

## The Influence of Sufism on the Sudanese Belt *Sūfisms “Sudānas joslas” zonā*

Salah M. Sharief

University of Latvia  
Faculty of Humanities  
Višvalža iela 4a, Rīga, LV-1050

### Abstract

As of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Middle East and Africa have been the birthplace of extremist organizations espousing a radical ideology, which encourages violence against the dissenters and branding them apostates. Organizations like Al-Qā'ida and Dā'ish/ISIL performed numerous terrorist acts around the world, but especially in the Middle East. Other Salafi organizations like Boko Haram also gained recognition in international media disproportionate to their actual size. This discourse was behind the coinage of the term 'Islamic Terrorism', which casts a shadow of suspicion on any member of the Muslim community worldwide and served as an impetus for the writing of this paper as a means of shedding light on other Muslim organizations, which arguably are much larger in scope and influence. At the same time, these organizations are peaceful in nature and characterized by an incomparable level of tolerance.

In my quest for sources of both narratives, I traced the history of the advent and dissemination of Islam in Africa – such a diverse geographic, cultural, ethnic and religious setting. I discovered that whereas the advent of Islam in the northern part of the region (North Africa) unfolded relatively quickly through invasion, it entered the Sudanese Belt (an area from the red sea shore of modern-day Sudan in the East to today's Mauritania by the Atlantic Ocean in the West) more gradually via trade relations and the influence of Sufi sheikhs. They lived with the people indigenous to the area and seamlessly weaved themselves into the fabric of the societies they came to counsel.

This paper argues that the areas where Sufi Islam is present have been largely shielded from extremist ideologies, and the reverse is true for North Africa, where Islam arrived in a relatively short period of invasion. The argument is presented by looking at the example of modern-day Sudan, which leads me to examine the phenomenon of Sufi orders entering political life through direct involvement by establishing political parties, which propelled them into direct confrontation with representatives of a different branch of the Islamic movement in politics, namely, the Islamists. Arguably, the strongest Islamist party in the Middle East and Africa of today is the Muslim Brotherhood. I look at the diverging values of the two. Where the Muslim Brotherhood is arguably seeking absolute political power through a rigid organizational structure, the Sufi orders have been integrating into the political life of the country of residence. I argue that this example constitutes an opportunity to renegotiate the social contract between different factions of the society and lay the foundation for a different Islamic narrative. One based on pluralism, tolerance and understanding, which has the potential to gradually transform the sociopolitical environment of the entire Sudanese Belt in this direction.

**Keywords:** Sufism, Al-Qā'ida, Dā'ish, Boko Haram, South Sudan.

## Introduction

For a decade or so, the news have become a stage for seemingly incessant scenes of bloody violence imposed upon civilians by terrorists. Organizations that have spread throughout the world of today under different names such as Al-Qā'ida, Dā'ish, Boko Haram etc. have been responsible for many of these attacks committed in the name of Islam. This phenomenon was behind the introduction of the term "Islamic Terrorism" into the public discourse. Unfortunately, this has had the effect of viewing the entire body of Muslim population through this lens. This has been particularly pronounced in the case of Muslims living in the Middle East and Africa, which drove me to write this paper as a means of illuminating the peaceful, tolerant nature of Islamic tradition exemplified by the influence of Sufi orders among the Muslims of this region, which has been conspicuously absent from public discourse as of late.

I have looked at the spread of Islam throughout Africa as a means of shedding light on the influence of Islamic tradition on a diverse geographic, cultural, ethnic and religious setting.

Whereas the advent of Islam in the northern part of the region (North Africa) unfolded through invasion, it entered the southern part via trade relations and the influence of Sufi sheikhs, who lived with the people indigenous to the area and seamlessly weaved themselves into the fabric of the societies they came to counsel. I shall refer to this area as the Sudanese Belt. The civilization of this part of Africa crystallized during the period between the eighth to the eighteenth century. The Sudanese civilizations rose between West Africa and the Nile Valley as a unified chain, as a sequential loop of historic and geographic elements. For instance, the kingdoms of Ghana and Tuklore appeared in the period between 800–1230 AD, which is directly after the collapse of the Nubian, pagan and Christian kingdoms of Alodia and Macoria between 300–800 AD. This exemplifies the mutual influence between the kingdoms of the Sudanese Belt, and the role of migration and the cultural exchange this entailed, which allows us to speak of a common culture and assign the name of the Sudanese Belt to an area from the Red Sea of the Sudan in the East to the Atlantic Ocean in the West<sup>1</sup>.

In this paper, I looked at the Sudan as a salient example of the prominence of Sufi Islam, where burial sites of Sufi saints are among the most popular tourist attractions of the capital to this day. The influence of Sufism affects all aspects of life, including politics and sports. For instance, when I was a football player in the Sudan of the 1960s and 70s, my team had to obtain the blessing of a certain sheikh before any match considered to be of importance as a means of soliciting divine assistance to reach victory. Sometimes the visits resulted in the distribution of amulets to the entire team, which had to be affixed to the uniform of the players during the match.

In the course of this paper, I will seek to compare North Africa with the Sudanese Belt in an attempt to explain why the latter has been largely shielded

<sup>1</sup> Abdul Hādī Aṣ-Ṣiddīq. *The Sudanese Belt*. Abd Al-Kareem Marghany Cultural Center, 2005, p. 61.

from the influence of violent extremism and terrorism. The low number of Sudanese recruits among Dā'ish members is a testament to this argument despite the lack of meaningful efforts on the part of the Sudanese authorities to counter Dā'ish propaganda, which – in contrast, was extremely effective in North Africa. The deep rootedness of Sufi values in Sudanese society is also exemplified by the failure of the so-called “Civilization Project” of the Bashir regime aiming at instilling the values of the eponymous slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood into the population. During their thirty years in power starting from the military coup of 1989 the National Congress Party (NCP), which had close ties to the Sudanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood failed to transform the culture and traditions of their subjects and was toppled by a peaceful uprising in 2019. The youth brought up during the rule of the NCP was instrumental to its downfall, which is also confirmation to the prevalence of the Sufi tradition in the Sudan. I shall show in this paper how Sufi sheikhs are ingrained into the lives of the society accompanying its members through major events in their lives from beginning to end. When a baby is born, he or she is taken to the sheikh for a blessing. From an early age, he or she is sent to the Khalwa to memorize the Qur'ān and learn the basics of Islam. A blessing is also required for the beginning of school, graduation – even in the case of medical doctors and engineers. The sheikh is called upon again to perform the rites of marriage or death.

However, let us start at the very beginning and trace the advent of Islam in Africa.

## Conquest of Egypt

The siege and conquest of Alexandria in 641/642 AD ushered Islamic rule into Egypt under the leadership of 'Amr Ibn Al-'Āṣ. Invading Egypt was no easy task, and the caliph 'Umar Ibn Al-Khattāb was purportedly hesitant about the potential success of conquest due to the difficulty of securing sufficient manpower to 'Amr Ibn Al-'Āṣ' army. The Caliph was under significant pressure on several accounts, the first of which was due to his introducing the idea of taking Islamic rule into territories beyond the traditional habitat of Arab tribes. The second was the challenges faced in the Levant, which were yet to surrender to Muslim rule. Moreover, after the Levant's acquiescence to Muslims Umar was faced by other problems: the spread of famine all over the Arabian Peninsula<sup>2</sup> and an outbreak of the plague in Palestine, which extended to the Levant and Basra. This had the effect of turning Umar Ibn Al-Khattāb's mind away from the idea of further conquests due to the difficulties associated with procuring sufficient troops to execute them.

However, when the Islamic Caliphate had secured its survival and life had gone back to normal, 'Amr Ibn Al-'Āṣ took the opportunity of the Caliph's visit to the Levant in order to draw his attention to the conquest of Egypt. His main argument for conquest of Egypt was purportedly the Roman army's retreat from Palestine to the Nile valley where it should be defeated before it has a chance

<sup>2</sup> Mohamed Hussein Heikal. *Alfarouq Omer*. An-Nahda Almasriya Library, 1963, p. 64.

to regroup and fortify itself. ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattāb was convinced at the end of the trip, but he still asked for more time until he returned to Medina<sup>3</sup>.

After securing the consent of the Caliph in December 639 AD, ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ set off from Palestine towards Egypt with a force of 4 000 troops. Most of the soldiers belonged to the Arab tribe of ‘Akk, whose members lived in the villages of the Tihāma plain along the shores of the Red Sea. Some Roman and Persian converts to Islam also joined the Arab soldiers. However, the Caliph reconsidered his orders to ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ thinking it foolhardy to expect to conquer a country as large as Egypt with mere 4 000 soldiers. Consequently, he wrote a letter commanding ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ to turn back. The commander purportedly guessed the content of the letter and therefore delayed its receipt until the army had crossed the border of Egypt. After opening it, ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ went on to consult his companions as to the course of action to be adopted. The view was unanimous that, as they had received the letter on Egyptian soil, they had a permission to proceed”.<sup>4</sup>

When the Caliph ‘Umar Ibn Al-Khattāb received the reply, he decided to watch for further developments and concentrate fresh forces at Medina, which could be dispatched to Egypt as reinforcements”<sup>5</sup>. ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ continued on his way through Egyptian cities until he reached the city of Alexandria, which might have resisted its invaders for months or even years, especially if it was supplied from the sea, but this was not to be. The Byzantine Empire as a whole and its capital city of the province of Egypt in particular were torn apart by rivalry and infighting as narrated by John of Nikiu. The emperor Heraclius had died on 11 February 641 AD, two months before the surrender of Babylon. “He had ordained that imperial authority should be shared between his two sons, Constantine and Heraclius. It was never a workable scheme, and Constantine took effective charge. He summoned Cyrus back from exile and the military commander in Egypt to a conference, at which he agreed that he would send more troops to Egypt. Preparations for the expedition were already under way when, on 24 May, Constantine suddenly died. Power now passed to his younger half-brother Heraclius and his ambitious mother, Martina. The new government seems to have been determined to make peace with the Muslims and Cyrus was now sent back to Alexandria, not to strengthen the resistance, but to see what terms could be negotiated. The new rulers in Constantinople may have felt that they needed all their military resources to maintain their position in the capital. Cyrus may have hoped that he could re-establish the tribute arrangements he had put in place before 639 AD. After all, the Byzantines had often paid subsidies to barbarians to keep out of their territory before, and this small group of marauders might be prepared to accept terms”<sup>6</sup>. Cyrus left Rome quietly in October and went to negotiate with ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ in Al-Fuṣṭāṭ. Cyrus felt that he had no alternative, but to accept the *fait accompli*

<sup>3</sup> Mohamed Hussein Heikal. *Alfarouq Omer*. An-Nahda Almasriya Library, 1963, p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Kennedy. *The Great Arab Conquest*. Kindle version, 2008, p. 157.

and peace was finally agreed on 28 November 641 AD. The people of Alexandria were to pay tribute. The Roman army was to leave the city with its possessions and treasures and return to Constantinople by sea. There was to be an armistice for eleven months until September 642 AD. In the meantime, the Muslims would keep 150 soldiers and 50 civilians as hostages to ensure that the terms of the agreement were implemented”<sup>7</sup>. The last Byzantine troops under Theodore set sail for Cyprus on 17 September and the final act was played out when, at the end of the eleven-month truce, ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ formally entered the city without meeting any resistance on 29 September. A thousand years of Graeco-Roman rule were at an end. The story goes that ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ had intended to make Alexandria his capital, which would have been the natural move, but that he was prevented from doing so by the Caliph ‘Umar, who feared the Christian and Hellenic influence of the city. Instead, the governor and the army of conquest were established just north of the fortress of Babylon, on a site that became the nucleus of old Cairo. The Egyptian-Arab tradition claims that the decision was made by the Caliph ‘Umar, who, as in Kūfa and Basra, did not want the Muslim armies to be separated from Arabia by water”<sup>8</sup>. The settlement became known as Al-Fuṣṭāṭ, either from one of the numerous Arabic words for tent or as an attempt at transliterating the Greek word *fossaton* or ditch.

## Expansion into North Africa

Thus, ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ became the first Muslim governor of Egypt. Historical sources give him a good reputation, including of his competence as a military commander and a politician, but also of him being a just leader. In 645, AD ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ was dismissed by the new caliph ‘Uthmān Ibn ‘Affān, who was engaged in centralizing the government of the caliphate. Consequently, ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ was replaced with Abdullāh Bin Sa’d Bin Abī Sarḥ, who was less likely to have close ties with the conquering army and could be relied upon to send more revenue to Medina. However, ‘Amr was not finished yet. He played an important role as adviser to his distant cousin Mu’āwīya Bin Abī Ṣufyān, the first Umayyad Caliph, in the struggle for power that followed Uthmān’s death in 656 AD. In 658 Mu’āwīya appointed him to lead an army to take Egypt from the supporters of his rival ‘Alī”<sup>9</sup>.

In 642 AD, soon after ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ became the first governor of Egypt, he began to prepare for invasion of North Africa; it began with a raid on the western frontier “‘Amr was soon off again, leading his men west to Sabra (Sabratha). Here the local people, imagining that ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ was far away and preoccupied with the siege of Tripoli, had dropped their defences. The city was taken and plundered. Soon after this Leptis Magna (Labla) also fell into Arab hands. ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ then returned to Egypt, no doubt well pleased with the booty he and

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Kennedy. *The Great Arab Conquest*. Kindle version, 2008, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

his followers had amassed. It had been a great raid, but it was not a conquest. Only in Barqa did ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ leave any sort of presence by imposing taxes and appointing a governor, ‘Uqba Ibn Nāfi’, who was to become the hero of the Muslim conquest of North Africa and whose name, like that of Khālid Bin Al-Walīd in Iraq and Syria, was to go down in history and legend as an example of military leadership and derring-do.”<sup>10</sup>

The dismissal of ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ from the governorship of Egypt in 645 AD meant that there was a pause in Arab conquests. It did not last long, however. In 647 AD, the Caliph Uthmān Ibn ‘Affān sent a new army to Egypt to assist the African campaign. A list of the composition of the army suggests it numbered between 5 000 and 10 000 of mostly recruits, like the majority of the Arabs who had originally conquered Egypt from south Arabian tribes. They were commanded by the new governor of Egypt Abdullāh Bin Sa’d Bin Abī Sarḥ. The expedition moved fast along the North African coast into what is now southern Tunisia. Meanwhile, Gregory, the Exarch of Africa, commanded the Byzantine forces in the area who seemed to have decided to move from the traditional capital at Carthage and base himself at Sbeitla in southern Tunisia, probably so that he could meet up with Berber allies and oppose the invaders more effectively. The two armies met outside the city. The Byzantines were defeated and, according to Arabic sources, Gregory was killed in the battle, although according to Theophanous and other Christian sources, he escaped and was later rewarded by the emperor.

This was the only major military encounter between the Muslims and the Byzantine forces in North Africa. It is intriguing that Gregory made no attempt at using the Byzantine fortresses constructed in the area, but chose to encounter the enemy in an open field battle. After this defeat, what remained of the imperial army seems to have retreated to Carthage and left the Arabs and the Berbers to fight for control over the countryside, which due to the fierce resistance of the latter continued for up to around 709 AD.

## Subduing the elusive Nubian Kingdoms

Further events were shaped by changes in the government of the caliphate as much as by events on the campaign. In 680 AD the Caliph Mu’āwiya Bin Abī Ṣufyān died and his son and successor Yazīd I decided to reappoint ‘Uqba Ibn Nāfi’ to his old post”<sup>11</sup> who successfully continued the invasion campaign until he reached the Atlantic Ocean. It was a vast territory containing diverse landscapes, including the coastal and mountainous area and the great African Sahara in the background and mostly inhabited by Christians.

‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ sent ‘Uqba Ibn Nāfi’ as field commander ‘to invade the Nubian kingdoms in the southern frontier in the year 642 AD. He encountered great resistance, which was due to the Nubian kingdom having converted to Christianity in the period of emperor Justinian, soon to be followed by the Arab-Islamic

<sup>10</sup> Hugh Kennedy. *The Great Arab Conquest*. Kindle version, 2008, p. 207.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

conquest of Egypt when the Nubians were insulated from direct communication with the Christian world in the north of the Mediterranean Sea. The first Arab attempt to conquer Nubia failed, which gave the Nubian kingdoms independence for centuries after having reached a profitable agreement with the Caliph. The Nubian kingdoms had so much leverage with the Caliph; they could even use it to intervene for Egyptian Copts.”<sup>12</sup>

Penetrating the Nubian kingdoms was no easy task for the people of Hijaz and Yemen who were accustomed to fight with swords while the Nubians had perfected the art of archery to the extent that the Arabs called the Nubians ‘the eye archer’.<sup>13</sup>

Not much changed until ‘Amr Ibn Al-’Āṣ was replaced by Abdullāh Bin Sa’d Bin Abī Sarḥ as governor of Egypt. The southern border of Egypt continued to be a source of tension for the new rulers of the country, because the Nubians depended on it for food supplies and hence, continuously carried out attacks into its territory until Abdullāh Bin Sa’d Bin Abī Sarḥ launched a campaign against them in 651 AD and reached the capital of their kingdom. Consequently, the Nubians called for reconciliation, which he accepted. The terms among others were that every year the Nubians were to give 360 slaves to the Muslims, who shall return the favour with food supplies. This, according to Al-Maqrīzī, whose account was later widely quoted and became common knowledge through the medium of school textbooks in Sudan, was sufficient to keep peace alive between the two parties for another 600 years between 651 and 1323 AD. The agreement contained 13 items of mutual commitment in total to include:

- A promise to secure mutual armistice between the parties;
- Free passage through each other’s territories;
- Ensuring mutual safety when staying in each other’s territories;
- sending back any fugitive Muslim slaves and ensuring their safety in anticipation of their departure;
- maintaining mosques and ensuring freedom of worship for Muslims.

However, some scholars have since called into question the authenticity of Al-Maqrīzī’s account on this treaty, which was largely quoted by later historians.

The challenge lies in Al-Maqrīzī account being the only source, which historians have relied upon in their attempt to shed light on the outcome of the military campaign of Abdullāh Bin Sa’d Bin Abī Sarḥ. In accordance with his narrative Abdullāh Bin Sa’d Bin Abī Sarḥ invaded the Nubian kingdom, besieged their capital city Dongola by employing the catapult, an instrument of war they hadn’t encountered before. It hit their main church with stones compelling their king Kledworth to ask for peace and Abdullāh Bin Sa’d Bin Abī Sarḥ to comply, which resulted in the Bacte treaty that opened the door to Islam in the Sudan, and the Arabs, in the land of the Beja, and the kingdoms of Macoria and Alodia.

Professor Yusuf Faḍl, after listing seven different texts on the invasion of Nubian kingdoms in 652 AD arrives at Almaqrīzī’s account to conclude it was marred by

<sup>12</sup> Usāma, A. An-Nūr. “Kingdom of Kush-State”, *Nubi civilization.com*, Wordpress, October 31, 2014, Web. October 10, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Baladhūrī. *The Conquest of States*. Lebanon, Maktabat Al-Hilāl, 1987, p. 331.

doubts. For example, his mentioning of a mosque being built by Muslims shortly after the battle is not in harmony with accounts of other historians such as Ibn Sālīm Al-Aswānī who visited Dongola some 300 years later and never mentioned the presence of a mosque in the city. Professor Faḍl brought his readers' attention to the name of the treaty used by Al-Maqrīzī, i.e. 'Bacte' when early sources like Ibn Alḥakam, Al-Balādhurī Aṭ-Ṭabarī, Al- Mas'ūdī, Ibn Khadazba, Yāqut Al-Ḥamawī and Al-Maqrīzī himself mentioned 22 texts of this agreement with the name 'Truce and Reconciliation', while the term 'Bacte' was only mentioned in 5 texts.

Al-Balādhurī said about the battle: "one day they came out and stood in rows, facing us, we wanted to make it one attack with swords, we could not defeat them, they defeated us and many among us lost their eyes. 'Amr Ibn Al-'Āṣ refused to make peace with them, he continued to fight them until he was recalled and Abdullāh Bin Sa'd Bin Abī Sarḥ took his place."<sup>14</sup>

"Other contradictions were found between Al-Maqrīzī's account and that of other prominent historians such as Aṭ-Ṭabarī, Ibn Al-Athīr and Ibn Khaldūn. For instance, Al-Maqrīzī reports the Nubians were defeated in the battle concerned, while Al-Balādhurī stated the contrary or that the Muslims were unable to achieve victory so they decided to conclude a truce instead. Hence, there was no clear winner, nor a defeated party. Moreover, other early sources made no mention of Muslim armies even reaching the Dongola kingdom as reported by Al-Maqrīzī.

The popularity of Al-Maqrīzī's narrative, which has been widely quoted at face value disregards his account having gone through several stages of editing in response to fluctuations in the political landscape. For example, Al-Maqrīzī's account was found to have been revised by The Umayyad governor, Abdul Azīz Bin Marwān in 826 AD, as well as by the two Abbasid Caliphs, Mahdī and Mu'tasim<sup>15</sup>".

In spite of diverging opinions about the treaty concerned, it secured a stable relationship between the Nubians and the Muslim Arabs, the rulers of Egypt. It served as a vehicle for establishing vibrant trade, diplomatic and social relations between the parties. Moreover, some Arab nomadic tribes chose to immigrate into Sudanese lands looking for pastureland and opportunities for trade after being unable to adapt to the sedentary life style of the Egyptian countryside. In this manner, Arab Muslims already coexisted with Nubians even before Ibn Sarḥ's military campaign. This offers a potential alternative to Al-Maqrīzī's narrative on the motives behind the conclusion of the truce between the Muslims and Nubian Christians, in accordance to which the armistice agreement might have been an act of accommodation for pre-existing economic and social ties between the parties. In this light, the agreement was a balanced one serving the needs of both communities. The Nubians undertook to provide slaves while the Arabs guaranteed to satisfy

<sup>14</sup> Usāma, A. An-Nūr. "Kingdom of Kush-State", *Nubi civilization.com*, Wordpress, October 31 2014, Web. October 10, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



the Nubian's nutritional needs. It also provided free trade, safe passage through each other's territories, as well safeguarding the rights of individuals as well as their property and religious sites. Through this agreement, the parties committed to good neighbourly relations, non-interference in each other's internal affairs and clearly excluded the possibility of further invasion attempts, which one might argue, was quite a progressive agreement for the region in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD.

It was also instrumental to the Arabs spreading throughout Nubian lands, which extended from 651 to 1323 AD. Their quest for pastureland took them far away from central political power. Eight centuries passed from the first wave of Arabs entering Sudan and the establishment of the first Sudanese Islamic Sultanate of Sennar, where the Arab tribes shared power with the Nubians starting from 1504 AD.

### Islam in the Sudanese Belt

Our description so far has shown how the conquest of Egypt constituted the first step towards taking the whole of North Africa. The newly acquired territories were characterized by a diverse landscape consisting of three distinct territories. The first is the flat surfaced coastal strip extending from Egypt to Morocco, then comes the mountainous area behind it beginning with the lush mountains of Libya and ending with the bare Atlas Mountains of Morocco. Then comes the Sahara – the great African desert to the south, which fades into Bilād As- Sūdān or the Sudanese Belt. The name has been used to describe a region stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Red Sea in the east. Every one of the aforementioned parts has a distinct climate and is inhabited by different ethnic groups such as the Berber people in the north and the Tuareg in the Sahara and the Sūdān, as they were named by the Arab when referring to the black people living between the desert and the tropical part of Africa.

The Islamic conquest of those territories was achieved in a relatively short time between 641 and 708 AD storming through the coastal areas previously occupied by the Roman and Byzantine Empire. However, the deeper southern parts behind the coastal area were a very different story. Those were much more challenging to conquer due to the fierce resistance put up by the Berber people of the Maghreb and the Nubians in the Nile Valley. It took several centuries for Islam to reach the Sudanese Belt from the Maghreb down to West Africa and through Nubian lands approximately from 651 to 1323 AD.

The native people of these areas had well established trade relations. The Berber and the Tuareg exchanged salt with gold. "The dialogue between the desert and the forest began since the beginning of history. The trade of the salt of the north and the gold of the south began before the existence of a common language; it started without words in what is called the 'dumb trade'. It developed to include tools, fabrics, perfumes in return for ivory and ostrich feathers, which were the first steps in economic, industrial progress. As a result of this progress cities like Zanata, Sunhaja, and Odagst blossomed as trading centers."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Abdul Hādī Aṣ-Šiddīq. *The Sudanese Belt*. Abd Al-Kareem Marghany Cultural Center, 2005, p. 21.

Arab traders entered the stage of the Sudanese Belt after the conquest of Egypt and the Maghreb trade activities, which is arguably one of the ways in which Islam slowly and gradually, spread from north to south to western Africa from the Maghreb and from Egypt to the Nubian kingdoms. At the early stages, the traders played a principal role in introducing Islam to the African kingdoms, but from the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD onwards they were upstaged by different Sufi orders or *tariqas*. For example, growing trade activities along contact lines between Muslim territories and people indigenous to the area in the Sudanese part of the Sahara served as an impetus to the founding of the cities of Aoudaghost, Walata and Sigilmasa. Some traders lived with the African tribes and became part of their kings' retinue who sometimes converted to Islam because of such interactions. In this manner, the king of Mali Baramanda was purportedly nicknamed 'the Muslim' in 1050 AD. His kingdom had been suffering from drought and he sought help from a Muslim, who invited him to pray together for mercy to be brought over his people. It had begun to rain shortly after they did so, which is when the king converted to Islam<sup>17</sup>.

### The advent of Sufism in the Sudanese Belt

The vibrant trade along the so-called Sudanese road connecting the Nile valley to Kurdofan and Darfur with West Africa resulted in the founding of the Great African Empires such as InKanem – Brnu Empire, Bagrami and Ouaddai adjacent to the Nile Valley and the Kingdoms of Darfur, Tagali and Sinnar. With time this road branched out into Upper Egypt, which was the desert artery connecting Darfur and Kurdofan in modern day Sudan to Asyut and Aswan in Egypt, which was called "Darb Al-Arba'in" or the "Forty Day Path" and went on towards Lake Chad. Traces of the significance of these trade routes remain to this day, for instance one of the biggest roads in the capitals of Sudan and Chad bear the same name. The particular road is still in use by camel exporters from Sudan to Egypt. Trade routes were also carriers of the diverse cultures of peoples living throughout the Sudanese Belt. They were instrumental to spreading the Maliki Doctrine and the influence of Sufi orders between Upper Egypt and Central Sudan far into western Africa and the Maghreb. For example, they assisted the Tijani Order to spread throughout modern day Sudan to Upper Egypt and to Timbuktu and Sokoto down to the Lake Chad area, Darfur, Waddai and Brno in the west.<sup>18</sup>

With the increasing numbers of Africans converting to Islam between 651 and 1323 AD the number of intermarriages between the Muslim population and the people indigenous to the Sudanese Belt rose steadily, which led to a mingling of social customs. This phenomenon aided the spread of Sufi orders; because Sufi sheikhs moved throughout the area and lived with the people, they met on their way and taught the basics of the Islamic faith wherever they went. They also were

<sup>17</sup> Abdul Hādī Aṣ-Ṣiddīq. *The Sudanese Belt*. Abd Al-Kareem Marghany Cultural Center, 2005, p. 92.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

tolerant enough to engage in dialogue about the customs and traditions of those people, which in turn resulted in a questioning and revision process followed by adjustments to those traditions bringing them in line with Islamic principles. This is how unfettered polygamous practices of were replaced the more limited version of four wives provided for by Islamic law.

Most of the Sufis came to the western part of the Sudanese Belt from the Maghreb through Upper Egypt and onwards to central areas of modern-day Sudan, especially in the period of the Blue Sultanate or the Funj Sultanate in Sennar from 1504–1821. The Funj Sultans acted as sponsors of Islam encouraging the settlement of Muslim holy men in their domain. “With the establishment of the Sennar Sultanate, the flow of West Africans to the Sudan increased on their way to pilgrimage and back. Sennar became a source of Islamic culture. The number of students in the Sudanese Khalāwī (schools for memorizing Qur’ān) exceeded a thousand.”<sup>19</sup>

The Sufi orders also built direct contacts with the people by providing services such as schools, hospitals and religious institutes or Khalwas for memorizing the Qur’ān where they ensured subsistence for their students and their only job was to concentrate on their studies<sup>20</sup>. This is how various Sufi orders cemented their power in the region and had a strong impact on its population embodied in this description: “Sudan is a country of Sufism par excellence. Islam in Sudan is marked with a special dye of Sufism, even the everyday life is imprinted with this type of innate faith in the Righteous saints.”<sup>21</sup>

The scale of the spreading of Sufism in the region is evident in the map where most villages have been named after Sufi sheikhs, because of their growth around Khalwas. Typically, the sheikh would arrive in any place near a village and sit down under a tree where he would place his meagre belongings, such as a carpet and a pot for water. There he would begin reciting the Qur’ān and people would show their hospitality by bringing food to him, which would herald a long relationship with the sheikh who will gradually become an integral part of the community. The sheikh would be transformed into the community’s spiritual leader, advisor and someone whose blessing is sought after for every major event in the communal life, such as birth, marriage and death. This promotes the deep faith in the sheikh and his abilities. He becomes not only a teacher and a wise man, but also a judge in disputes, even a leader who can change difficult conditions into more favourable ones averting the effects of floods and droughts, which are a regular occurrence in the area. The sheikh is also the physician of the community who has the power to cure physical and psychological ailments. These strong links have survived into the modern age as illustrated by this anecdote told by a rural Sudanese judge who had to arbiter in a dispute between two persons about the ownership of a baby goat. When the defendant put his hand on a copy of the Qur’ān that belonged to

<sup>19</sup> Abdul Hādī Aṣ-Ṣiddīq. *The Sudanese Belt*. Abd Al-Kareem Marghany Cultural Center, 2005, p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> Sabāḥ Mūsa. “Essays”. *Midad.com*, Midad Websites, November 8, 2007, Web. September 10, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Ṣafā Alsāliḥ. “World News”. *BBC Arabic*, BBC, May 12, 2007, Web. September 20, 2019.

the court to vow to be truthful as accustomed, the plaintiff suddenly jumped up to interrupt him, demanding the judge to fetch another copy of the Qur'ān from the village. The plaintiff and his relatives mounted their donkeys and returned after a few hours with a hand written Qur'ān so hefty it had to be carried by three of them. They put the Qur'ān on the judge's desk with a bang and dust spread in the air. The court suddenly fell into complete silence in stark contrast to the constant rumble at rural courts. The Qur'ān was enormous and its pages were falling apart like crusty leaves. When the judge turned to the defendant instructing him to approach the Qur'ān to take his oath, he was surprised to see the man perspiring and struggling to move his lips, his mouth parched. When he managed to speak, his voice trembled to release a cry of panic asking the judge if he did not think it was too much trouble to solicit an oath for the sake of a baby goat.<sup>22</sup> One can argue this is testament to the community's belief in the righteousness of their saints more than religious doctrine embodied by the Qur'ān, because the fetched copy had been brought from the village Khalwa. This also signifies a level of fear from the sheikh, because god gives humans a chance to mend their ways until the judgement day, but the punishment of the Sheikh is immediate.

### **Sufism – a Vehicle for Political Power**

This deep-seated faith gives the sheikh immense power over his community, which can be of great political value and many political organizations and parties have been keen to employ to their desired political ends. Thus, some parties have been established on the foundations of Sufi orders such as the Democratic Unionist Party of Sudan and the Khātimiya order, but arguably, the most potent example to this is the Umma Party and the Anṣār order. To this day, they are followers of Muḥammad Aḥmad Bin 'Abdullāh who came to be known all over the Sudanese Belt as Al-Mahdī or the messianic redeemer of Muslim faith. His legend spread all over the Sudanese Belt at a time of great resentment against the oppressive policies of Turco-Egyptian rule of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sudan. A widespread feeling of helplessness at the time became fertile ground to ideas of struggle against injustice and inequality with the assistance of a higher power beyond the reality of the age.<sup>23</sup>

Muḥammad Aḥmad Bin 'Abdullāh was born in northern Sudan in 1844. He grew up in a humble artisan's family, whose trade was building boats. The family moved to settle in Karari, north of Omdurman when he was a child, but later moved several times in an attempt to find more favourable conditions for trade. This enriched his experience and expanded his horizons. He soon joined one of the Sufi orders and went on to study with different sheikhs gaining knowledge on the Qur'ān and Islamic sciences. He stayed with Seikh Muḥammad Sharief Nūr Ad-Dā'im, the head of the Samaniya order up to 1865 AD where he became his most beloved student due to his piety and adherence to ascetic life style. Following the Sheikh's death, he took his place in the leadership of the order and people

<sup>22</sup> Kamāl Al-Jizūlī. *The Government's Baby Goat*. Madārik, Khartoum, 2010, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> M. S. Algaddāl. *The History of Modern Sudan*. Alamal Co. Press, Khartoum, 1992, p. 114.

began pouring in to see him and seek his blessing. Eventually, this resulted in him becoming convinced of the idea of the Mahdi in 1881 AD and calling on Muslims to believe in him as the Mahdi who will bring eternal justice on earth. His followers became known as the Anṣār, and he soon called on them to wage jihad against the Turco-Egyptian authority. The response came not only from the Sudanese, but also from wide swathes of territory in western Africa. This was mainly due to the fatwa of Seikh ‘Usmān dan Fodio (founder of the Sokoto Caliphate in north Nigeria) who pronounced jihad to be the fifth pillar of Islam instead of pilgrimage to Mecca. He also declared whoever joins the Mahdi in Sudan will be considered a pilgrim to the house of god. West Africans responded to this call by going to Sudan and eventually settling there.<sup>24</sup> The Mahdi’s movement succeeded in establishing an independent state under the name of “Al-Mahdiyya”, which lasted from 1885 to 1898 AD, the capital of which became Omdurman in state of Khartoum. Successors of this movement are the Umma Party, which played a prominent role in regaining the Sudan’s independence from British rule in 1956, and continue to be one of the biggest political parties in the country today.

## Conclusion

As of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Middle East and Africa have been the birthplace of extremist organizations espousing a radical ideology, which encourages violence against whoever disagrees and branding them apostates. Organizations like Al-Qā’ida and Dā’ish performed numerous terrorist acts around the world, but especially in the Middle East. Other Salafi organizations like Boko Haram also gained recognition in international media disproportionate to their actual size. This had the effect of distracting public opinion from assigning these minority factions to their place reserved for a relatively small group of people, which inflicts great suffering on humanity, especially on the Muslim community. This discourse was behind the coinage of the term ‘Islamic Terrorism’, which casts a shadow of suspicion on any member of the Muslim community worldwide. This served as an impetus for the writing of this paper as a means of shedding light on other Muslim organizations, which arguably are much larger in scope and influence. At the same time, these organizations are peaceful in nature and characterized by an incomparable level of tolerance. In order to demonstrate the source of their deep influence on the societies of today, I traced the history of the advent of Islam to Africa and the way Sufism wove itself into the fabric of the societies of the Sudanese Belt where it continues to thrive among millions of Muslims.

In this journey through Islamic history, we also saw that the religion entered Africa through either conquest or trade. The former took place in a relatively short time in the coastal area ranging from Egypt to Morocco. As a result of the relative weakness of the Byzantine Empire at that time, trade became the vehicle for the gradual introduction of Islam into its territories below the Sahara Desert, and

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<sup>24</sup> Abdul Hādī Aṣ-Ṣiddīq. *The Sudanese Belt*. Abd Al-Kareem Marghany Cultural Center, 2005, p. 55.

the active role this assigned to Sufi orders until today. From the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Sufi Islam became the dominant force in the Sudanese Belt where millions of people continue to reside today.

For example, the opening of the largest mosque in West Africa belonging to the Mūrīdiya order with the capacity of 30 thousand worshippers drew impressive crowds in September 2019. There are equally numerous groups of people flocking to Tobi-Senegal's second largest city every year to visit the tomb of the founder of this Sufi order called Ahmed Bamba. Reports indicate that millions of citizens of the country take part in this event. Every year millions queue in front of Bamba's tomb, in memory of his exile to Gabon by the French authorities. The Senegalese of today mostly belong to four Sufi orders: the Tījāniya, Mūrīdiya, Qādiriya and Lainiya. Few Senegalese do not belong to a particular Sufi order, which, one might argue, is the reason behind the immunity of the society against extremist ideology<sup>25</sup>. In addition to indicating the unequivocal influence of Sufi Islam in the area, but it also speaks of its insusceptibility to post-colonial borders. Sufi festivals and important occasions have the power to attract people from countries throughout the Sudanese Belt.

The current paper argued that areas where Sufi Islam is present were shielded from extremist ideologies and the reverse is true for North Africa, where Islam arrived in a relatively short period of invasion. On some occasions, Sufi orders entered political life through direct involvement by establishing political parties, such as in the case of the Anṣār of Maḥdī and the Khātmiya order. This, in most part, propelled them into direct confrontation with representatives of a different branch of the Islamic movement in politics, namely the Islamists. Arguably, the strongest Islamist party in the Middle East and Africa of today is the Muslim Brotherhood. This was a consequence of the diverging values and practices of those branches. Where the Muslim Brotherhood is arguably seeking absolute political power through a rigid organizational structure, the Sufi orders have been integrating into the political life of the countries where they reside as exemplified by the Umma Party, which continues to be one of the multitude of political parties in the Sudan. The Bashir regime was well aware of the popularity of Sufi orders and sought to gain their approval, which remained elusive for the 30 years that NCP was in power. For the first time in the history of the Sudan, the Sufi orders took part in the protest demonstrations against the government, which started in December 2018 and consequently toppled the Bashir regime.

This opens a new page in the history of the Sudan and has the potential to serve as an example to the whole Sudanese Belt and beyond. It is an opportunity to renegotiate the social contract between different factions of the society and find an answer to the question of how politically engaged Sufi orders will wish to be when given the choice and how will this affect the future of Islamism in the area as embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood. I believe this is an opportunity to lay the foundation for a different Islamic narrative. One based on pluralism, tolerance and understanding, which has the potential to transform the environment

<sup>25</sup> Reporter, "World News", *BBC Arabic*, BBC, September 28, 2019, Web. September 30 2019.

of the entire Sudanese Belt in this direction. Consequently, this would gradually push the extreme, violent narrative of Dā'ish and their likes out of the realm of public concern and opinion. With time, I wonder, might this also have the potential to change the narrative about Islam towards Muslims being representatives of a tolerant, pluralistic religion?

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## Kopsavilkums

*Sākot no 20. gadsimta beigām, Tuvie Austrumi un Āfrika kļuva par daudz ekstrēmistu organizāciju izcelsmes vietu. Tās pasludināja savus oponentus par neticīgajiem un plaši lietoja vardarbību savu uzskatu izplatīšanai un baiļu sēšanai gan savā mītnes zemē, gan visā pasaulē. Tādas organizācijas kā "Al Kāida" un ISIL veica teroristiskus uzbrukumus visā pasaulē, bet īpaši Tuvajos Austrumos. To darīja arī citas relatīvi vietēja rakstura organizācijas, piemēram, Boko Haram, kas ar saviem uzbrukumiem ieguva plašu publicitāti, kas būtiski pārsniedza tās lielumu un nozīmību politiskajos un sociālajos procesos tās mītnes zemē. Rezultātā plaši izplatījās termins "Islāmiskais terorisms", kas meta aizdomu ēnu uz musulmaņu kopienu visā pasaulē, neraugoties uz to, ka musulmaņi vēl joprojām ir skaitliski lielākie cietēji šajos uzbrukumos.*

*Šie notikumi mani pamudināja meklēt un pētīt alternatīvu islāma diskursu. Tādu, kas ir pretrunā ar mediju izplatīto vardarbīgo naratīvu. Savos meklējumos es atgriezos islāma*

vēstures pirmsākumos Āfrikas kontinentā un sekoju šīs reliģijas izplatībai tik dažādajā ģeogrāfiskajā, kultūras, etniskajā un reliģiskajā vidē. Es atklāju, ka islāms Ziemeļāfrikā izplatījās strauji, ar varu un iekarojumiem, bet Sudānas joslas reģionā no Sarkanās jūras piekrastes mūsdienu Sudānā līdz Atlantijas okeānam rietumos mūsdienu Mauritānijā tas iegāja pakāpeniski, caur tirdzniecību un sūfītu šeihi ietekmi. Šajā darbā es salīdzinu islāma izplatību abos minētajos reģionos, lai rastu skaidrojumu relatīvi mazāko ekstrēmisma ideoloģiju izplatībai Sudānas joslas reģiona sabiedrībā, izmantojot Sudānu kā piemēru. Šis ceļojums laikā mani aiznes līdz mūsdienu Sudānai, kur dažu sūfītu grupu lēmums iesaistīties politiskajā dzīvē tās noveda līdz tiešai konfrontācijai ar citu islāma organizāciju atzaru jeb islāmīstiem, kuru lielākā un pazīstamākā pārstāve reģionā ir Musulmaņu brālība. Es izgaismoju abu atzaru ideoloģiskās un praktiskās atšķirības. Islāmīstu partijas ar laiku sāka tīkties pēc absolūtas varas; sūfītu grupas veiksmīgāk integrējās mītnes zemes politiskajā un sabiedriskajā dzīvē. Es cenšos parādīt, ka sūfītu grupu pieredze varētu būt pamatā islāma lomas pārformulēšanai musulmaņu sabiedrībā. Manuprāt, tā rada iespēju alternatīva islāma naratīva būvēšanai, kas būtu balstīts plurālismā un tolerancē ar potenciālu pilnībā pārveidot sociālpolitisko vidi visā Sudānas joslas reģionā, tādējādi pakāpeniski izstumjot ekstrēmo un vardarbīgo ISIL u. c. līdzīgu organizāciju naratīvu no sabiedriskās domas.

**Atslēgvārdi:** sūfisms, "Al Kāida", Dāiš, Boko Haram, Dienvidsudāna.