

How Tunisia's Sufis have withstood attack by hard-line Islamists

Salafism, a puritanical strand of Islam originating in Saudi Arabia, has sought to take over mosques and communities since the country's 2011 revolution.

by [Taylor Luck](#) in the [May 9, 2018](#) issue



A drummer at the Sidi Mahrez zawiya, or Sufi study center, for the Mouldia procession in Tunisia. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Cheima Fezzani](#).

(The Christian Science Monitor) “La ilaha ill-Allah, La ilaha ill-Allah,” the men, young and old, chant as they rock rhythmically, pressing wooden prayer beads through their hands.

“There is no God but God,” they repeat, every syllable rolling into the next without breath. Minutes go by, hours.

Such recitations, a pillar of Sufism, are reserved by some communities for special holidays. In Tunisia, they are part of a weekly or daily routine. Across the country, neighborhoods and towns are named after Sufi saints, and most Tunisian families can trace their lineage to a Sufi saint or holy person.

“We love God and we love our heritage,” said Mohammed, who gave only his first name, after completing a Sufi recitation at the Sidi Ibrahim Riahi shrine in Tunis. “For some of us this is all we have. No extremist can take this away from us.”

Yet the thousand-year-old tradition of mystic Sufi orders has been under pressure by a campaign from Salafist groups. Salafism, a puritanical strand of Islam originating in Saudi Arabia, rejects Sufis for their reverence of holy men and for their search for divine truth in life. Salafis see Sufis as an obstacle to spreading their hard-line interpretation of Islam.

In a bid for influence following Arab Spring revolutions, Gulf-backed Salafis and Salafi-inspired groups such as the self-described Islamic State systematically demolished Sufi shrines, kidnapped and assassinated Sufi clerics, and killed Sufi prayer-goers in Egypt, Syria, and Libya. In parts of the Arab world, Sufis have adopted a lower profile to escape attack.

Tunisia, the lone success story from the Arab Spring, became a battleground between Salafism and local Sufism. After toppling longtime dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia established a modern democratic constitution guaranteeing human rights and a level of personal freedoms and transparency far exceeding other states in the region.

Taking advantage of the weakened state right after the revolution, between 2011 and 2013, hard-line Salafis took control of most of the mosques in Tunisia. Salafist groups and supporters burned or desecrated 40 Sufi shrines and tombs. Islamists made inroads in marginalized communities by offering money to open small businesses, cover rent, or pay for weddings.

However, said Mohammed Riahi, a Sufi cleric and descendant of Sufi saint Ibrahim Riahi, “the Salafis underestimated how central Sufism and Sufi saints are to Tunisians’ identity.”

Out of Tunisia's population of 11.5 million, there are more than 300,000 members of various Sufi orders, according to scholars, who estimate that the vast majority of Tunisians identify with a Sufi order or saint without labeling themselves as Sufi.

"When these brazen attacks happened, Tunisians stood with Sufi orders and against extremism," Riahi said. "Tunisians will always stand up for their own."

Sufism flourished in Tunisia starting around the 11th century, a millennium before the modern state, as mystic clerics opened up *zawiyas*, centers to search for God's truth, and hosted regular *ziker*—recitations of Koranic verses, prayers, and the names of God and prophets.

These Sufi *zawiyas*, which taught Koranic memorization and Islamic jurisprudence, became epicenters of education in North Africa and helped Islam spread out across the continent. Today Tunisians of all backgrounds still file into Sufi shrines or *zawiyas*, making supplications as routinely as grabbing a morning coffee or getting on the bus for the morning commute.

"Before there was a Tunisian state, there was Sufism," said Mohammed Jayyoudi, a retired aeronautical engineer, as he leaves a morning recitation at Sidi Mahrez shrine. "We would give up our Tunisian nationality before we give up our traditions and religious practices."

Sufi holy persons also established schools, hospitals, and markets—building and fortifying towns across Tunisia, even using minarets and strategically placed shrines as a lookout for invaders. Sufi figures also became important leaders of popular and armed resistance movements against French, Italian, and British colonial occupation in the 19th and early 20th centuries across North Africa.

In Tunisia, the shrines to Sufi saints are both geographic landmarks and part of local folklore. Locals in the capital base their directions around the shrine of Sidi Mahrez—known locally as sultan of the medina, Tunis's old city. And Sidi Bou Said al-Baji, whose tomb on a seaside cliff top overlooks a town of the same name, is believed to protect Tunisia's coasts from invaders to this day.

Many Tunisians make annual and sometimes weekly visits to their holy Sufi ancestors' shrines. Even secular Tunisians are proud of their Sufi lineage.

“We are related to Shadhili, others to Ben Arous and so on,” said Oussama Marassi, a self-proclaimed Marxist, naming prominent Sufi saints. “Whether you pray or not, you will stand up for your ancestor.”

Another wedge between Tunisians and Salafism is the latter’s male-dominated theology, alien to Tunisians’ progressive attitudes toward women’s roles in the workplace and worship. Women run many Sufi shrines across Tunisia and pray there alongside men, a rarity at Islamic sites.

This more inclusive approach, combined with the country’s modernist secular path since the 1950s, leaves many Tunisians bewildered by Salafis’ restrictions.

“The Salafis tell us to stay in the home, clean, cook, and pray there,” said Noor, a university student who was at Sidi Riahi *zawiya*. “All people—men and women—have the right to ascertain truth, remember God, and express their love to God. That is true Sufism.”

While Islamic movements have become hyper-politicized in much of the Arab world, Tunisian Sufis have been largely absent from the political sphere.

“Sufism here unites, it doesn’t divide,” said Mazen Cherif, president of the Arab Maghreb Union for Sufism and a Tunisian Sufi thinker. “We don’t think of our way of worshiping and remembering God as Sufism or mysticism, it is just Islam.”

As fervent as Salafis may be in their beliefs, some know their path forward in Tunisia today cannot be forced.

Saber Trabelsi, an unemployed resident of a marginalized Tunis suburb, came under the influence of hard-line Salafists who came to his neighborhood mosque in 2012. He, and many young men like him, reject Sufi mysticism and deride the veneration of saints as polytheism and heresy.

“Sufi practices are outside Islam and Sunni doctrine,” Trabelsi said. “It is paganism.”

But rather than confronting Sufi adherents with threats, insults, or violence, like many Salafis have done in Libya and Egypt, Trabelsi instead tries to politely counter their arguments with scripture.

“My five brothers and sisters are all Sufis,” Trabelsi said. “All I can do is pray that they change their path.”

A version of this article, which was edited on April 23, appears in the print edition under the title "Tunisia's Sufi traditions are under attack by hard-line Islamists."