sufism (*turuq*, sing. *tariqa*) took the lead in resisting European colonial powers in the nineteenth century, for example in North Africa against the French and in the North Caucasus against the Russians. Some networks resisted post-colonial states that aggressively sought to secularise local society, for example in the early years of the Turkish Republic and in pre-1982 Syria.”¹² And in the case of Algeria, as I shall discuss more below, ‘Abd al-Qadir, the leader of the Qadiriyya Sufi order, embarked upon a rebellion against French colonialism, where, before his defeat, he was able to control significant parts of the country against the outside invaders. However, there were actually many Sufi orders quite active in fighting colonial powers in North Africa. Another such order was in the Sudan with ‘Umar b. Sa’id al-Futi (c. 1796-1864) and the Tijaniyya Sufi order.¹³ Sufi orders often are led by a shaykh, and then under the Shaykh are adherents of the Sufi order. The orders differ both on the leadership, as well as who founded the order. Different Sufi orders may also have different practices such as dhikr (remembrance) techniques and/or ceremonies. The difference of these orders is based on who founded them, whether it was Abdul-Qadir Gilani (of the Qadiriyyah order), Baha ud Din al-Naqshband al-Bukhari (of the Naqshbandiyyah order), or Ahmad al-Tijani of the Tijanniya order.

Despite the examples from North Africa, the role of Sufi military actions against colonialism was not limited to the Middle East and the Maghreb. Sufi anti-colonial rebellion movements were also quite prevalent in South East Asia. For example, Sufi orders fought against the British in the region. And while some of the movements were non-military political movements (such as the case with Shari’atullah (d. 1840) and his son Dudu Miyan (d. 1862), others, such as the anti-colonialist movement of Titu Mir (d. 1831), used violence against the British. Additionally, it has been documented that

A second focus of militant jihad in this period was on the northwestern frontier in opposition to the Sikh warrior state that was deemed oppressive of Muslims. Its leader, Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi (1786–1831), was part of the circle of Shah ‘Abdul Aziz (1746–1823), who was the distinguished son of Shah Waliullah and himself a great scholar of hadith and a charismatic guide to many disciples. Shah ‘Abdul Aziz’s *fatawa* defining India as *darul harb*, a site of war, has been taken by later anticolonial nationalists as evidence that the jihad was launched against the British. In fact, Shah ‘Abdul Aziz had cordial relations with East India Company officials posted in Delhi, and he intended his *fatawa* to give guidance in relation to practical matters, such as interest rates, that were different in a context of *darul harb*. He did not regard militancy against British power as legitimate given that Muslims were free to practice their religious rituals in British territories.¹⁴

Barelwi wanted to focus on Sufi and Islamic teaching and reform, but he also “undertook his militant campaign in the state-building spirit of the times, hoping to carve out a place of correct and unhampered Muslim rule and practice.”¹⁵ And, in Daghestan, Sufi leader Shamil (d. 1871) fought against Russian forces. Shamil himself was tied to the Naqshbandi, another Sufi order, although there is controversy with regards to how much Sufism played a role in Shamil’s political authority.¹⁶

However, for the purposes of this article, the majority of attention with regards to Sufism and military resistance will center on ‘Abd al-Qadir’s resistance against French forces in Algeria beginning in the early 1830s, as well as Italy’s colonization of Libya in the early 1900s, and the Sufi Sanussi response to

¹² Heck, “The Politics”, 13. One could even go back to early formations of some Sufi orders to see individuals’ roles in military actions and campaigns. For example, in the case of the Bektashiyya Sufi order, the founder of the movement, Hajji Bekhtash (d. ca. 669/1270) was active in the Baba’i rebellion that occurred in 639/1240 (Elias, 1998: 604).

¹³ Abun-Nasr, *Muslim Communities*.

¹⁴ Masud, “The World.” Cf. Metcalf, “A Historical Overview,” 21.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Kemper, “The Changing.”

this invasion. As I shall argue, in both Algeria under ‘Abd al-Qadir as well as in Libya under the Sanussi Sufi order, these groups mounted consistent (and rather effective) military campaigns against outside aggression, with the hopes of not only preventing France and Italy respectively from controlling the politics and social affairs of Algeria and Libya, but also with the goal that their orders and leaders (in Algeria, ‘Abd al-Qadir of the Qadiriyya order and in Libya, the Sanussi order) would have political power as rulers of territory in those states.

Sufi Orders and Violence: A Case Study of ‘Abd al-Qadir, the Qadiriyya Order and Rebellion

In 1830, France embarked upon what turned out to be one of the longest periods of colonization in North Africa. Following Napoleon’s initial interest in Egypt in the late 1700s, the French government under Charles X began their occupation of Algeria in 1830. The French government wanted to gain additional territory and influence in North Africa, was interested in countering British power on the Mediterranean and in Egypt, and also aspired to police activities on the coast of the Mediterranean. The French government embarked upon an extensive campaign of discrimination against the Algerians, one that lasted for multiple decades, with Algeria declaring independence in 1962. During this time period, French authorities were taking land from locals and establishing their control over Algeria, without regards to the rights of those living in the region. This included employment discrimination, control over the judiciary, as well as other humanitarian rights abuses of Algerians. Furthermore, they greatly controlled economic and political aspects of Algerian life, repressing Algerians through economic policies, as well as through colonized governance structures.¹⁷

It was within this context of colonialism and rights violations committed by the French that almost immediately following their invasion in Algeria, local anti-colonial movements formed to fight French activity. And arguably, none was stronger than that led by Sufi *shaykh* ‘Abd al-Qadir and the Qadiriyya Sufi order. ‘Abd al-Qadir was born in the year 1806, near the city of Maskara. Under his father Mohy-ud-Din, Abd-al-Qadir studied a variety of subjects that included philosophy, religion, as well as poetry¹⁸ (Rishad, 1960). ‘Abd al-Qadir headed the Qadiriyya Sufi order in Algeria and also maintained membership in the Naqshbandiyya and Akhbariyyah orders.¹⁹

His family ties to Sufi orders extended to his grandfather, who, following his initiation in a Sufi order, established a *zawiya* (an Islamic religious school) in 1791 in Algeria.²⁰ It is believed that “[i]n 1825 ‘Abd al-Qadir travelled with his father to the Mashriq with the aim of visiting the shrine of the Qadiriyya’s founder in Baghdad.”²¹ Furthermore, following a pilgrimage to Mecca, and a visit to Medina, they also went to Damascus, before Baghdad. It was at this time that “they met *Shaykh* Khalid, the founder of the revivalist Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya brotherhood... who had settled in the city some two years earlier.”²²

With the French forces in Algeria, groups in Algeria were looking for help in fighting the colonialists. They first asked ‘Abd al-Qadir’s father. However, given his lack of strength late in life, he was unable to lead a rebellion and suggested that ‘Abd al-Qadir be the one to take on this task.²³ It was in 1832 that ‘Abd al-Qadir united a number of various tribes and other forces for a military rebellion campaign against the French. In November of that year he was chosen to lead the military *jihad* in Algeria. Following this he was able to organize a wide of range of forces into a “union of defense” against the French. In addition, ‘Abd al-Qadir also established an advisory council, as well as minister positions in his political structure.²⁴

‘Abd al-Qadir began advocating for the importance of military defense against the French, relying on

¹⁷ Franz Fanon (1959) discussed some of the rights abuses in Algeria Unveiled.

¹⁸ Rishad, “Emir Abd-Al-Qadir.”

¹⁹ Neusner, *God’s Rule*.

²⁰ Abun-Naser, *Muslim Communities*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. It was believed that he greatly admired Shaykh Khalid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Rashid, “Emir Abd-Al-Qadir,” 118.

the Islamic concept of *jihad*. The notion of jihad was to advocate for the protection of the individuals from outside aggression and injustice. This notion of justice is an important element of Islam and Sufism. It was not long before he controlled much of the region around Oran. Because of his military successes, the French government had to accept ‘Abd al-Qadir’s state in 1834, although they unsuccessfully attempted to defeat him into the mid-1830s.²⁵ After more years of fighting and failures by France to capture or end ‘Abd al-Qadir and his resistance, in 1837 the French government agreed to a treaty which gave ‘Abd al-Qadir extensive control over Tittery, Oran, as well as the Algiers provinces, which, as a whole, encompassed nearly 2/3rds of Algeria.²⁶ This agreement was beneficial for ‘Abd al-Qadir, since

the agreements contained the French presence to coastal enclaves around Algiers and Oran, and appeared to give him freedom of action across most of the country as well as effective control of foreign trade and access to arms supplies. These diplomatic successes were achieved in a context of military stalemate, in which the Algerians could not defeat French armies in pitched battle or secure cities against them, but the French could not maintain their own over-extended positions against the Algerians’ mobile guerilla forces.²⁷

As mentioned, the reason that ‘Abd al-Qadir himself continued to receive support for his fight against the French during these years, and how he was able to ultimately gain various territorial and political concessions from France was in part through his use of military *jihad* in Algeria. In fact, as Brower explains, the concept of *jihad* was useful for ‘Abd al-Qadir

to strengthen his authority Algerians, who were as diverse and jealous of their autonomy as they were unsure of the best strategy to oppose the French occupation. Jihad legitimized his state-building effort in particular, giving it a privileged status within shared Islamic norms. Moreover, jihad helped resolve matters of leadership and legitimacy in the amir’s favor, providing the tools he needed to forged political loyalties and assert his hegemony among Algeria’s notables. Finally, jihad served the important function of defining relations between ‘Abd al-Qadir and the Ottoman leaders remaining in Algeria like Ahmed Bey of Constantine (‘Ahmad ibn Muhammad Sharif, 1784-1850) by stressing that ‘Abd al-Qadir’s struggle was not to restore the Sublime Porte’s control.²⁸

And because of this usefulness of *jihad*, ‘Abd al-Qadir continued to operate his military campaign around this concept. The idea of justice, and of fighting against aggressors who were looking to colonize the Algerians was a continue message throughout the military campaign, and thus, was one that Sufis (as well as others) used for violent, as well as non-violent struggles against colonialism. In addition, he looked to Islamic scholars throughout the region for *fatwas* or religious rulings backing his calls for Algerians who were in French controlled parts of the country to help him fight against the colonialists.²⁹ ‘Abd al-Qadir even looked to neighboring religious leaders for *fatwas* or Islamic legal rulings on the issue of justifying actions against those who were working with the French government. For example, a few years into the military conflict with the French, ‘Abd al-Qadir sent an envoy with an expensive gift to ‘Abd al-Rahman, the sultan of Morocco, requesting a *fatwa* from the *ulema* of Fez.³⁰ Not only this, but he also went to seek Islamic rulings (from scholars and spiritual leaders) to challenge anyone who was willing to make political deals with France.³¹

Ideals of Islam, Sufism, and more specifically the notion of a military *jihad* continued to be effective motivations for ‘Abd al-Qadir in his fight against French forces. First, *jihad* was a beneficial categorization

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ McDougall, “Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri,” 2.

²⁸ Brower, “The Amir ‘Abd Al-Qadir,” 178.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Reiter, *War*, 158.

³¹ Brower, “The Amir ‘Abd Al-Qadir”. Interestingly, many of the Sufi *shaykhs* and other Islamic leaders did not back ‘Abd al-Qadir. In fact, “[a]mong the influential Sufi *shaykhs*, only the *shaykh* of the Rahmaniyya in the Kabylia region endorsed his authority” (Ghurab, “Al-Tariqa al-Rahmaniyya”, quoted in Abun-Nasr, *Muslim Communities*). And since “the *shaykhs* of the Tijaniyya openly opposed him, he attacked and captured the main centre of this brotherhood in ‘Ayn Madi in 1839” (Abun-Nasr, *Muslim Communities*).

for the fighters; without this label, there existed a concern that the French (or others) might try to define the fighters as rebels or unbelievers, instead of holy warriors against elements counter to Islam. In addition, this idea of *jihad* as a military and state-tied idea “served as a powerful ideological tool, theologizing what were in fact historical processes of state centralization. In this sense, the sharifian monarchy’s jihad represented an example of a good war. It relied on positive images of war and deployed shared norms and idioms about war towards separate political ends.”³² However, this is not to suggest that ‘Abd al-Qadir always favored military war, as there is evidence to suggest the contrary.³³ However, what we do know is that he did use violence against the French colonialists.

But despite ‘Abd al-Qadir’s ability to establish political power that was separate from French colonialism, it was not to last. The French continued their attacks on ‘Abd al-Qadir throughout the late 1830s and early 1840s, looking to fully eliminate his power in Algeria. The French military increased troop presence in the country, and in 1843, pushed ‘Abd al-Qadir out of Algeria and into northern Morocco.³⁴ French forces then attacked Morocco with the objective of defeating ‘Abd al-Qadir and his forces. And, in 1847, ‘Abd al-Qadir went back to Algeria to surrender. Following his arrest, he spent much of the remainder of his life writing on issues of Sufism, the Quran and the Hadith, as well as writing poetry.³⁵

It was during this time that ‘Abd al-Qadir drew more from the teachings of the famous Sufi thinker Muhyi al-Din Ibn Arabi, who was instrumental in advancing, among other ideas, the notion of “Unity of Being.” Not surprisingly, ‘Abd al-Qadir based his understanding of Islam, the Quran, and Hadith on ideas of Sufism. As Itzhak Weismann explains,

The Sufis of our path, [‘Abd al-Qadir] states, neither revoke the literal meaning of the scriptures, nor do they maintain that their interpretation is the only valid one. Yet, while confirming the literal meaning of the scriptures, they also find in them additional inner meanings. This is supported by the prophetic traditions which testify to the many faces of the Quran, by the Sufi experience, and by reason. As the word of God corresponds to His all-encompassing knowledge, He may mean by His words not only what the scholarly and the Sufi commentators understood them to be, but also that which did not even cross their minds. Hence, a man may, by means of a mystical revelation, generate a new interpretation of a verse or a tradition, to which no one else had previously been guided.³⁶

And ‘Abd al-Qadir continued to view the world and reality along the lines of Sufi thought similar to that of Ibn Arabi³⁷ (who advocated a notion of oneness of God and reality, whereas all things are a reflection of God). Thus, whether it was during his time as the leader of the Qadiriyya movement, or afterwards, the role of Sufism was clearly a strong element in the life of the Algerian resistance leader.

Sufism and Anti-Colonialism in Libya

As we see with Algeria, Sufis have used violence to fight off colonizers. However, Algeria was not the only case in which Sufi orders took up the use of violence—military defensive campaigns against foreign oppressors. As mentioned above, Sufi anti-colonial movements were quite prominent throughout parts of North Africa. One of the other clear examples of Sufi orders involved in military campaigns is in relation to Italian colonialism in Libya. In the late 1800s Italy, who up to this time had engaged in relatively little colonial activity in Africa, was looking to increase its territorial control in North Africa. Libya was one place in which it would be able to establish a presence.

There were many reasons why Italy was interested in Libya. The Italian government, recently unified, was looking for ways to help bring its civil society together. For many in the state, colonial movement under an Italian banner was one way to establish this. In addition, they saw other states expanding their

³² Ibid, 180.

³³ Brower, “The Amir ‘Abd Al-Qadir.”

³⁴ McDougall, “Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri.”

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Wiseman, “God and The Perfect Man”, 60.

³⁷ Ibid.

influences in Africa and elsewhere, and they also were hoping for similar outcomes. Furthermore, because of Libya's historical link to ancient Rome, the Italian government felt that Libya would be an easy sell to the Italian public, and also that leaders could promise land and resources to Italians looking to migrate.³⁸ Another reason that Libya was of interest to Italy was because of the lack of interest in the territory by others. Thus, "Italy had to take what the other nations of Europe did not want, the territories finally acquired by Italy have been described as the least desirous of all the colonial lands, possessing few resources and a sources for raw material needed for a modern industrial state."³⁹ However, despite Italy's desire to control Libya, its attempt to colonize the region was not without a great deal of resistance. It had to face organization and military activity by the Ottoman Empire, who had loose control over some of the northern cities. But one of the most organized and successful campaigns defending Libya from Italian occupation was the Sanussi Sufi brotherhood.

The Sanussi Order

The Sanussi order in Libya began in the Libyan city of Cyrenaica by an individual named Sayyid Muhammad Ibn Ali al-Sanusi in the year 1842. This group was based on Sufism, as well as on the idea that the Islamic community should live according to the way the Prophet Muhammad lived in Arabia in the 600s (a.c.e.).⁴⁰ Following the establishment of the order, the Sanussi movement began to gain popularity in Cyrenaica and other parts of Libya rather quickly. Much of this can be contributed to their involvement in society; the Sanussi order was active in providing places of rest for those who were travelling through on business, or for religious pilgrimage.⁴¹ And their influence spread quite rapidly, not only in Libya, but in parts of Senegal as well.⁴² Much of this rising power can be attributed to the Sanussi order playing a central role in providing religious and other types of support for others in the community.

While many of their teachings and beliefs were centered on Sufism, one cannot look at this order as merely a religious movement, but rather, also a political movement. In fact, the Sanussi order had a history of fighting colonialism. For example, the group was active during the Ottoman influence in the country. As they rose in influence, they were able to extend their power with regards to matters of law and trade in the region. But it was during the Italian occupation of Libya that the Sanussi order became much more involved as a military challenge to the colonial regime.

The Sanussi Sufi order was very active in fighting Italian presence in Libya. In fact, historians refer to the Sanussi campaigns against the Italians as the First Italo-Sanussi war (1911-1917), and the Second Italo-Sanussi war (1923-1931). These wars occurred during a time of many political upheavals within the Ottoman Empire. For example, pro-democratic movements such as the Young Turks were active. However, the leaders of the Sanussi order decided to work with the Ottoman Empire under pan-Islamic philosophy. Working together, the Ottoman Empire and "[t]he Sanusi Chief al-Sharif (grandson of the Founder) against the advice of his councilors made the decision to throw the Order into the struggle and in essence transform the trade-oriented organization into a guerrilla force".⁴³ And while Italy made a deal with the Ottoman Empire in 1912, the Sanussi order continued its fighting against Italy for a number of years to follow.

The Ottoman Empire's influence and fight against Italy was weakened during their 1912 agreement with Italy, where Italy was to control Libya. However, this did not prevent them (the Ottoman Empire) from helping the Sanussi order. For example, Sanussi leader "Al-Sharif met with Enver Bey (Ottoman official and Army Leader) who supplied him with arms and supplies before departing [Libya], and then declared *jihad* against the Italians in 1913—he could afford to do this as the Sanussi possessed integrated social, economic,

³⁸ St. John, *Libya*.

³⁹ Raza, "Italian Colonisation", 90. Cf. Rudin, "Italy in North Africa", 222.

⁴⁰ Cleveland & Bunton, *A History*.

⁴¹ St. John, *Libya*.

⁴² Raza, "Italian Colonisation."

⁴³ *Ibid*, 102.

and religious institutions.”⁴⁴ And thus, the Sanussi order was not only the key local fighting force against the Italians, but they carried on their defensive campaign under a flag of Islam and a holy war against outside forces. In 1913 the Sanussi order began an all out fight against Italian forces.

One of the first places where this happened was during the battle of Sidi Qurba in 1913. While Italy was militarily victorious, the battle nonetheless established al-Sharif’s position as the central leader against Italian colonialism. Following this battle, the Sanussi order (along with the support of the Ottoman Empire and other local groups) fought the Italian military at Cyrenaica, as well as Derna (in northeast Libya). In fact, it was during this fighting that “[t]he Sanusi with their well-integrated socio-political system managed to mobilise and keep the Italian armies inside the coastal towns of Cyrenaica (in comparison the Tripolitarians resisted the army only until 1913, plagued by a lack of armies and supplies, resulting in the occupation of Jabal and the exile of key leaders in the resistance along with 3,000 fighters escaping to Tunisia).”⁴⁵

From 1914 onwards, with Italy joining Britain and France in World War I, these allies worked to fight the Ottoman Empire and in turn the Sanussi order. However, as Britain was gaining military victories against the Ottoman Empire and the Sanussi order in Libya, Muhammad Idris Sanussi led a movement within the Sanussi order that was willing to work to establish a treaty with Britain and Italy. The Italian government, because of the difficulty in defeating the Sanussi order militarily, and with a leader willing to negotiate politically, was open to the idea of a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Libya.⁴⁶ In fact, in the case of Libya, the Italian government recognized the Sanussi power; it was only later in the early 1920s that with new Italian leadership did the position towards the Sanussi political influence change. Thus, whether it was in Algeria or Libya, the Sufi military campaigns did lead to colonial recognition of their political and military authority.

It was the culmination of years of fighting in the early 1900s — through a declared *jihad* or military struggle — that the Sanussi order was able to make an agreement with the Italian leadership over political and military in Cyrenaica in 1916 and 1917.⁴⁷ In fact, the Sanussi order, through its military resistance, was able to establish partial authority in Libya. Through the 1916 Accord of al-Zuwaytina, and the 1917 Accord of al-Akramah, the conflict between Italy and the resistance (led by the Sanussi order) came to an end. These documents stipulated that the Sanussi order under Muahmmad Idris Sanussi would be given autonomy over Cyrenaica and other inland parts of Libya, their lands would not be taxed by Italy, and they would get monthly payments from the Italian government in exchange for them to put down their weapons.⁴⁸ In the 1920 Accord of al-Rajma, the agreement “granted Idris, a ceremonial title of Emir — under this agreement Idris was paid a monthly stipend of 63,000 lire every month, the Italians agreed to pay for the policing and administration of the regions under Sanusi control, as well as 300,000 lire in gold.”⁴⁹ Thus, from 1917-1923, leaders of the Sanussi order, as well as the Italian colonialists, both had a government in Cyrenaica. This was viewed as a victory for many who wanted local political control of Libya.

But while the Italian leadership allowed the Sanussi order to have political power during this time period, the rise of the Italian fascist party changed Italy’s position on dual rule; following 1923, the Sanussi order was suppressed, and Italy fully colonized Libya.⁵⁰ As mentioned, given the levels of oppression and the many deaths committed by Italy against Libyans, there were many within the Sanussi order that continued to organize resistance forces against Italy.

One of the most known Sufi educated leaders within the Sanussi order was Omar al-Mukhtar. Al-Mukhtar was able to lead “small, mobile groups called *muhafiziya* (or *dors*)” against Italian forces. He was involved in protecting Libya through military defense as early as 1912, but continued to resist against the aggression even after the agreement with the Sanussi order; Al-Mukhtar and his fighters often used guerilla warfare to attack Italian troops on terrain that they were not familiar with, thus achieving various military

⁴⁴ Anderson, “Nineteenth-century reform”, quoted in Raza, “Italian Colonisation,” 105.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 107.

⁴⁶ Raza, “Italian Colonisation.”

⁴⁷ St. John, *Libya*.

⁴⁸ Ahmida, “The making”, 122, quoted in Raza, “Italian Colonisation.”

⁴⁹ Anderson, “Nineteenth-century reform”, 208, quoted in Raza, “Italian Colonisation,” 111.

⁵⁰ Paoletti, “Libyat.”

successes.⁵¹ However, as St. John points out, the Italian leadership in Libya carried out a number of human rights violations (such as genocide and torture) against Libyans.⁵² But despite the Italian actions to quell the Sufi order, the Sanussi movement did not leave quietly, but, rather, continued to engage upon a military struggle against Italy. For example, according to Atallah Bogdan Kopanski (1993),

In 1930, several heroic *shaykhs* of the militant wing of the Sanussiyyah declared a total *jihad* against the Italian occupation. ‘Umar Mukhtar was a leading figure among *ghazis* like Salih Lataywish, ‘Abd al-Hamid al-‘Abbar, Saffat and Muhammad ibn Farwah, Husayn al-Juwayfi, Ibrahim al-Fallah, Fadil al-Mahashash, Qtayt ibn Musa, Yusuf ibn Rahil, Khalid al-Humri, Sharif al-Maylud, ‘Abd al-Qadir Farkash, Fadil ibn ‘Umar, ‘Salih al- ‘Awwami, and Muhammad ibn Majwah al-Masmari.⁵³

Thus, despite the Italian suppression of the resistance during this time period, and the death of Al-Mukhtar in 1931,⁵⁴ this was not the end of political and military involvement for the Sanussi order.

For example, the leadership continued to work in the political and military spheres when they aided Britain fight against Italy during World War II. And following the end of the war, the Sanussi order was able to establish authority of Libya following its independence, something they held onto until the 1969 military coup by Muammar Gaddafi and his fellow officers. Furthermore, the memory of individuals such as Al-Mukhtar continued to be used as inspiration by others not only in Libya, but also elsewhere in Muslim majority parts of the world.⁵⁵

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that although countries and the Western media present Sufism as apolitical and non-violent, historically Sufi movements were quite the opposite, such as in the North African fight against colonialism.

There are numerous other cases to suggest that Sufis have in fact been central actors in military resistance movements. This is not to say that their military campaigns were unjust in the eyes of local communities; the respective public in Algeria and Libya still view these individuals as anti-colonialist heroes in fighting the oppression of colonial actors. The point here is that individuals within Sufism (or Sufi orders) have used violence for political and/or religious objectives, something that often gets lost when some speak about Sufism today.

In the case of ‘Abd al-Qadir, he used his religious and political influence to lead Algerians against the French. The Algerians viewed him as a spiritual and military leader, even labeling him *amir al muminin* (or “Commander of the Faithful”).⁵⁶ While many Sufi orders were not directly tied to his military *jihad* against France (in part because of their role as mediators, and because their *zawiyas* were often in neutral territory),⁵⁷ ‘Abd al-Qadir did benefit from ties to other Sufi orders, and “‘Abd al-Qadir profited from the disinterested image of a marabout family, and from this position he was able to attract the allegiances of a multitude of tribes and factions,”⁵⁸ even if his own power did not derive from his emphasis on his leadership as a Sufi.

In Libya, leaders of the Sanussi brotherhood fought against Italian colonialism, and did achieve military and political success. In fact, scholars explain that the Sanussi order was one of the most important entities in the anti-colonialist movements in Libya. The Sufi order was able to unite various groups in order to fight Italy’s invasion. Furthermore, with regards to the use of military *jihad*, the Sanussi order did not

⁵¹ Evans-Pritchard, “The Sanusi,” cited in Atkinson, “Governance.”

⁵² St. John, *Libya*.

⁵³ Kopanski, “Islam in Italy,” 199.

⁵⁴ Dhont, “The Historical Figure.”

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Neusner, *God’s Rule*. ‘Abd al-Qadir’s father played a role in framing ‘Abd al-Qadir as the Commander of the Faithful to surrounding tribes (Bennison, “‘Abd al-Qadir’s Jihad). This reference is important as it provides further religious legitimacy to his political rule against the oppressors in Algeria.

⁵⁷ Kemper, “The Changing Images,” 35.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

see their fighting as anti-Western (philosophy and political system), but rather, with some similarities to ‘Abd al-Qadir in Algeria, the *jihad* was used as a tool to fight imperialism and heavy oppression, along with the goals of Islamic political leadership.⁵⁹ Thus, Sufi orders were very willing to use violence against the oppressors, in order to fight against all of the oppression that came with the imperialist and colonialist governments.

This article provides a review of two cases of Sufi orders mounting military campaigns against colonialism. However, what one finds is that throughout places of colonialism on Muslim majority territories, there were many cases of Sufi activity in the fight against these outside powers. This is important to note since it offers complexity to the history of Sufism. While Sufism has a detailed past with regards to Quranic exegesis, philosophy and Islamic law, Sufi orders also have a well-documented political and military history with regards to fighting colonial and imperial powers.

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⁵⁹ Gazzini, “Jihad in exile”, cited in Raza, “Italian Colonisation.”

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