

Spirituality under the Shadow of the Conflict

• • • *Sufi Circles in Israel*

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ABSTRACT: This article describes the new “field” of Sufi ideas and practices in Israeli Jewish society and analyzes the mutual relations between new Western Sufi influences and traditional Sufi orders of the Middle East. It focuses on the role of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in this evolving field. While the current rise of interest in spirituality is often described as emphasizing an apolitical approach, the evolving Sufi field in Israel is an example of a field that cannot detach itself from the overarching conflict. Moreover, efforts are made by some of the actors in this field to present Sufism as representing a different Islam and, hence, as a potential bridge between the rival parties. These approaches, as this article shows, have their own complexities and influences on the emerging Sufi field in Israel.

KEYWORDS: coexistence, Islam, Israel, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Jewish-Muslim relations, spirituality, Sufism

In the last 20 years Sufi philosophy and practices have become an intriguing component of the evolving interest in spirituality in Israel. While current interest in spirituality is often described as emphasizing an apolitical approach, the evolving Sufi field in Israel is an example of a spiritual and social dynamic that cannot detach itself from the conflict.¹ Moreover, the very emergence of Sufi circles in Israel is strongly connected to the conflict. This article examines different modes of interaction between the evolving Sufi field and the politics of the conflict. It is based on analysis of different publications (in magazines and on Internet sites) written by participants in the evolving Sufi field or discussing their activities, and on multi-site ethnography at different Sufi events, primarily during the years 2008–2012.



Sufi ideas started to appear as part of the wider Israeli field of current spirituality during the 1990s. Sufi ideas and activities emerged in various forms, including new translations of Sufi literature (especially the poetry of Jalal al-Din al-Rumi), music, and 'spiritual tourism.'² Organized groups of study and practice started to operate (among Israeli Jews) at the beginning of the twenty-first century; A Jewish-Muslim *tariqa* (brotherhood), The Path of Abraham, was established, as well as study circles of the Mevlevi Whirling Dervishes tradition. Meanwhile, scholarly interest in encounters between Judaism and Sufi Islam has also increased (Idel 1991; Fenton 1994; Sekonda 2012). In the last decade increasing numbers of Sufi events, including an annual Sufi Festival (established 2012), have taken place. These developments demonstrate the evolution of Sufism as a differentiated part of current spirituality in Israel.

The emergence of new Sufi circles in Israel has been influenced by the growing presence of Sufi ideas and practices in Western societies in the last decades and especially by Sufi circles in North America.³ Globalization and global migration have accelerated mutual influences between the worlds of traditional Sufi orders (in Islamic surroundings) and new Sufi circles in Western societies. The spread of Sufi Islam is part of a development that questions the former concepts that define a 'Muslim world' as an entity that is somehow separate from Europe and America. Scholarly works have drawn attention to the meaning of these global' Sufi phenomena, especially "in the context of current tensions between 'Western' and Islamic Civilizations," (Ernst 2006: 3; see also Hatina 2007). Emerging Sufi circles in Israel are part of the appearance of global Sufism. However, the development of Sufism in Israel has unique characteristics that distinguish it from the development of Sufism in the West.

First, the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict makes the case of Israeli Sufi circles distinct in several ways. Unlike in Christian-dominated societies, these interactions take place in a state with a dominant Jewish society and a considerable Arab population (of whom the majority are Muslims). The conflict has shaped relations between majority and minority, a fact that is highly important for any understanding of Israeli society in general. National and religious aspects have been intertwined in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from its very beginning. In recent decades, however, religious dimensions of this conflict have been increasing dramatically. One example for this development is the increasing influence of religious actors such as the Jewish national religious settlers' movement (*Gush Emunim*) and Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood among the Palestinians. This causes questions about the meaning of Sufism and its relations to Islam to take specific form in the Israeli context.

Second, in Israel these relatively new efforts to disseminate Sufi spirituality take place in an area where traditional Sufi orders already operate, among the Arab-Palestinian citizens. Although Sufis are a small minority within the Muslim Arab-Palestinian population, a few Sufi Brotherhoods (*tariqas*) are currently active in Israel, and some are active in the West Bank and Gaza.⁴ Sufi orders in Palestinian society were marginalized during the twentieth century (Weismann 2004), and hence they are now struggling to re-establish their place in society. Recently there have been different efforts to reconstruct traditional Sufi centers, such as the recent renovation of the *zawiya* (meeting center) of the *Shadhiliyya-Yashrutiyya* in Acre. This context creates an interesting field of interaction between new Sufi spirituality, mainly in Israeli Jewish society, and local Sufi brotherhoods. Following a brief description of Sufi circles in Israel, I will show how the complex relations between emerging Sufi spirituality and the conflict manifest themselves in several arenas and specific case studies.

Sufism as an Alternative Islam and as a Bridge between Jews and Muslims

The dissemination of Sufism in the West involved different developments and strategies (Hermansen 2000; Sedgwick 2004). One of them was the tendency to represent Sufism as an alternative and moderate Islam. I argue that this tendency has additional importance in the Israeli case. While in the West some actors try to ‘detach’ Sufism from its Islamic origin, more often, in Israel, efforts are made to represent Sufism as a ‘different’ kind of Islam. This has led to creation of a social field in which the quest for alternative spiritual experiences is intertwined with a depiction of Sufism that has political implications in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The tendency to represent Sufism as “a different Islam” raises fundamental questions of what Islam is and who actually represents its heritage. Before discussing how this issue manifests itself in the Israeli case, it is important to highlight the complexities and pitfalls of this discourse in a wider context.

The contradiction between “moderate Sufis” who represents “a different Islam” and “radical fundamentalists” is a problematic dichotomy, which might imply a negative image of all Muslims who are not Sufis. The idea that Sufism represents a moderate and different Islam, however, is not only a Western non-Muslim invention. Among Muslims there is an ongoing global struggle on these questions, with Sufis on the one hand and Salafis and Islamist revivalists on the other hand, each representing different understandings of Islam. Among some current Sufis, this is manifested

also in the understanding of the place of Islam vis-à-vis modernity and especially in relation to the West (Ernst 2006). An example of this tendency can be seen in the preaching and activities of the Naqshbandi leader Sheikh Nazim al Haqqani (1922–2014), who was very involved in a global effort to stem the tide of the worldwide Islamic fundamentalist trend (Weisman 2007, 2012).

At the same time, this approach does not necessarily represent Sufis in general. Scholars of modern Islam have shown that a simple dichotomy between moderate Sufis and fundamentalists is a naïve over-simplification. The relationship between traditional Sufism and reformist/revivalist Islam (sometimes referred to as fundamentalism) is complex. Thus, some of the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood, as Weisman (2007, 2012) has shown, were also connected to Sufi brotherhoods. It is true that several traditional Sufi orders do currently challenge the politics of revivalist and Salafi Muslims (a stance often related to the emergence of Sufi centers in the West), but other moderate Muslims share this view as well. At the same time, Sufis have been—and are still—involved in anti-colonial and national struggles (Gammer 1994). Sufism in the Muslim world, hence, is a multifaceted and heterogeneous phenomenon, and globalization makes it even more varied (Hermansen 2000; Knysh 2000; Sedgwick 2004).

The tendency to portray Islam in these dichotomous terms takes new forms once different Jewish actors refer to the above questions, or even try to portray Islam as they would like to see it. The peaceful Sufi image can be appealing to people who seek to create an artificial distinction between ‘radical’ Muslims and ‘moderates’, the latter being the preferred partners for renewed dialogue with Jews. This approach seems to ignore the fact that the general Muslim reaction to Israel is related to their understanding of the continuous occupation of the territories, and it is shared by many Sufis and revivalist Islamists alike.

The growing interest in Sufism among Israeli Jews, hence, sometimes leads to misrepresentation of other forms of Islam. As Sara Sviri, a scholar of Sufism who is involved in introducing Sufism to the Israeli public has stressed, “...the representation of Sufism as an opposite of fundamentalism is wrong and harmful. It is important to see things in their complexities, and not as an abstraction of black and white, good, and evil” (quoted in Ya’akobson 2010: 42).⁵

An example of this problematic representation can be seen in the words of a scholar of Judaism and Sufi-Jewish dialogue in the Middle Ages, who explains that “it is important to stress that as a matter of fact there is a contradiction between the forms of fundamental Islam and the ‘Sufi spirit’ ... we have even evidence of sheikhs who study Jewish texts together with Jews.”⁶ As I witnessed in different gatherings, such perceptions are common among

many Jews who take part in emerging Sufi circles. Images of ‘peaceful Sufis’ are derived from aspirations to recreate medieval Sufi–Jewish dialogue as a cure for current political and spiritual dilemmas. Still, we should be mindful of the possibility of seeing this historical dialogue between Jews and Sufis as a source of inspiration for inter-religious activities and inter-group relations, without necessarily connecting it to problematic dichotomies among Muslims. The question is to what extent current over-simplified political ideas shape today’s approach to these historical experiences.

Often, the portrayal of Sufism as a spiritual way that can serve as a bridge between Arabs and Jews is part of an overt discourse. The promoters of this approach connect together their interest in Sufism as a spiritual path with visions regarding future relations between Jews and Muslims. One example discussed below is the initiative of the Jewish–Muslim Sufi *tariqa* The Path of Abraham. In other cases, however, this is not an overt discourse, but rather a tendency of different actors that use Sufism (or Sufis) as representatives of Islam and Muslims while operating in other arenas. Examples are the use of Sufis as representatives of local Muslims by state agents, or in the field of coexistence initiatives. Several agents or “players” are involved at the same time in more than one of these different arenas, creating by their activities a fluid Sufi ‘social field’ (Bourdieu 1990: 110–129). I argue that these different manifestations of Sufism tie together a discourse of Sufism as an alternative Islam, and an idea—or practice—of Sufism as a bridge between Jews and Muslims as part of the evolution of Sufism as a mode of current spirituality among Israeli Jews. By analyzing the role of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in this evolving field, I offer a critical examination of the ideas of Sufism as a “different Islam” and as a bridge between Jews and Muslims.

Timing and Context: Sufism as a Moderate Alternative Islam

The preceding description of the Sufi field emerging in Israel might give the impression that interest in Sufism is a result of cultural influences and fruitful encounters. However, this description lacks an important component: political timing and context.

The presence of Sufism in Israel beyond traditional Arab brotherhoods became important at a time of political crisis. Around 1999, articles on Sufism started to appear in various Israeli magazines (for example, Arnon 1999; Elkayam 2001; Shvili 2002; Ben Arie 2005). This period was marked by disappointment with the implementation of the Oslo agreements and the rise of the Islamic movement among Palestinians. The Second Intifada broke out, and there were also clashes between demonstrating Palestinian

citizens of Israel and Israeli security forces (October 2000). Soon afterwards, the September 11 attacks in the United States signaled a new phase in the discussion of global Islam. Although this event was connected to a particular group, it had significant influence on the image of global Islam. Given the context, I suggest that the growth of interest in Sufism in popular media during this period was facilitated by a search for an 'alternative' Islam and for a new basis from which Jews and Muslims might relate to one another. This search took various forms, from a narrow political interest in 'other Muslims' to a more philosophical and spiritual quest in the context of the fierce discourse on the "clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1996). A parallel development is seen in writings by Arab Sufis who introduced Sufism in Hebrew articles (Abu Ras 2003;⁷ Al-Khaldi 2000, 2001).

The weight of the political context was quite evident in many articles on Sufism published in popular Israeli magazines since the late 1990s. Considerable space was frequently dedicated to Sufism in the magazine *Eretz Acheret* (A Different Land), a magazine covering Israel and Judaism, known for its high standards and social agenda. In 2001 and 2002, during the height of the Second Intifada, almost every issue included an article about Sufis or Sufi philosophy, including some in an issue entitled "Facing Islam," published shortly after the September 11 attacks. One example is an interview conducted by Dita Geri with Ziad Abu-Moch, a sheikh of the *Rahmaniyyah al-Khalwatiyya tariqa*. While the interviewer friend was afraid to join her in the journey to the sheikh's town, Baqa al-Gharbiyye, she testified that Abu-Moch is "a Sufi who is not involved in politics, and an educator ... who was involved in founding the Sharia college in his town," (Geri 2002). By portraying a figure of a restrained and moderate religious leader in a time of negative reactions among Jews toward Muslim citizens in Israel, this article demonstrated the search for an alternative Islam.

Other articles in *Eretz Acheret* were written by active actors in the evolving Sufi field, such as Khalid Abu-Ras (2003), a member of the Qadiriyyah Brotherhood. In an article about his sheikh, Abu-Ras 'translates' to Hebrew an inter-Islamic dialogue between Sufis and other Muslims. The writer sees Sufi teaching as an answer to the difficult state of Islamic societies in general and that of Israeli Palestinians in particular.

These (and other) articles, although varying in their perspectives, represent an attempt to develop an alternative basis for interaction with Islam and the Muslim world through a 'spiritual discourse' between Judaism and Sufism. These discussions in a reputable magazine demonstrate the movement of the discourse on Sufism into wider public spaces, beyond the New Age arena.

Other articles dealt with the political context in a more direct fashion. An interview with the journalist Yossi Klein Halevi (Zoriya 2001) is especially

telling in this regard. The interview highlights his journey to meet Sheikh Abdallah Bablit, leader of the Rifa'iyya *tariqa* in the Nuseirat refugee camp in Gaza. In his book, Halevi (2001) had written of this meeting while referring to incidents from his army reserve service in the area (see also Halevi 1995). In the interview he highlights his encounters with moderate Sufi sheikhs. When asked what he had learned from the journey, Halevi differentiated between political and spiritual lessons:

The political answer is that our former partner for the peace process aims for a holy war of Islam against us. But we can deny him this pleasure if we will highlight, report on, and explain the moderate and peaceful elements—this anonymous minority [among Muslim Palestinians] who strive for peace that I met in different corners of the land. My spiritual answer is that not any Palestinian, Christian, nor Jew, knows how God works. (Zoriya 2001: 36)

Halevi's partner (and guide) in his search for Sufis was Eliyahu McLean, a peace activist involved in Sufi circles in Israel. Their visit to Gaza was arranged by a Sufi sheikh from the Mount of Olives. The *raison d'être* of these encounters was to find an alternative Islam, as a possible solution to the logjam in the conflict. The journalist who interviewed Halevi concludes her article by saying: "Halevi tries to repress the unresolved dialogue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and move to the unknown dialogue between the Jew and the Muslim" (Zoriya 2001: 33).

The articles described above reflect a wish to find an alternative Islam, given the context of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and demonstrate the desire for Jewish-Muslim encounters. The author's observations of such encounters, presented in the following paragraphs, expose a more complex picture than the idealistic accounts that appeared in the popular articles just discussed.

Sufis and Coexistence Initiatives

Some social activists in emerging Sufi circles emphasize the role of Sufism in peace and coexistence initiatives as a potential bridge between Jewish Israelis and Muslim Palestinians. The rise of interest in Sufism opened up new opportunities in the already packed field of activities designed to promote interaction between Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel (Rabinowitz 2000) and to contribute to the peace process with the Palestinians in the territories. However, there is a tension between serious engagement in coexistence activities that values the Sufi contribution, and the temptation to use Sufi sheikhs and Sufi ideas as 'decoration' for such initiatives.

Before describing attempts to integrate Sufi encounters with coexistence activities, it is important to understand the role of traditional Arab Sufis in these events and their motivations to take part in them. In Israel, inter-religious coexistence efforts cannot ignore the different national identities of Arabs and Jews. The tendency towards interreligious dialogue, often found among Sufi brotherhoods (Ernst 2006: 3–4), is manifested among some traditional Sufis in Israel as involvement in coexistence initiatives. This dynamic is reinforced by the motivation to suggest an alternative to prominent leaders among Islamic reformers who represent themselves as hardliners toward Israel (e.g. from Hamas in Gaza or those of “northern” faction of the Islamic movement inside Israel).

It is also important to understand how the overall coexistence ‘industry’ shapes these initiatives among Jews and Sufi Arabs. Most Sufis who are involved in Israel’s coexistence industry are doing it for its own sake, but at the same time, consciously or unconsciously, such activity can be worthwhile for other purposes. Shalev (2011: 17) noted, “As a focal point of global interest, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict attracts resource-rich activities.” He describes how Ali, a leader of a Sufi brotherhood, introduced himself: “I lead groups in conflict; I set up 99 percent of the projects for dialogue, coexistence, and inter-religious understanding in this country with Jewish partners.” Shalev points out that these activities serve as a source for power and charisma for him, enabling him to meet influential people and world leaders.

The activities of Eliyahu McLean are an example of the integration of Sufism with coexistence activities. McLean was born in San Francisco, grew up in Hawaii, and had been influenced by New Age spirituality since his childhood. His mother, a Jew from Brooklyn, and his father, the son of a Baptist minister, were students of a Sikh guru. Later he was ordained by his spiritual teacher, the late Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a major leader of revival Judaism in North America, as a *rodef shalom*, or “pursuer of peace” (Patrick 2004). McLean has been frequently portrayed as a prominent peace activist and interreligious bridge-builder, e.g., in the Israeli journal of new spirituality and alternative medicine, *Hayim Acherim* (Alternative Living): “His close connections with Sufi sheikhs, his proximity to Islam and his belief in spiritual work without expectations of immediate result keep motivating him to create dialogue between the parties even in this difficult period” (Patrick 2004). McLean has been active in *Mevakshei Shalom*, an organization for “social change, promoting peace and spiritual encounters between the religions.” He also established the Jerusalem Peacemakers Holy Land Tour together with the Naqshbandi Sufi Sheikh Aziz al-Bukhari from Jerusalem (aiming, it seems, for a foreign audience). McLean has been involved in arranging many Jewish-Arab

interreligious encounters. One is portrayed by Rabbi Ohad Ezrachi (2002), himself an active agent of new Jewish spirituality (Werczberger 2011). Ezrachi describes a meeting in the Galilee during Hanukah 2002:

Gavriel Meir, with the assistance of Eliyahu McLean, gathered a big circle of nice people, maybe seventy altogether, which included many Jews, respectable Druze and Muslim Arab leaders such as the old *mukhtar* [head of village] of Kfar Yassif, Arab-Christian peace activists, and even an Indian healer from New Mexico who prayed in his forefathers' language a prayer for the inhabitants of the Holy Land. It was somehow empowering to sit there ... a shared hope for a different life. (Ezrachi 2002)

Gavriel Meir, who] organizes the meetings with McLean, is a "musician ... a Jewish and interfaith ritual leader and ... a peace maker." Meir combines new-age spirituality with coexistence initiatives. Among his influential teachers he mentions Native American Shamans, Buddhist teachers (Thich Nhat Hanh, Joanna Macy) and Sufi sheiks from Africa, Turkey, the Holy Land, and India.⁸

Rabbi Ezrachi's account of the above meeting suggests that it had aspects of a "spiritual supermarket," sometimes seen as a characteristic of New Age, as evidenced by the intermingling of representatives from several different spiritual traditions (including Ezrachi himself as a representative of "Jewish spirituality").⁹ They encourage the utilization of spiritual efforts to change the harsh political reality. As expressed by Ezrachi (*ibid.*), "creating a shared hope and shared 'spiritual space' can, by itself, bring a change." The Sufis are not mentioned directly in this account, but they are part of this trend. On his personal Internet site Meir describes his achievements: "Led Interfaith Rituals for Peace in Europe (Auschwitz), USA Kabbalat Shabbat & Sufi Zikr with Palestinian Sufi Sheik in Lakota Sundance." New Age characteristics, however, can also be understood as the somewhat romantic approach towards the political sphere that is expressed by these activities. Indeed, providing hope and gathering together people from different religious backgrounds has its own value, but its influence on promoting peace or bridging Palestinian-Jewish relations is questionable. As for relations between Jewish and Arab citizens inside Israel, the focus on religious encounters can be criticized for sidelining discussion of more concrete political issues such as inequality in state resources and services to citizens.

Given that coexistence activities incorporating Sufism are usually initiated by Jews, they can be seen as too similar to the historical efforts of Jewish Israeli state agents to enhance religious identities among Palestinians in Israel as a way of weakening shared Palestinian identity (Benziman and Mansour 1996), and it is also questionable if such initiatives can actually

empower the Palestinian population and not reinforce existing power structures. I do not claim that this was McLean's or Meir's goal. Their initiatives seem to come from inner enthusiasm and goodwill. They may also have succeeded in creating grassroots connections between Jews and Arabs and in spreading the message of peace to others. However, a critical review of their activities might allow them—or others—to avoid these problematic aspects.

The above observations receive additional support from Dr. Dov Maimon, who has been involved for many years in Muslim-Jewish dialogue, including interreligious activities involving Sufis and Jews. Maimon is an Orthodox Jew, often introduced as a Haredi rabbi. He won a coveted prize in France for his dissertation (about a thirteenth-century dialogue between mystical Islam and Judaism), and was a founding member of the Interfaith Encounters Association. Maimon's criticism seems to go beyond the Sufi issue: He has come to understand that

if you are not handling the basic problems of unequal power relations, you are actually strengthening them ... political redemption will not come through spiritual encounters—there is a need for social change. With all the respect, and with all the beauty of these encounters, how many times it can be repeated?¹⁰

Maimon's statements reveal a sense of disillusionment and an adoption of a more critical stance toward the possibility that current spirituality might have a quick influence in the political sphere.

The Utilization of Sufis as Representatives of Islam and of Muslims

The quest to find a different Islam can easily lead to a view of local Sufi Arabs as representatives of all local Muslims or of Islam in general. As noted, Sufis make up a small percentage of Israel's Muslims, but their willingness to engage in dialogue with Jews makes them a potential partner when some official authorities or organizations look for representatives of Islam. This general tendency has different manifestations in different contexts. For some local Sufi orders, this provides opportunities for additional resources and connections.

Shalev (2011) describes how a Sufi leader was invited to a ceremony at the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Israel. Actually, the sheikh was invited not because of his identity as a Sufi leader, but simply because the Kazakhs were looking for a representative of a moderate Islamic approach. The

Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbayev has made efforts to present Kazakhstan as a country of religious freedom and moderate Islam and to maintain good relations with Israel. Political moderation, in this context, is used as a resource. Relations among Muslims are also affected: When the sheikh gives a religious sermon in Hebrew and the 'masters of the land', the Jews, are there to listen, it emphasizes the important status of the sheikh in the eyes of his local Arab followers (*ibid.*).¹¹ However, it can also put the local Arab Sufis in conflict with more radical segments of Islam in Israel. Such tensions became evident in the case of the sheikh of Qadiriyyah from Nazareth and his family members, who were attacked by Salafi extremists for their collaboration with Jews. The sheikh connected the attacks to his continued participation in religious and coexistence projects with Jews, as well as to Salafis' reactions to Sufi practices such as dance and the use of music in Islamic rites (Feldinger 2012). Following the attack, Jewish partners attended a special meeting in Nazareth to express support for the sheikh.¹²

The place of Sufis in the sensitive context of Jerusalem is even more problematic. Trapped between Israel and the occupied territories, Palestinians in Jerusalem are residents of the city but not citizens of Israel. As a result, most of the Palestinian population of Jerusalem suffers from more economic and political difficulties than Palestinian citizens of Israel. Although officially they can take part in elections for the city mayor and for other city institutions, most of them boycott the local elections. They adopt a practical approach in cooperating with the municipality only in issues of everyday life, while symbolically most of them stress their connections to the Palestinian Authority (Cohen 2007). This creates problems for the officials of Jerusalem, who make efforts to show that the municipality of the Holy City provides a place for all religions and cooperates with Muslims. When officials need a Muslim at an official event, they seek out local Sufis rather than other Muslims. Are they hoping for the appearance of some Muslim legitimacy? It seems that Sufi sheikhs are willing to cooperate and accept invitations to formal municipal events because they already hold a marginalized position in local Arab society. Also, as we will see below, they are dependent on Jewish cooperation and on the Jewish establishment.

In 2010 and 2011, I took part in some official municipal ceremonies, which included representatives of various religions and religious organizations in Jerusalem, such as the mayor's official reception to celebrate the civil (and also Christian) New Year. One Sufi sheikh was the only Muslim who attended these events. At one event the mayor said a few words in memory of another Sufi leader, Sheikh Al-Bukhari, who had come to a similar event in previous years and passed away in May 2010. Sheikh Al-Bukhari's activities and his relations with the state and other social actors

shed additional light on the complex situation of 'traditional' Sufi leaders in the context of the conflict, particularly in Jerusalem.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Tragic Fate of Abdul-Aziz al-Bukhari

"The most important local context of Sufism is the state," argues Ernst (2006). "Whether the state attempts to outlaw Sufism or merely regulates its institutional centers, much of the energy of contemporary Sufi groups must go into negotiating the forms of their social existence within the limitations imposed by the state" (ibid). In Israel the state does not outlaw Sufism; as discussed above; sometimes state agencies even prefer Sufis over other Muslims. Still, negotiating with the state has an impact on traditional Sufis. It shapes their relationships with other Muslims *and* with Jews with interest in Sufism. An example of a dynamic that demonstrates all these active forces is the tragic story of Sheikh Abdul-Aziz al-Bukhari.

Al-Bukhari was the sheikh of the Naqshbandi *tariqa* in Jerusalem. His name testifies to his Uzbek (Bukharian) roots; the Naqshbandi is not a local Arabic *tariqa*. Rather, the sheikh's family held, for generations, a place in the Old City that originally served Central Asian pilgrims. After studying in Turkey with the *Mevlevi* Order and working as a manager of U.S. fast food restaurants, al-Bukhari returned to Jerusalem to continue his family's traditional role as Naqshbandi sheikhs of Jerusalem. From the 1990s he was involved in different interreligious and coexistence initiatives, such as his cooperation with Eliyahu McLean mentioned earlier. He also hosted many groups of tourists—both local and foreign—in his family compound in the Old City.

This involvement had put him in a vulnerable position: Both tourism and the coexistence industry are problematic and sensitive interfaces for the Palestinian national movement, especially in Jewish-controlled Jerusalem. Al-Bukhari's identity added to this sensitivity; he was Sufi and stressed his Uzbek ancestry—hence he was 'not quite Palestinian'. This identity symbolically allowed him to develop relations with Jewish activists and Jewish organizations, but at the same time it demonstrates the even more problematic nature of relating to him as a representative of the local Muslim population. Al-Bukhari also had affiliations with Sheikh Nazim al-Haqqani, who, more than others, positioned himself as a master of a global struggle against Islamic fundamentalists (Weismann 2007, 2012). This connection located al-Bukhari on the front line of a global struggle between different representations of Islam, in addition to his problematic position regarding the national struggle of Palestinians in Jerusalem.

My personal acquaintance with al-Bukhari, as well as testimonies from others, reveals a peaceful man who did not look for conflicts and whose involvement in coexistence and interreligious dialogue was sincere.¹³ However, all this was not enough to negate the tensions. As one of my interviewees described it, “On the one hand, each time he wanted to travel outside Israel he needed a certification from the *Shabak* [the Israeli security service]. On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood went against him. He was in a difficult position, trying to propitiate everybody.”

With the growing tensions in Jerusalem, it appears that al-Bukhari’s tensions with local radical Islamists became fatal to him. Officially, al-Bukhari died of a heart attack at 61 years old. However, there were many rumors that his death was not an accident.¹⁴ A clear connection between al-Bukhari’s death and his rivalry with radical Islamists was made by Ghassan Manasra, head of the *Qadiriyyah* Sufi brotherhood in Nazareth. As described above, Manasra and his family were subject to violent attacks by local Salafis. While telling a journalist about these attacks, Manasra added that “following the attacks, [he] decided to spend two weeks in meditation, in order to avoid the fate of Sheikh Abdul-Aziz al-Bukhari, who suffered from a fatal heart attack following similar attacks [by Salafis]” (Feldinger 2012). Al-Bukhari’s story tragically demonstrates the complex influences the politics of the conflict, state agencies, and state policies have on an evolving interreligious discourse where Sufism plays an important role.

New Sufi Groups and Circles

The most salient expression of the emerging Sufi field in Israel is the creation of new Sufi groups, and even new Sufi brotherhoods. Two circles are central in the evolving Sufi field: The Path of Abraham, a “Jewish-Muslim *tariqa*,” and groups that focus on the study and practice of the *Mevlevi* Whirling Dervishes tradition. The development and activities of each of these groups deserves a separate discussion, which is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I describe how these activities have taken shape given the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Path of Abraham was established as a Jewish-Muslim brotherhood (Sviri 2008: 56) and consists of Israeli Jewish ‘seekers’ as well as Arab Muslim Sufis. The bilingual name *derekh Avraham* (Hebrew) or *al-tariqa al-Ibrahimiyya* (Arabic) refers to Abraham, the forefather of both nations and religions, and expresses the desire to foster spiritual dialogue between the Jewish and Islamic traditions. It creates an alternative shared space for interpersonal encounters and spiritual activities. While the “inner circle” of

activists is relatively small (a few dozen), it involves a wider circle of a few hundred who are interested in the subject, and more who were exposed to different activities.

The main founders of this organization were Professor Avraham Elqayam, a scholar of kabbalah and mysticism, Sheikh Ghassan Manasra of the Nazareth Qadiriyyah *tariqa*, and the conservative Rabbi Roberto Arviv. They are also sometimes referred to as, “the professor, the sheikh, and the rabbi” (Manasra 2012).

The group activities were halted during the October 2000 events. These protests by Palestinian citizens of Israel turned into riots, the police reacted harshly, and thirteen Palestinian citizens and one Israeli Jew were killed. In addition to suspending activities, The Path of Abraham stopped publishing names of Sufi sheikhs connected to the group, to avoid endangering them. Although the violence slowed activities and revealed the sensitive position of the Palestinian Sufis, in the long run it seems to have added motivation to continue the activities. Jewish group members in particular have expressed their vision of the need for an alternative dialogue as a protest to the general atmosphere (Ron 2000). Later, the activities were renewed and even intensified.

Jewish participants clearly outnumber Arab participants, and meetings usually take place in Tel Aviv or Jaffa. However, the group also organizes meetings in more ‘Arab’ settings on a regular basis. This includes meetings organized by the Arab–Sufi brotherhoods on their grounds, especially the *Qadiriyyah* in Nazareth, but also others, such as the renewed compound of *Shadhiliyya Yashrutiyya tariqa* in Acre.

The Path of Abraham, like many other Jewish-Arab organizations, is characterized by the basic structural inequalities that exist between Jews and Arabs in Israeli society. This is reflected, for example, in economic differences between middle- and upper-class Jewish participants, who usually come from the central cities, and the Arab participants who, almost by definition, come from the peripheries. However, at least in some sense this is counter-balanced; choosing a Sufi framework and making interreligious dialogue secondary highlights the ‘cultural capital’ of local Arab Sufis.

The activities of The Path of Abraham address the confluence of the Sufi-Jewish dialogue and the Israeli Palestinian conflict directly. Developing a spiritual dialogue in the context of the current conflict is the *raison d’être* of this organization. Paradoxically, this starting point allows, at least potentially, for different dynamics than do other activities described earlier. It seems that over the years there is greater ability among these Sufi activists to construct a shared space of spiritual exchange, without necessarily connecting it immediately to wider political issues. This, paradoxically, indicates that they may be making a significant contribution to the wider fields

of Jewish-Arab coexistence and Jewish-Muslim dialogue. This hypothesis, however, requires additional study.

Below is a brief discussion of the recent development of the practice of the Mevlevi Whirling Dervishes tradition in Israel. In the past few years dozens of Jewish Israelis have been learning and practicing this tradition, led by a few local teachers. Most of the teachers see themselves as students of Sheikha Khadija, a Sufi master from the United States.¹⁵ Most of the practitioners are Jews from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds.

At first glance this is a development that resembles similar groups in the United States and elsewhere in the West. In its meetings, and in its focus of practicing the whirling dances, it signifies its constitution as an autonomous Sufi sphere within the larger field of current spirituality. Still, the aspirations to connect Sufism with an alternative approach to the conflict exist in this case as well. Khadija's first visit to Israel, in 2005, was organized by Ronen Yizkhaki (2006), a dance teacher and social entrepreneur, who hoped that she could "facilitate an encounter with a teacher external to the Israeli reality capable of bringing together students and friends from different religions, Israelis and Palestinians." Since then, once a year, she comes to Israel and holds classes in different locations. Most of the local teachers are Jews. Female teachers among them take central leading positions.

Among them is a couple, Ihab and Ora Balaha, an Arab man and a Jewish woman. She became a teacher of the whirling dancing, while he teaches Sufi philosophy. In some meetings, such as the Sufi Festival, their performance clearly symbolizes the 'alternative' option that the Sufi path offers for Jewish-Muslim relations. At the same time, the content of these meetings tends to neglect some of the more fundamental problems that the Arab population experiences. Sometimes other Arabs who have connections to local Sufis also take part in meetings, especially in special events in the center of the *Shadhiliyya Yashrutiyya* in Acre.¹⁶ It is also interesting to note that some of the practitioners started to arrange study groups to learn the Arabic language. However, all these examples only accompany the main issue—the practice of the Whirling Dervishes and the interest in Sufi poems and philosophy. Moreover, despite Yizkhaki's ideas for encounters described above, it seems that these Sufi circles represent newer tendencies of avoiding direct connection of Sufi activities with political issues.

The development of the Whirling Dervishes in Israel is a Jewish phenomenon that serves the need of urban Jews rather than truly bringing together students from different religions. Their activities, and the way they approach the conflict, suffer from the same problems and paradoxes discussed above. However, the examples of the Arabic lessons and continuing collaborations with Arab Sufis suggest that this is also part of an

evolving Sufi sphere that has, as well, a potential for creating an interesting Jewish-Arab dialogue.

Conclusion

On its way to Israel, global Sufism has been reformulated in a new context where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and issues with Jewish-Muslim relations cannot be ignored. Sufi spirituality in Israel, though part of a wider New Age spirituality, is not detached from politics. Some components of the evolving Sufi field seem to exist inside 'spiritual bubbles' (such as in some depictions of Sufi poetry and Sufi dances outside their original context), sharing a tendency with some circles in the West to detach Sufism from Islam. However, this is not what has usually occurred in the Sufi field in Israel. On the contrary, social dynamics related to the conflict have shaped the new and growing initiatives and interest in Sufism. This dynamic has influenced the characteristics of encounters between 'new' Sufis (mostly Jews with interest in Sufism) and traditional Sufi Arabs. Moreover, attempts to challenge the traditional ideas about the conflict often stood behind these initiatives.

The apolitical spiritual approach (even though it can never be truly apolitical) and attempts to integrate Sufism into coexistence activities both have their own political implications, often unexpected and not obvious. In this sense, the influence of the emerging Sufi field in Israel, and especially the attempt to foster Sufi-Jewish dialogue, is full of potential pitfalls. As we saw, when Israeli magazines search for an 'alternative' Islam, they often portray an oversimplified image of Sufism. It can be easy to forget that Palestinian Sufis often experience the same dilemmas and even oppression as other Palestinians. Spiritual connections cannot replace addressing the conflict's core issues.

In fact, some of the enthusiasm to engage Sufis or Sufism by others results in maintaining the existing structures and power relations between Jews and Arabs. Moreover, they tend to exclude the majority of Palestinians, those who are not close to Sufi ideas or Sufi brotherhoods. The attempts to present Sufis as representatives of a "different" Islam often go hand in hand with a political orientation that seeks to eliminate the connections between Jewish-Muslim relations and the actual tensions resulting from the Israeli-Palestinian national struggle. But while it is easy to criticize many of the developments discussed above, a strictly cynical analysis is no less problematic.

Can spirituality, particularly Sufism, be harnessed for social and political purposes? Encounters between Jews and Sufi Muslims simultaneously

contain contradictory possibilities. On the one hand, these encounters open possibilities for new or improved relationships. On the other hand, they can serve as a framework for unbalanced relations while stressing unrealistic or romantic expectations. Any declared attempt to 'use' spiritual encounters as an answer to political conflict raises severe and problematic issues. However, these problematic aspects do not contradict the idea that focusing on the spiritual encounters by themselves (not as an instrument for 'outer' objectives), can create genuine proximity between people from conflicting sides. This, sometimes, can be followed by other developments that will reshape the relations, or at least some aspects of them. A Jewish proverb seems to be relevant here: "Through repeatedly doing something not for its own sake one eventually does do it for its own sake."

The focus on spiritual dialogue per se creates a shared framework, an alternative ground for encounters between Jews and Arabs. However, it is hard to differentiate this specific mode of operation from other types of activities. The different case studies and arenas discussed in this article are part of one social field, with many complicated connections and influences on one another. Some, even many, of the people who are active in the more 'narrow' framework of spiritual encounters are also active in other arenas: attempts to use Sufism in the wider field of coexistence, or the tendency to depict local Sufis as 'alternative' representatives of Islam.¹⁷ Therefore, it is not always possible to separate types of activities into analytical categories, nor can one easily make clear distinctions between those who participate in Sufi activities 'for their own sake', and those that integrate Sufism into coexistence activities. However, thinking theoretically about these options is important for the understanding of this emergent Sufi field.

Sufi activities in Israel provide opportunities for Jews and Muslims to have different kinds of interactions and to develop new contacts within and across religious groups. The new interest of non-Muslims in Sufism can also make additional resources available to Palestinian Sufis in areas such as cultural production, education, and tourism. Although one must be aware of the complicated influence of the conflict and potential unintended consequences of bringing Jews and Palestinians together around Sufism, it is worthwhile to recognize Sufism as a valuable facilitator of spiritual and cultural dialogue, shared now by Muslims and Jews in Israel.

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NOTES

1. By 'current spirituality' I refer to a phenomenon often described as "New Age spirituality." See Huss (2014) and Lynch (2007).
2. Yaqub ibn Yusuf (originally Joshua Heckelman), who immigrated from the United States and defines himself as a Jewish Sufi, was one of the pioneers of Sufism among Jewish Israelis. He represents the interaction between global Sufism, local Arab Sufis, and Jewish mysticism. See Yagan (2009, with Ibn Yusuf, foreword and editor) and Bram and Hatina (2014).
3. See El-Zein (2000), Sedgwick (2004), Hermansen (2000), Webb (1995), Westermund (2004), and Malik and Hinnels (2006).
4. See Weismann (2004) and Svir (2008: 56) for descriptions of the different Sufi brotherhoods.
5. Svir is quoted in a popular travel magazine, another example of the discussion on Sufism in popular culture. See an additional interview with her in Heler-Eshed (2008).
6. Conversation with Professor Yosef Fenton (Ramon and Ilai 2002: 28)
7. The name of this writer appears in Hebrew as "Ibn-Rosh" or "Ibn-Ras." However, it seems that it should be "Abu Ras." See the post dated 26 September 2008 on <https://shoeyraz.wordpress.com/>. See also the list of lecturers (Arabic Language and Literature) on the Hebrew site of Key College: <http://www.kaye.ac.il/about>.

8. Meir was born in Argentina to a Rabbi and educationalist father. He is also the co-founder (with Elias Jabour) of the Sulkah project. See <http://www.gabrielmeyerhalevy.com/#!peace> (accessed on 7 June 2013). Sufi sheikhs from Sakhnin took part in the Sulkha Festival.
9. On characteristics of New Age spirituality see Hammer (2004), Hanegraaff (1996), and Heelas (1996).
10. Based on a telephone interview with Dr. Maimon (June 2012). See also Shippin (2006), on a conference on peace and interreligious dialogue in *Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam*, where Maimon participated with academics and religious figures, including Sheikh Ziad Abu-Much, founder of the first Islamic College (who belongs to the Rahmaniyyah al-Khalwatiyya Sufi brotherhood).
11. Shalev's (2011) research also shows how other Sufi leader, from older generation, use his position as a means of resistance and criticism of the positions of Arabs in Israel and the Territories.
12. A very different dynamic of Sufis as representatives of Islam, which requires a separate discussion, is the activities of the sheikhs of the *Rahmaniyyah-Khalwatiyya tariqa* in the *Baqā al-Gharbiyye*, which led to the establishment of *Al-Qasemi Academic College of Education*.
13. Some of my Jewish interviewees said that he was one of the "deeper" thinkers among traditional Sufis in Israel/Palestine.
14. I have also heard rumors that he was poisoned. Some also referred to a family dispute over the Naqshbandi property in Jerusalem, and some combined a family dispute with the interventions of radical Muslims.
15. Sheikha Khadija, originally Marcia Radin, was born in the 1950s to a Jewish-American family. She established the Dervish Retreat Center in upstate New York in 1999. See <http://www.whirling-dervish.org/about.htm> (retrieved 6.4.2014).
16. See, for example, Elkhadaz (2009).
17. An example of individuals' involvement in different kinds of Sufi activities can be seen in the organization Impact Se or the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education. One of the founders and staff is Dr. Eldad Pardo, a scholar of Iran, is described on this site as "a devoted interfaith activist of the Islamic-Jewish Sufi Way, Al-Tariqa Al-Ibrahimiyya, [who] was also granted the title of Sheikh by the Muslim Qadiriyyah order." See: <http://www.impact-se.org/about/staff.html> (accessed on 23 May 2013).

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