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## UAE's Impact on Sufism in Egypt

Mohamed Amasha

Egypt has witnessed a boom in Sufi discourse in the last few years. This boom has been manifested in hosting Sufi scholars on satellite channels, a growing interest in their news in the press, and in the employment of some of their symbols in high-level positions in the country, in addition to making way for the Sufi art groups to spread all over Egypt. However, this proliferation of Sufism coincided with imposition of full restriction on other Islamic trends such as the Muslim Brotherhood as well as some Salafist groups.

This study seeks to explore the impact of politics on this phenomenon, and specifically the role played by the United Arab Emirates in this regard (and of course the Egyptian regime's influence) on the Sufi discourse in Egypt. Anyway, the relationship of the UAE and accordingly the Egyptian regime with the religious discourse, especially that of Sufism, is in fact based on achievement of interests. While regimes seek maintaining survival, maximizing their benefits and reducing their losses, Sufism seeks prominence and spread of Sufi ideas.

### Two Types of Sufism

This study claims that there are two types of Sufism in Egypt: one is Emirati-sponsored Sufism and the other is Tariqa-based traditional Sufism (both of which are organically linked to Al-Azhar and its leaders). Both the UAE and the Sisi regime support Sufism to confront the threat of the political religious discourse, manifested by the so-called "Political Islam" groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. They also aim to make the Sufi discourse (especially the Emirati-oriented Sufism) dominate the Islamic Sunni world and become the official religious discourse in Egypt. In addition, Sufism plays an

important role in stabilizing regimes, preventing any change, and maintaining the status quo under the pretext of stability. Therefore, the relation between the two sides is based on interests, where Sufis can spread their ideas, while regimes consolidate their position in power.

### UAE influence on Sufism in Egypt

We have noticed that there are two types of Sufi discourse in Egypt: one is UAE-sponsored Sufism (that has appeared recently) and the other is the traditional Tariqa-based Sufism (that is rooted in history). The phenomenon of traditional Tariqa-based Sufism has developed with popular support and adoption, unlike the UAE-sponsored Sufism which has emerged at the hands of the UAE authorities. Traditional Tariqa-based Sufism has appeared in Egypt with the development of schools of asceticism since the early Hijri centuries to face a corrupt reality (including corruption of rulers); so it adopted recalling the importance of asceticism and preoccupation with self-purification. However, the UAE-based Sufism has emerged in the palaces of the rulers of the UAE since 2002, where the UAE officials used to host Sufi ulema (scholars) [both Tariqa-based or otherwise] to participate in Arab and international events, and lavishly spent money on them under the pretext of appreciation of ulema – until a new Sufi discourse has developed to serve Emirati-oriented objectives.

While the traditional Sufi discourse is a spiritually-oriented discourse focusing on self-purification and love of Prophet Mohamed's family, the UAE-sponsored Sufi discourse is a political, ulemai (related to ulemas or scholars), as well as spiritual discourse; as most prominent figures of the UAE-sponsored Sufism are Sufi ulemas preoccupied with facing the Salafi, Jihadi, and Brotherhood ideas. Although both types of Sufism in Egypt are pro-regime, the authorities aim to grant the UAE-sponsored Sufism official

religious authority, for their effective role in society as they occupy official religious positions, in addition to being more close to the regime than those engaged in the traditional Tariqa-based Sufi activities.

### UAE, Al Azhar and Sufism

It is important to address the relationship between Sufism and Al-Azhar, where the UAE uses Al-Azhar to achieve its objectives in this regard. In fact, there is an organic relationship between Sufism and Al-Azhar, as many senior Azhar officials adopt Sufi thought. Al-Azhar's organic link to the UAE-Sufism in particular is manifested in joining Sufi institutions established by the UAE:

- Ahmed Al-Tayyib (Sheikh of Al-Azhar) is Chairman of the Muslim Council of Elders (MSE);
- Both Hassan Al-Shafei (former head of Al-Azhar Sheikh Office) and Mahmoud Zaqzouq (former Awqaf Chairman) are MSE members;
- Former Grand Mufti of Egypt Ali Gomaa is member of the advisory board of Tabah Foundation;
- Shawki Allam (current Grand Mufti of Egypt) is member of the Board of Trustees of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies and head of the General Secretariat for Fatwa Authorities Worldwide.

In fact, the support provided by the UAE (and of course the current regime in Egypt) to the UAE-sponsored Sufism is mainly aimed to give it religious dominance over the official religious authority in Egypt and even in the whole Sunni world.

Both types of Sufism in Egypt support the survival of current regime through undertaking necessary functions for maintaining its survival, including legitimization of both officials and authority positions; social control, whether through direct fatwas

that oblige submission to the ruler and forbid revolting against him, or by attacking the anti-regime Islamic discourse; and social stability, either through posing security as an excuse for accepting the fait accompli, or through discouraging any move for change by directing the battle from facing political tyranny to fighting atheism.

\***Read** the complete study in Arabic [here](#).

\***Sufism**, defined as “the phenomenon of mysticism within Islam” is characterized by particular values, ritual practices, doctrines and institutions which began very early in Islamic history and represents "the main manifestation and the most important and central crystallization of “mystical practice in Islam”. Practitioners of Sufism have been referred to as “Sufis”. Historically, Sufis have often belonged to different Turuq, or “orders” – congregations formed around a grand master referred to as a Wali. These orders usually meet for spiritual sessions (majalis) in meeting places known as Zawiya.