

Sufism, Zawiyas, and the State: The Evolution of Sufism in Algerian Politics

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Abstract: This paper examines how Sufi zawiyas (lodges) have shaped political structures in Algeria, interrogating their evolving role from centers of anti-colonial resistance to instruments of state legitimacy. The research question emerges from Algeria's unique historical trajectory, where Sufi orders have alternately been marginalized, co-opted, and mobilized by successive regimes seeking religious-political validation. The significance of this inquiry lies in Algeria's historical trajectory, where Sufism has functioned as both a force of resistance and an instrument of state legitimacy. From the anti-colonial mobilization of Sufi orders to their contemporary integration into state institutions, Zawiyas have played a pivotal role in Algeria's political landscape where Islam remains central to national identity yet is fiercely contested between Sufi, reformist, and Salafist factions. Findings reveal that the Algerian state has strategically engaged Sufi orders to counterbalance Islamist movements, reinforce national identity, and legitimize political authority. Zawiyas have exerted influence in electoral politics, bureaucratic appointments, and religious policymaking, often aligning with state narratives of stability and heritage preservation. The state's instrumentalization of Sufism has, paradoxically, eroded some zawiyas' grassroots credibility while reinforcing their institutional role. Their role underscores broader dynamics of religious authority and state-building in North Africa, highlighting the intersection of spiritual legitimacy and political power.

Keywords: Sufism, Zawiyas, political islam, politics, Algeria

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Introduction

Sufism² has long been a defining feature of Algeria's religious and political landscape, serving as both a spiritual tradition and a socio-political force (Ageron 1991). The *zawiya* (pl. *zawayā*)—a Sufi lodge functioning as a center of worship, education, and community organization—has historically played a crucial role in mediating between state authority and local populations (Abun-Nasr 2007). From their emergence during the Ottoman era to their mobilization against French colonialism, and their complex relationship with post-independence regimes, *zawiyas* have been instrumental in shaping Algeria's political trajectory (Abun-Nasr 1987). Understanding their evolution is essential for analyzing how religious institutions interact with state power, particularly in a country where Islam remains a cornerstone of national identity yet is subject to competing interpretations by Sufi, Islamist, and state-aligned clerics.

The political role of Sufism in Algeria cannot be divorced from its historical context (Merad 1967). During the colonial period (1830–1962), *zawiyas* were key sites of anti-French resistance, with orders like the Rahmaniyya and Qadiriyya leading rebellions and preserving Islamic identity against cultural assimilation (Clancy-Smith 1994). After independence, the socialist-nationalist regime of Houari Boumédiène (1965–1978) sought to marginalize Sufi institutions, viewing them as obstacles to modernization. However, the rise of Islamist movements in the 1980s and the ensuing civil war of the 1990s forced the state to reassess its approach (Boukhars 2021). By the 2000s, Sufi orders were being strategically rehabilitated as allies in the fight against extremism and as legitimizing agents for the regime (Volpi 2003). Today, *zawiyas* occupy an ambivalent position—simultaneously co-opted by the state for electoral influence and deradicalization efforts, yet increasingly challenged by younger generations skeptical of their political entanglements (Boukhars 2021). More recently, the Algerian government has strategically promoted Sufism as a counterbalance to Salafi and Islamist movements, positioning *Zawiyas* as bulwarks of moderate Islam aligned with state interests. Given their enduring influence, a thorough examination of Sufi *Zawiyas* is essential for understanding how religious institutions function as political actors in Algeria.

This study argues that *zawiyas* are not merely passive religious institutions but

² Sufism (Arabic: *tasawwuf*) is the mystical dimension of Islam, emphasizing spiritual purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), inner knowledge, and closeness to God through practices such as *dhikr* (remembrance), asceticism, and devotion to a spiritual guide (*shaykh*). Rooted in both Sunni and Shia traditions, Sufism has been historically expressed through diverse orders (*turuq*) and philosophical teachings. Scholars often describe it as the internalization of Islamic teachings, integrating theological, ethical, and metaphysical elements. Scholarly consensus characterizes it as both a doctrinal tradition—rooted in Quranic and Prophetic precedents—and a diverse socio-religious phenomenon manifest in institutionalized orders (*turuq*, *sing. tariqa*) and localized communities (*zawiyas*). While often associated with esoteric practices (e.g., *dhikr* ceremonies, saint veneration), Sufism's historical role extends to education, mediation, and political engagement, complicating rigid distinctions between “orthodoxy” and “mysticism.”

active political actors whose alliances, resistance, and social influence have shaped state legitimacy, electoral dynamics, and counter-extremism policies. Their historical adaptability—from resistance hubs to state partners—reveals broader patterns of how religious authority is negotiated in authoritarian contexts.

Despite extensive scholarship on Islam and politics in North Africa, the role of Sufi institutions as political actors remains underexplored in political science. Most studies focus on Islamist movements or state-led religious policies, often treating Sufism as either a purely spiritual tradition or a static, declining force (Zeghal 2008; Willis 1996). This oversight neglects the dynamic ways in which *zawiyas* engage with power structures—sometimes resisting, sometimes collaborating, and often navigating a precarious middle ground.

Moreover, scholarship on *Zawiyas* often treats them as static, apolitical entities devoted solely to spiritual practice. However, historical evidence suggests that these institutions have consistently adapted to shifting political landscapes, actively engaging in governance, state formation, and national identity construction (Abul Qacim 1981). Furthermore, while research on political Islam has extensively analyzed the state's instrumentalization of religion, there is limited analysis of how *Zawiyas*, as religious institutions, negotiate power dynamics with the state. Are *Zawiyas* merely instruments of state control, or do they exert independent political agency? How do these institutions influence governance, electoral politics, and policymaking? Addressing these questions is essential for developing a nuanced understanding of religion's role in Algerian politics beyond the traditional Islamist paradigm.

Scholarly analyses of Sufi *zawiyas* in Algeria have predominantly framed these institutions within the broader paradigm of state cooptation, emphasizing how successive Algerian regimes have instrumentalized Sufism to counterbalance political Islamism and reinforce state legitimacy (Werenfels 2014; Driessen 2012). This body of work has significantly advanced our understanding of the ways in which authoritarian states cultivate religious allies to buttress regime stability. However, such studies remain largely state-centric, neglecting the agency of *zawiyas* as autonomous actors that actively negotiate power rather than simply acquiescing to state directives. This paper shifts the analytical focus from state control to *zawiya* agency, arguing that these institutions do not merely serve as instruments of state policy but function as strategic intermediaries that mediate power between the state and society.

One critical gap in the literature pertains to the political role of *zawiyas* in electoral politics. Scholarship on Algerian elections has overwhelmingly concentrated on the competition between secular nationalist parties and Islamist movements (Roberts 2003; Volpi 2003), overlooking the ways in which Sufi networks mobilize electoral support, particularly in rural and peripheral regions where they command significant influence. The role of *zawiyas* as electoral mobilizers, particularly in rural and peri-urban regions, remains underexplored despite evidence that Sufi networks influence voting behavior through kinship ties, spiritual patronage, and localized clientelism. For instance, in the M'zab Valley and western Algeria, *zawiya*-affiliated elites have historically swayed electoral outcomes by endorsing regime-aligned candidates or,

conversely, withholding support to signal discontent (Werenfels 2014).

The Algerian government has long recognized the electoral utility of *zawiyas*, frequently courting their leaders for endorsements during presidential campaigns (Tlemçani 2008). Yet, there remains a paucity of research on how *zawiyas* themselves leverage political engagement for institutional gains. For instance, while state patronage of Sufi orders has been well documented (Muedini 2012), little attention has been paid to the reciprocal strategies employed by *zawiyas*, such as negotiating state concessions in return for political support. By analyzing case studies of *zawiya*-backed electoral mobilization, this paper provides a nuanced account of the symbiotic relationship between religious and political actors in Algeria.

Another underexplored dimension is the role of *zawiyas* in counter-extremism efforts. The Algerian state has positioned Sufism as a moderate religious alternative to Salafism and jihadism, integrating *zawiyas* into its broader counter-radicalization strategy (Layachi 2013). Official discourse frequently underscores the theological contrast between the tolerant, mystical ethos of Sufi orders and the rigid, puritanical doctrines of Salafi-jihadist movements. However, the actual efficacy of *zawiyas* in deradicalization efforts remains largely unexamined. While some scholars acknowledge the ideological function of Sufi institutions in promoting non-violent interpretations of Islam (Jahanbegloo 2018; Masaeli and Sneller 2020; Pratt Ewing and Corbett 2019; Bayat 2007; Josefsson, Nilsson and Borell 2017; Mir 2024), there is a notable absence of empirical research assessing whether *zawiyas* genuinely deter radicalization or merely serve as symbolic bulwarks within state discourse. This study addresses this gap by critically evaluating the extent to which Sufi *zawiyas* offer a viable alternative to radical Islamist narratives and whether their influence extends beyond state-sponsored rhetoric to tangible counter-extremism outcomes.

Fieldwork by (Campana and Jourde 2016) in the Sahel suggests that Sufi orders may lack doctrinal appeal to youth attracted to Salafist rigorism, yet similar studies are absent in the Algerian context. This paper interrogates whether *zawiyas* possess the theological or institutional capacity to function as effective deradicalization agents or whether their state alignment inadvertently diminishes their credibility among communities skeptical of regime-backed religious discourse.

Furthermore, existing scholarship often treats *zawiyas* as monolithic entities, failing to account for internal generational and ideological divisions. Most studies depict Sufi institutions as unwavering allies of the state, led by aging religious elites who align with government policies (Khemissi, Larémont and Taybi 2012). However, this perspective obscures emerging tensions within *zawiyas*, particularly between older leaders who maintain traditional alliances with the state and younger adherents who are more critical of government interference in religious affairs. These generational shifts are crucial for understanding the evolving role of *zawiyas* in Algerian politics, as they suggest a potential reconfiguration of their relationship with the state (Boserup 2016). This paper interrogates these internal dynamics, highlighting how generational contestations shape the political trajectory of Sufi institutions and their engagement with state power.

This paper argues that zawiyas are not merely vessels of state legitimacy but active political mediators, operating at the intersection of religious authority and state power. By shifting the focus from unidirectional state cooptation to reciprocal bargaining, the study reveals how zawiyas exploit their symbolic capital to secure material benefits, influence local governance, and even resist state overreach—while the state, in turn, tolerates their autonomy so long as they reinforce regime stability. By combining historical analysis of colonial and post-colonial zawiya-state relations (Burgat 2003), case studies of electoral manipulation in Sufi strongholds and theoretical frameworks of religious brokerage, the study reveals a reciprocal dynamic: the state tolerates zawiya autonomy in exchange for political quiescence, while zawiyas capitalize on state patronage to expand their societal influence. This reorientation challenges binary depictions of coercion or cooptation, instead presenting Sufi institutions as agile players in Algeria's contested religious-political field.

The Role of Zawiyas in Shaping National Identity in Algeria: Resistance to French Colonialism

Before French colonization, zawiyas (Sufi lodges) in Algeria served as multifaceted institutions central to religious, educational, and social life. As hubs of Islamic scholarship, they preserved Maliki jurisprudence and Sufi teachings while operating Qur'anic schools (*kuttabs*) that disseminated literacy and spiritual guidance (Muedini 2012). Beyond their religious functions, zawiyas played a crucial political role, mediating conflicts between tribes and Ottoman authorities, thereby maintaining social cohesion (Ageron 1991). The Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya orders, in particular, wielded significant influence, with their leaders often acting as *de facto* rulers in rural areas where centralized authority was weak (Benaissa 1997). This pre-colonial function of the Zawiyas as both religious and political institutions made them particularly significant in the resistance against French colonial rule.

The zawiya network also facilitated transregional trade and pilgrimage routes, embedding these institutions in both local and transnational Islamic networks (Abun-Nasr 2007). Their autonomy from the Ottoman *beyliks* allowed them to function as semi-independent centers of governance, collecting *zakat* (alms) and redistributing resources—a role that later made them targets of French disruption (Ruedy 2005). With the French invasion of Algeria in 1830, colonial authorities quickly identified the Zawiyas as potential sources of resistance. The French administration implemented a range of strategies to undermine their influence, including direct military repression, co-optation through financial incentives, and restrictive policies such as taxation and land expropriation. The colonial authorities sought to neutralize these centers by fostering divisions within Sufi orders, appointing pro-French religious leaders, and limiting the autonomy of Zawiyas through legal and administrative measures (Rahal 2013).

The 1845 *Senatus-Consulte* policy formalized this approach, recognizing certain zawiyas as intermediaries in exchange for loyalty, while others faced land confiscation

and punitive taxation. The destruction of key Zawiyas, such as those affiliated with the Rahmaniyya order, exemplified this aggressive strategy. Despite these efforts, Zawiyas remained resilient and continued to serve as focal points of anti-colonial resistance (Bennison 2002).

Despite French efforts to neutralize them, many zawiyas became nuclei of anti-colonial resistance. Spiritual resistance was foundational: Sufi leaders framed colonial rule as an existential threat to Islam, invoking jihad not merely as armed struggle but as cultural preservation (Benaissa 1997). Sheikh al-Mokrani's 1871 uprising exemplified this, merging Sufi mobilization with tribal alliances to challenge French land seizures (Laremont 2000). Zawiyas contributed to anti-colonial resistance through spiritual, political, and military means. Spiritually, religious leaders used sermons, religious texts, and Sufi teachings to instill a sense of defiance against colonial rule. Prominent figures such as Emir Abdelkader, himself deeply influenced by the Qadiriyya order, framed resistance in religious terms, portraying jihad against colonial occupation as a sacred duty (Ruedy 2005). The influence of Sufi orders extended beyond religious instruction, shaping ideological frameworks that sustained anti-colonial sentiment for generations (Bennison 2002).

Military repression intensified after the 1871 Mokrani Revolt, in which the Rahmaniyya order played a leading role. The French dissolved "rebellious" zawiyas, exiled their leaders, and surveilled religious education to prevent anti-colonial indoctrination (Clancy-Smith 1994). Simultaneously, colonial ethnographers like Louis Rinn studied Sufi networks to exploit divisions, fostering rivalry between the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya to weaken unified resistance (Rinn 1884).

Politically, Zawiyas played key roles in coordinating resistance efforts. They provided logistical support to nationalist movements, facilitated communication between tribal leaders, and served as safe havens for anti-colonial activists. Many zawiya leaders, such as those of the Tijaniyya order, maintained networks that extended beyond Algeria into the broader Maghreb and the Sahel, allowing them to mobilize regional support against the French (Muedini 2015). Politically, zawiyas also facilitated clandestine networks. The Tijaniyya lodge in Ain Madhi, led by Sheikh Ben Badis, later influenced the reformist Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama (AOMA), bridging Sufism and modernist nationalism (Merad 1967).

Militarily, Zawiyas were directly involved in armed confrontations with colonial forces. Many Sufi orders-maintained militias that engaged in guerrilla warfare against French troops. The Sanusiya order, although primarily active in Libya, extended support to Algerian resistance groups by providing weapons, fighters, and ideological backing (Vikør 2015). Similarly, the Rahmaniyya Zawiya in Kabylia played a central role in organizing resistance during the early years of French occupation, leveraging its extensive network to coordinate attacks on colonial outposts. The ability of Zawiyas to mobilize fighters and resources demonstrated their strategic importance in anti-colonial struggles (Eugène 1886).

As indicated above, the Rahmaniyya zawiya of Seddouk, under Sheikh Mohand Amokrane, mobilized 250,000 insurgents in Kabylia, exploiting French vulnerability

post-Franco-Prussian War. Though crushed, the revolt demonstrated Sufi capacity to unify disparate tribes (Rey-Goldzeiguer 1977). Specific case studies further illustrate the critical role of Zawiyas in resisting French rule. The Qadiriyya order, with its deep roots in Algeria, provided the ideological and military foundation for Emir Abdelkader's resistance movement between 1832 and 1847 (Danziger 1977). The Tijaniyya, with its transnational networks, facilitated cross-border support for anti-colonial efforts, linking Algerian resistance to broader struggles in North and West Africa. The Sanusiya, although more active in Libya, maintained clandestine connections with Algerian rebels, offering material and ideological assistance. These examples underscore how Zawiyas adapted their strategies to sustain resistance despite relentless colonial repression (Muedini 2015).

The legacy of Zawiyas in Algeria extended beyond the colonial period, influencing nationalist movements in the twentieth century. Their ideological contributions to anti-colonial discourse shaped the rhetoric of later nationalist leaders, including those in the National Liberation Front (FLN) during the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962).

Post-independence, the Algerian state nationalized many zawiyas, wary of their autonomous influence. Yet, their legacy persisted in nationalist narratives—figures like Emir Abdelkader were reclaimed as proto-nationalists, and Sufi symbolism permeated FLN rhetoric. Today, zawiyas remain contested spaces, both as cultural heritage sites and as revived spiritual centers amid Islamist-secular tensions (Werenfels 2014).

The Role of Zawiyas in Post-Colonial Society: Integration, Cooptation, and Marginalization

Since independence in 1962, the Algerian state has oscillated between cooptation and marginalization of Sufi orders, recognizing their potential as both legitimizing agents and ideological challengers.

Following the country's independence, the newly established Algerian state, led by the National Liberation Front (FLN), recognized the potential of Sufi institutions to aid in the consolidation of power, but the state's approach to the zawiyas oscillated between co-optation and marginalization. In the immediate aftermath of the War of Liberation, there was a strong desire to forge a unified national identity, which was inextricably linked to Islamic heritage and anti-colonial resistance (Joassin 2019). The FLN understood that the zawiyas, with their networks of influence and moral authority, could play an important role in this effort. The zawiyas provided the state with an important connection to the Algerian masses, especially in rural areas where their influence remained strong (Enhaili and Adda 2003). In this sense, the early post-independence state sought to integrate the zawiyas into its political machinery through a process of co-optation (Papi 2010).

As hinted above, following Algeria's independence in 1962, the newly established state under the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) faced the dual challenge of

consolidating national identity and dismantling colonial-era structures (Ruedy 1994). Sufi zawiyas, which had historically served as religious, educational, and social hubs, found themselves at a crossroads. Their integration into the political landscape varied significantly depending on state policies, shifting between cooptation and marginalization under successive regimes. This section examines how zawiyas navigated post-colonial Algeria, their relationship with the state, and their role in shaping national identity. While some regimes co-opted these institutions for political legitimacy, others marginalized them as potential threats to the secular, modernizing state. This dynamic of co-optation and marginalization was rooted in Algeria's history of colonial exploitation, where French policies sought to undermine indigenous institutions, including Sufi orders, and replace them with structures loyal to colonial authority. The struggle over the role of the zawiyas in post-colonial Algeria must, therefore, be understood through the lens of both resistance to colonial oppression and the pursuit of post-independence political stability.

Early Post-Independence: Ambivalence and Suspicion (1962–1979)

In post-colonial Algeria, Sufi orders and their affiliated institutions, particularly the zawiyas, played a critical role in shaping national identity and navigating the complex political landscape following the country's independence in 1962. The FLN government, influenced by socialist and secular nationalist ideologies, initially viewed Sufi orders with suspicion due to their perceived collaboration with French colonial authorities (Harbi and Meynier 2004). Many zawiyas had been incorporated into the colonial administration as intermediaries, a legacy that cast a long shadow. However, the state also recognized their grassroots influence, particularly in rural areas where Sufi networks retained strong communal ties (Hassan 2003).

President Ahmed Ben Bella (1962–1965) and his successor Houari Boumédiène (1965–1978) adopted an ambivalent stance due to their perceived collaboration with French colonial authorities (Vatin 1981). While Boumédiène's agrarian reforms and nationalization policies weakened some zawiyas' economic foundations, others were cautiously integrated into state-sponsored religious institutions. The Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama (founded by Ben Badis) had historically opposed Sufi practices as "backward," and this reformist current influenced early state policies, leading to the marginalization of some orders (Sanson 1983).

The political leadership increasingly feared that the zawiyas could serve as potential rivals to the state's authority, especially as they provided an alternative form of political mobilization and could act as a rallying point for political opposition. In the 1970s, the state responded by placing restrictions on the activities of the zawiyas, particularly targeting those with significant political influence, such as the Rahmaniyya order, whose leader, Sidi Mohamed Belkacem, was a well-known critic of the government's policies. The state's policies of co-optation turned into efforts at marginalization, as secular institutions like the national university system were increasingly prioritized over traditional Islamic institutions (Burgat 1988). The

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Nevertheless, zawiyas such as the Rahmaniyya and Tijaniyya retained influence by adapting to the new political climate, framing themselves as preservers of Algerian Islamic identity against residual colonial influence (Vatin 1981).

Despite the marginalization of the zawiyas during certain periods of post-colonial state-building, these institutions continued to exert a lasting influence on Algerian society. Zawiya leaders, especially those from the Rahmaniyya and Tijaniyya orders, remained central figures in the rural communities, which had little access to urban political power structures. Even as state policies sought to reduce the influence of Sufi orders, these institutions adapted by forming alliances with other political movements, including the growing Islamist political parties that emerged in the 1980s (Kourgiotis 2023). This period saw the return of political Islam as a powerful force in Algeria, and Sufi orders, despite their earlier marginalization, found themselves aligned with Islamist groups in their opposition to the secular, socialist policies of the state (Al-Hanaf, Botiveau and Fregosi 1991).

Cooptation Under Chadli Bendjedid and the Islamist Challenge (1979–1992)

The Bendjedid era (1979–1992) saw a shift toward limited cooptation of Sufi orders as the state sought religious legitimacy amid growing Islamist opposition. The rise of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the late 1980s forced the regime to recalibrate its religious policy, positioning Sufism as a “moderate” alternative to radical Islamism (Tamburini 2019). Zawiyas were increasingly promoted in state media as bastions of “authentic” Algerian Islam, with some leaders receiving government patronage (Matarese 2016). In this environment, the Sufi orders, particularly the Rahmaniyya and Qadiriyya, played a mediating role between the state and the growing Islamist opposition. Their leaders were able to garner popular support due to their historical role in resistance against colonial powers, and their religious legitimacy provided them with a unique position to speak on behalf of Algerian society, particularly in the context of a growing sense of alienation from the state's secular policies (Muedini 2012).

Moreover, the zawiyas' role in providing social services—such as education, health care, and charitable work—remained a key element of their influence, particularly in areas where the state's infrastructure was weak. The continued existence of these institutions highlighted the gaps in the state's ability to govern effectively, particularly

in rural areas where the presence of state institutions was minimal. Through their charitable activities, the *zawiyas* became vital to the everyday lives of Algerians, reinforcing their cultural and social significance, even in the face of official attempts to control or co-opt them (Khemissi, Larémont and Taybi 2012).

The Tidjaniyya order, for instance, was leveraged by the state to counterbalance the FIS's influence in the south. However, this cooptation was selective: orders that resisted state control, such as the more autonomous Darqawiyya, faced continued marginalization (Romey 2004). The state's instrumentalization of Sufism reached its peak in the early 1990s, when *zawiya* leaders were mobilized to endorse military rule following the cancellation of the 1991 elections (Eveno 1998).

Repression, Co-optation, and Rehabilitation: from the Civil War to the Bouteflika Era (1990s–2019)

The outbreak of large-scale armed conflict after the cancellation of the 1991–92 electoral process created an environment in which all social actors — including Sufi brotherhoods and their *zawiya* — had to recalibrate. Islamist armed groups such as the GIA (*Groupe islamique armé*) and AIS (*Armée islamique du salut*) pursued tactics that did not spare religious figures and cultural actors: violence was often indiscriminate and aimed to break social authority structures that challenged the insurgents' claims to monopoly over legitimate Islam (Sour 2016). The brutal Algerian Civil War (1991–2002) further complicated the position of *zawiyas* (Burgat 2003). While some Sufi leaders aligned with the state's anti-Islamist rhetoric, others became targets of jihadist violence, particularly in regions where *zawiyas* were seen as collaborators (Martínez 1998). The destruction of the historic Rahmaniyya *zawiya* in Kabylia by armed groups in 1994 exemplified this vulnerability (Echeverría Jesús 2004).

At the same time the state's securitized response (mass arrests, paramilitary auxiliaries, and localized militias) further upended traditional social mediators (Kalyvas 1999). The net effect was that many *zawiya* became vulnerable (as sites for targeting or pressure) while others tried to survive through alignment with either Islamist forces or the state.

Sufi sheikhs and *zawiya* responded heterogeneously: some publicly endorsed the state's anti-extremism line and accepted protection or patronage; others were attacked as collaborators or because they refused to “purge” local practices (Werenfels 2014). Surveys and qualitative studies from the period and immediately after show that ordinary Algerians perceived Sufi organisations as generally non-violent and stabilizing, yet Sufi actors were not immune to coercion, threat, or assassination when local power relations made them targets (Werenfels 2011). Thus any analysis that treats “the *zawiya*” as a single, coherent political actor misses this internal variation and the localised, contingent nature of survival strategies.

Under Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1999–2019), the state pursued a dual strategy: publicly rehabilitating Sufism as part of Algeria's religious heritage while tightening bureaucratic control (Ghanem 2018). The 2012 law regulating religious associations

formalized state oversight of zawiyas, requiring them to obtain government approval for activities (Werenfels 2014). This period also saw the proliferation of state-sponsored Sufi festivals, such as the annual Tijaniyya gathering in Temacine, used to project an image of religious tolerance (Benaïssa 2015).

A decisive legal moment came with the new law on associations (JORA 2012). Among other things, it limited foreign funding to Algerian associations, strengthened registration requirements, and centralized authorisation powers — measures that applied to religious associations and thus had direct consequences for zawiyas that depended on networks, donations, or foreign links for activity and pilgrimage. This statutory tightening complemented the earlier “civil concord” (1999) and the 2005 Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, which had politically reframed the war’s legacy and created the conditions for the state to manage the religious field as part of its reconciliation agenda (Sour 2024). This reversal was not merely symbolic: it reflected the president’s broader reconciliation project and his effort to mobilize all strands of Algeria’s Islamic heritage in the aftermath of the civil war (Larroque 2021).

The political dimension of this rehabilitation was evident from Bouteflika’s first electoral campaigns. Zawiyas, long excluded from the public sphere, became visible supporters of the president, with their sheikhs endorsing his candidacy and urging disciples to vote for him (Hachemaoui 2013). The zawiyas thus re-emerged as actors of mobilisation, lending religious legitimacy to Bouteflika’s successive electoral victories (Muedini 2015). This support was not incidental: zawiyas were integrated into official ceremonies, granted access to state media, and treated as allies in consolidating the president’s authority (Fedele 2020). Institutionally, the presidency encouraged the formation of associations and umbrella structures that unified diverse zawiyas under state-friendly frameworks (Werenfels 2014). This move facilitated closer contact between Sufi leaders and political authorities, while also allowing the regime to monitor and channel their activities. At the same time, the Ministry of Religious Affairs promoted zawiyas as guardians of an “authentic” Algerian Islam, distinct from Salafi or Islamist movements (Volpi and Benzenine 2024). Festivals, cultural events, and commemorations were organised with official sponsorship, presenting the zawiyas as both spiritual authorities and symbols of national heritage (Muedini 2015). At the same time, this policy also served international ends. By highlighting Sufism, Algeria projected an image of moderation and tolerance on the global stage, countering external narratives of radicalisation (McDougall 2017). The Sufi orders, particularly prominent orders such as the Tijaniyya, Rahmaniyya, Qadiriyya, and ‘Alawiyya, were showcased as embodiments of peaceful religiosity rooted in Algeria’s past.

The state sponsorship of Sufi cultural events and of ministries’ programs — as documented by recent scholarship and policy analyses — produced concrete instances of political leverage (Khatir 2016). Ministries and state firms enlisted Sufi leaders in mediation, local pacification, and even corporate outreach (for instance, appeals to Sufi notables in the south to mitigate tensions around energy projects) (Chikhi 2018). High-profile appointments and the creation of state-friendly umbrella organisations

(e.g., associations of *zawiyas*) gave some sheikhs new access: seats on advisory councils, sinecures, or visibility in state media (Boukhars 2021). But that same proximity produced reputational costs: orders and *zawiya* closely associated with political elites saw factional criticism, allegations of corruption, and loss of moral authority—dynamics sharply exposed during the 2019 Hirak mobilization (Boukhars 2021).

It is precisely this ambivalence—increased institutional visibility and political margin on the one hand, versus declining grassroots moral credibility on the other (Bessadi 2018). By the mid-2000s and 2010s, some *zawiya* had become useful nodes of regime stabilization (soft-power tools, mediators for local grievances, instruments in national reconciliation) while others were side-lined or delegitimized by youth, Salafi critics, or civil society activists. The 2019 Hirak demonstrated in practice that formal ties to an unpopular and physically ailing presidency could be politically fatal for a *zawiya*'s local standing (Ouaisa 2020).

Contemporary Role of *Zawiyas* in Algerian Politics

The interaction between *Zawiyas* and political legitimacy in Algeria today manifests through electoral influence, state-Sufi relations, and counter-extremism initiatives, revealing a complex dynamic that oscillates between religious authority and political control. *Zawiyas*, historically autonomous centers of spiritual and social influence, have increasingly become entangled in the mechanisms of state governance, serving as both legitimizing institutions and instruments of political consolidation (Muedini 2015).

Zawiyas in Algeria have long played a role in electoral politics, leveraging their religious and social capital to endorse political candidates. A striking case is the 2019 presidential elections, where key *Zawiyas* publicly supported Abdelmadjid Tebboune, framing his candidacy as aligned with traditional Algerian religious values (Farhi 2019) (Radio Algérienne 2024). Similarly, during the Bouteflika era, *Zawiyas* provided consistent endorsements, reinforcing his legitimacy through the rhetoric of stability and national unity. These endorsements shape political legitimacy by mobilizing voters who regard Sufi leaders as moral guides, effectively blending religious authority with electoral strategy (Bessadi 2018).

The alignment between *Zawiyas* and political figures is not merely a matter of shared ideological visions but operates within a broader patronage network. The state provides financial and logistical support to *Zawiyas*, while Sufi leaders reciprocate by endorsing candidates who guarantee the continuity of their institutional privileges. However, this dynamic raises concerns about the instrumentalization of religious institutions for political ends. While some argue that these alliances serve mutual interests—ensuring the preservation of Sufi heritage and securing state recognition—others contend that such arrangements erode the independence of *Zawiyas*, transforming them into extensions of state power rather than autonomous spiritual entities (Hadj Ali 1992).

Algerian administrations have pursued varying policies toward *Zawiyas*, reflecting

broader shifts in governance and state control over religious affairs. Under Houari Boumediene, the state's approach was marked by secular nationalist policies that marginalized traditional religious structures, including Zawiyas. In contrast, under Chadli Bendjedid, a more conciliatory stance emerged, allowing Zawiyas to regain some influence as part of a broader strategy to counterbalance Islamist movements. The Bouteflika era marked a peak in state patronage, with the administration actively funding Zawiyas, recognizing their role in national identity, and incorporating them into state ceremonies (Tuquoi 1999).

These fluctuating policies highlight a fundamental tension: while state patronage grants Zawiyas resources and official recognition, it also subjects them to increased political oversight. Government support often comes with expectations of loyalty, limiting the ability of Zawiyas to act independently of state interests (Tamburini 2019). The challenge for Zawiyas remains whether they can maintain their traditional role as spiritual and social mediators while navigating the pressures of state co-optation. This dependency dynamic raises important questions about the long-term viability of Zawiyas as independent religious institutions in Algeria's political landscape (Larroque 2021).

Countering Extremism: Zawiyas as Agents of Moderation

Since the 1990s, the Algerian state has framed Sufism as a bulwark against radicalization. Zawiyas have been incorporated into deradicalization programs, particularly in regions like the Blida Atlas, where jihadist recruitment was historically high (Ashour 2009).

Yet, this narrative is contested. Some scholars argue that the state's instrumentalization of Sufism has inadvertently fueled Salafist backlash, framing zawiyas as regime collaborators (Hafez, 2021). Moreover, the efficacy of Sufi-led deradicalization remains uneven, with limited empirical evidence of long-term impact (Meijer 2013).

Zawiyas have emerged as key actors in the Algerian government's strategy to combat extremism, positioning Sufism as a moderate counterweight to radical Islamist ideologies (Corbett 2020). The state has promoted Sufi teachings in educational curricula and supported Zawiya-led initiatives that emphasize tolerance and non-violence (Muedini 2012). In regions such as Tamanrasset and Ghardaïa, Zawiyas have spearheaded intercommunal dialogue efforts, reinforcing narratives of religious moderation.

However, the effectiveness of these efforts remains a subject of debate. While Zawiyas undeniably provide an alternative to Salafi and jihadist discourses, their close association with the state can undermine their credibility among segments of the population skeptical of government-backed religious messaging. This raises the question of whether Zawiyas function as independent religious mediators or as instruments of state policy. If the latter, their ability to genuinely counter extremism may be compromised by perceptions of political manipulation.

The Algerian case makes several important contributions to political science theories of religion and state power. First, it challenges simplistic secularization narratives by showing how religious institutions persist as political actors even in ostensibly secular nationalist regimes. Rather than disappearing with modernization, *zawiyas* have adapted to new political contexts, supporting Asad's (Asad 2003) argument about the enduring modernity of religious formations. Second, it complicates theories of religious legitimacy in authoritarian contexts (Wegner 2011) by demonstrating how Sufi orders provide a particular form of symbolic capital that differs from both clerical Shiism and Sunni reformism. The Algerian model of state-Sufi relations represents a distinct pathway that contrasts with neighboring Morocco's monarchical incorporation of religious authority (Hashas 2024), while sharing some similarities with Tunisia's state-controlled religious administration, albeit with greater institutionalization of Sufi networks (McCarthy 2015).

Theoretical insights from (Gill 2008) on religious competition and state favoritism help explain why Algerian governments have alternately suppressed and promoted *zawiyas* depending on the perceived threat from competing Islamic movements. The post-9/11 era particularly illustrates this dynamic, as the state increasingly framed Sufism as a moderate alternative to Salafism, in line with global counterterrorism discourses (Meijer 2013). However, this instrumentalization has produced what (Schleutker 2021) terms "authoritarian governance of religion," where state management of religious institutions ultimately weakens their independent moral authority. The Algerian experience thus supports the broader theoretical observation that while co-opted religious institutions may provide short-term stability, they often lose credibility over time, potentially creating new sources of religious-political contestation.

Comparative and Regional Implications: Sufi Orders in Algeria and Morocco

The historical trajectory of Sufi institutions in Algeria and Morocco reveals stark contrasts in their integration into state structures and political frameworks.

In Algeria, *zawiyas* (Sufi lodges) emerged from their historical role as centers of anti-colonial resistance to become contested instruments of state legitimacy, while in Morocco they were systematically incorporated into the monarchy's religious apparatus as pillars of royal authority (Laremont 2000). This contrast stems from their distinct colonial experiences and post-independence political systems. During French colonial rule (1830-1962), Algerian *zawiyas*, particularly those of the Rahmaniyya and Qadiriyya orders, served as organizational hubs for resistance movements and preservers of Islamic identity against cultural assimilation (Bennison 2011) (Chatra et Ramdani 2024). This militant heritage made them suspect to the post-independence socialist regime, which marginalized them as obstacles to modernization. By contrast, Morocco's monarchy historically co-opted Sufi orders like the Tijaniyya and Boutchichiyya, integrating them into state religious bureaucracies and appointing their leaders to official councils to reinforce the king's status as Amir al-Mu'minin

(Commander of the Faithful) (Halstead 1969).

The Moroccan monarchy actively promotes and funds Sufi orders, framing them as key custodians of the country's spiritual heritage and as counterweights to Islamist opposition. This symbiotic relationship has ensured that Zawiyas remain politically relevant while also functioning as instruments of state authority. The result is a more centralized and hierarchical religious landscape in Morocco compared to the relatively fragmented structure in Algeria (Bouasria 2015).

The post-colonial period saw these divergent paths solidify. Algeria's Boumédiène regime (1965-1978) actively suppressed zawiyas as part of its secular-nationalist project, only to rehabilitate them during the 1990s civil war as a "moderate" alternative to Islamist insurgents (Rabasa, et al. 2007). Contemporary Algerian zawiyas operate under tight state supervision with limited financial autonomy, their influence circumscribed by generational divides and public skepticism. Morocco's approach has been more consistently incorporative - the monarchy patronizes Sufi orders through annual Mawlid celebrations and state-sponsored festivals, using them to counterbalance Islamist movements like the Justice and Development Party (PJD) (Wegner 2011). This reflects broader governance models: Algeria's centralized republic views religion instrumentally, while Morocco's monarchical system treats it as a constitutive element of state legitimacy (Bouasria 2015).

These divergent experiences reflect broader patterns of state control and religious institutionalization. Whereas Morocco's monarchy has employed Zawiyas to reinforce its legitimacy, Algeria's republican model has been more ambivalent, at times seeking to instrumentalize Sufism while also limiting its political reach. This distinction underscores fundamental differences in governance and the role of Islam in public life, shaping each country's approach to religious authority and political Islam (Thibdeau 2023).

The competition between Algeria and Morocco for influence in West Africa through Sufi networks, particularly the Tijaniyya order³, demonstrates how religious institutions become tools of geopolitical rivalry (El Guabli 2018). The Tijaniyya, with its strong presence in Senegal, Mali and Niger, has become a battleground for soft power projection. Algeria promotes its Tijaniyya zawiyas (notably in Ain Madhi) as centers of "moderate Islam," (Triaud 2010) while Morocco leverages historical ties through the Boutchichiyya branch, hosting West African Sufi leaders in Fez. In Senegal, Morocco funds Tijaniyya daaras (schools) and sponsors pilgrimages, while Algeria cultivates the rival Niassene faction (Popovic and Veinstein 1996). In Mali, both countries deploy Sufi networks to counter jihadist influence - Morocco through imam training programs, Algeria via scholarships at its Sufi institutes. This religious diplomacy reflects broader competition for leadership in the Maghreb and Sahel regions (Thurston 2020).

³ Founded in Algeria by Ahmad al-Tijani in the late 18th century, the order rapidly expanded across the Sahel and beyond, establishing significant centers in Senegal, Mali, and Niger. Both Algeria and Morocco claim spiritual and historical ties to the Tijaniyya, using these connections to bolster their influence in the region.

Algeria leverages its association with the Tijaniyya through state-backed initiatives that emphasize its historical origins and scholarly contributions. The government has actively engaged with West African Tijani networks, sponsoring conferences and fostering ties with religious leaders to project Algeria's role as a custodian of moderate Islam. This approach aligns with Algeria's broader strategy of religious outreach, countering extremist narratives while reinforcing its geopolitical position in the Sahel (Zaghlami 2016).

Morocco, in turn, has institutionalized its Tijaniyya connections through royal patronage, positioning the king as a spiritual leader with transnational authority. The Moroccan state funds Tijani shrines, supports the order's activities, and cultivates alliances with West African religious elites. This strategy has been particularly effective in Senegal, where the Tijaniyya holds significant sway, enabling Morocco to expand its diplomatic footprint (Wainscott 2018).

Algeria's experience with state management of Sufism offers important insights into global debates about political Islam. Like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Algeria has attempted to promote an "official Islam" through coopted religious institutions, though its zawiyas lack the institutional depth of Morocco's Sufi-monarchy alliance or Iran's clerical system (Sambe 2010). The post-9/11 framing of Sufism as an "anti-extremist" force finds particular expression in Algeria's strategy, though with mixed results - while zawiyas contribute to local deradicalization efforts, their state alignment risks alienating younger generations (El Amrani and Cherkili 2023). This reflects a broader pattern of authoritarian regimes instrumentalizing religion to sustain power, though as the 2019 Hirak protests demonstrated, such strategies remain vulnerable to societal pushback (Bessadi 2018).

The Algerian-Moroccan rivalry over the Tijaniyya exemplifies the intersection of religion and geopolitics in North Africa. While both states seek to assert their religious legitimacy, their methods reflect their respective political systems: Algeria's emphasis on historical authenticity and intellectual lineage contrasts with Morocco's monarchy-driven model of religious authority (Tadlaoui 2015). This competition underscores the strategic importance of Sufi diplomacy in shaping regional dynamics, highlighting how religious networks function as extensions of state power (El Guabli 2018).

The comparison reveals fundamental differences in institutionalization - where Morocco has developed a durable framework for incorporating Sufi orders into state structures, Algeria's approach remains more ad hoc and reactive. This stems from their distinct historical experiences with religious authority: Morocco's centuries-old monarchy has cultivated religious legitimacy as a core pillar of its rule (Mercedes 1990), while Algeria's revolutionary republic has treated religious institutions with alternating suspicion and instrumentalization (Deeb 1996). These differences manifest in their international religious outreach, with Morocco's more coordinated "spiritual diplomacy" contrasting with Algeria's narrower security-focused engagement (Bouasria 2015).

Regionally, the competition over Tijaniyya networks highlights how transnational religious connections are mobilized for political ends. Both countries have sought to position themselves as leaders of African Islam, using Sufi ties to bolster their diplomatic and security agendas (Sambe 2010). However, this rivalry also exposes the limits of religious soft power - while Sufi works provide access to local communities, their political utility depends on broader geopolitical and economic factors. The Algerian-Moroccan competition also illustrates how historical religious networks are reinterpreted for contemporary purposes, as both states selectively emphasize aspects of the Tijaniyya tradition that align with their national narratives (González 2020).

The cases also shed light on different models of managing political Islam. Morocco's monarchical system has proven more effective at incorporating both Sufi and Islamist movements into controlled institutional frameworks, while Algeria's vacillation between suppression and cooptation has created more volatile state-religion relations (Ghanem 2019). This difference became particularly apparent during the Arab Spring, when Morocco's religious establishment helped stabilize the monarchy (Thibdeau 2023), while Algeria's fragmented religious field contributed to more sustained protests. The comparison suggests that institutionalized systems of religious governance may provide more durable stability, though at the cost of genuine pluralism.

These dynamics have important implications for understanding religion and authoritarianism more broadly. Both cases demonstrate how states seek to monopolize religious authority, but through different mechanisms - Morocco via incorporation and ritualization, Algeria through bureaucratic control and security-focused cooptation. The relative success of these approaches depends on historical legacies and institutional capacity, suggesting that models of religious governance are not easily transferable between contexts (Parmentier 1999). They also highlight the enduring political relevance of Sufi institutions in Muslim-majority societies, even as they adapt to modern state structures and geopolitical rivalries.

Conclusion

The intricate relationship between Sufism, Zawiyas, and the Algerian state underscores a broader theme in political science: the dynamic interaction between religious institutions and state authority. This paper demonstrates how these institutions have transitioned from centers of anti-colonial resistance to contested instruments of state legitimacy, reflecting broader tensions in Algeria's nation-building process. From their early contributions to anti-colonial movements to their post-independence integration into state structures, Zawiyas have continuously adapted to shifting political landscapes. This evolution, marked by moments of alignment and contestation with the state, reveals the malleability of religious institutions in navigating power structures. The contemporary political role of zawiyas operates on multiple levels: as local power brokers in rural areas where they maintain electoral influence through

patronage networks: as participants in state-sponsored religious bureaucracies like the High Islamic Council: and as partners in deradicalization programs that position Sufism as Algeria's "authentic" Islamic tradition against extremist ideologies. The challenge moving forward lies in balancing these roles without compromising the spiritual and social foundations that have historically defined Zawiyas in Algerian society.

The impact of globalization on Algerian Sufism, including the transnational reach of certain Sufi orders, raises questions about the evolving nature of religious authority. The intersection of Sufism with digital technologies and social media also warrants exploration, as online platforms increasingly shape religious discourse and mobilization. Furthermore, the influence of regional and international actors, including Morocco's promotion of its own Sufi networks and Saudi Arabia's propagation of Salafism, highlights the geopolitical dimensions of Sufi-state relations. These factors underscore the need for a multidimensional approach to studying the future trajectory of Sufism in Algerian politics.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms the centrality of religious institutions in political life, challenging rigid dichotomies between secular and religious authority. Algerian Zawiyas exemplify the fluidity of religious engagement in politics, demonstrating both resilience and adaptability in response to state interventions. Their historical and contemporary significance attests to the enduring role of Sufism as a force of political mobilization, cultural preservation, and state legitimacy. As Algeria continues to navigate the complexities of governance and religious pluralism, the evolving role of Zawiyas will remain a crucial aspect of its political landscape, meriting sustained scholarly attention.

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Лотфи Сур

Суфизам, завије и држава: еволуција суфизма у алжирској политици

Сажетак: Овај рад испитује како су суфистичке завије (редовничке лозе или обитељи) обликовале политичке структуре у Алжиру, анализирајући њихову еволутивну улогу од центара антиколонијалног отпора до инструмената државног легитимитета. Истраживачко питање произилази из јединствене историјске путање Алжира, где су суфистички редови наизменично били маргинализовани, кооптирани и мобилисани од стране различитих режима који су тежили верско-политичком оправдању. Значење овог истраживања лежи у чињеници да је суфизам у Алжиру функционисао и као снага отпора и као инструмент државне легитимације. Од антиколонијалне мобилизације суфистичких редова до њихове савремене интеграције у државне институције, завије су играле кључну улогу у политичком пејзажу Алжира, где ислам остаје централни елемент националног идентитета, али истовремено представља поље оштрих сукоба између суфистичких, реформских и салафистичких струја. Налази показују да је алжирска држава стратешки ангажовала суфистичке редове како би уравнотежила исламистичке покрете, учврстила национални идентитет и легитимисала политичку власт. Звије су утицале на изборну политику, бирократске поставке и креирање верске политике, често се усклађујући са државним наративима стабилности и очувања наслеђа. Инструментализација суфизма од стране државе, парадоксално, поткопала је кредибилитет неких завија на локалном нивоу, али је истовремено ојачала њихову институционалну улогу. Њихова позиција осветљава шире динамике верског ауторитета и изградње државе у Северној Африци, истичући спој духовног легитимитета и политичке моћи.

Кључне речи: суфизам, завије, политички ислам, политика, Алжир