RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sufi Brotherhoods (Turuq) and Their Functional Transformations

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Abstract

This study focuses on the pivotal political role played by Sufi orders since their inception—a role most evident in their involvement in the founding of states, ensuring their continuity, and even contributing to their decline. This influence was particularly pronounced in the Central Maghreb, from the late Almohad period through the Ottoman era. Here, Sufi orders exerted their impact through religious authority, which served either to legitimize ruling powers or to incite rebellion against them, underscoring their role as dynamic forces shaping Islamic societies.

This paper will examine the manifestations and practices of Sufi thought in the Central Maghreb, with particular emphasis on analyzing how these spiritual networks converted symbolic capital into political influence and public governance.

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1. Introduction

If the political field during that era was embodied in the religious sphere, this field in the Central Maghreb transformed into the domain of Sufi orders (ṭuruq). This transformation was reinforced by the expanding popular base of Sufism and the deepening influence of its leaders in both urban and rural areas, driven by pressing political changes and developments.

The Sufi movement in the Central Maghreb emerged from a complex interplay of three major civilizational tributaries: the Islamic East (Mashriq), al-Andalus, and the Far Maghreb. This influence became particularly evident from the 6th century AH/12th century CE onward, significantly shaping the region's religious and spiritual landscape.**1**

These external influences coincided with distinctive endogenous factors within Maghrebi society, particularly patterns of popular religiosity and pre-Islamic spiritual practices deeply rooted in local culture. These included the veneration of sacred figures or "righteous saints" (al-walī al-ṣāliḥ), known in the Amazigh tradition as "ighurramen" or "aghuram" **2**- concepts that embodied a form of spiritual leadership or religious charisma combining symbolic power with social legitimacy. This symbolic accumulation helped cultivate the cultural soil for Sufism's spread and its transformation into a central element of the Central Maghreb's cultural structure.

Accordingly, our paper interrogates the significance of Sufi orders (ṭuruq) in political articulations during the Ottoman period."

2. The Early Features of Sufism: Origins and Practices

This spiritual orientation formed a foundational basis through which Sufism transitioned from theoretical principles to practical application, particularly under the influence of Imam Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's thought. Through his writings, al-Ghazālī established the framework for a balanced, Sunni practical Sufism. By the 7th century AH / 13th century CE, the contours of *ṭarīqa* Sufism (institutional Sufi orders) began to crystallize clearly, marked by the emergence of organized orders with distinct rules and structures. These differed significantly from philosophical or Illuminationist (*ishrāqī*) Sufism, which some historical sources regarded as an extremist current, as seen in the Sufism of al-Ḥallāj (d. 309 AH) and Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 261 AH).

From this period onward, *ṭarīqa* Sufism became recognized as an institutionalized religious practice, grounded in collective allegiance to a founding *shaykh* and adherence to a strict spiritual and pedagogical system. This system manifested in communal life within *ribāṭs* (Sufi lodges) and *zāwiyas* (Sufi retreats)3, as well as through structured *dhikr* (remembrance) circles and scholarly gatherings. As a result, Sufi orders evolved into highly organized structures, playing an active and far-reaching role in both religious and social spheres across the Islamic world.

2.1 The Emergence and Evolution of Sufi Orders in the Central Maghreb

Sufi Orders in the Middle Maghreb distinguished themselves by a clear particularity compared to their counterparts in the Mashriq and Al-Andalus. Unlike philosophical Sufism, which faced significant opposition under the Almoravid dynasty, this form of Sufism did not encounter the same level of rejection. This relative acceptance can be attributed to its moderate nature, its alignment with Sunni orthodoxy4, and its adherents' engagement in religious sciences, which facilitated its gradual integration into the official religious framework.

Thanks to its openness and moderation, this Sufism expanded its influence within society—especially as it evolved from traditional educational and spiritual roles to assuming political functions. Most notably, it led jihadist movements and directed resistance against Crusader invasions, particularly during the late Almohad and Zayyanid periods, when central authority was weakening and external threats were escalating.

Abu" Madyan Shuayb" stands out as one of the most prominent founders of Sufi orders in the Middle Maghreb. His arrival in" Béjaïa" and the establishment of a Sufi school there during the "Almohad" era marked a turning point in the region's Sufi history. His teachings were characterized by simplicity and an avoidance of philosophical excesses, earning him widespread popularity and attracting a large number of disciples. The *Madaniyya Order*, attributed to him, is regarded as the first organized institutional expression of Sufi orders in the Middle Maghreb.

The rapid spread of Abu Madyan's school alarmed the Almohad Sultan Abu Yaqub al-Mansur (r. 580–595 AH / 1184–1199 CE), whose jurists warned him, saying: *"We fear for your reign because of him, for he bears a resemblance to Imam al-Mahdi.5"* Consequently, Abu Madyan was summoned to Marrakesh after reports of this comparison reached the Sultan. However, he died in the region of *al-'Abbad* near Tlemcen before complying with the order.

Biographical and hagiographical sources mention that a great number of his disciples—estimated at a thousand followers—later became Sufi masters and leaders of various orders across the Islamic world. They played a pivotal role in expanding the reach of Sufi orders throughout the Islamic Maghreb, particularly in the Middle Maghreb. This shift marked the transition from Sufism as an individual, ascetic pursuit to an organized collective movement with educational, social, and political dimensions. As a result, Sufi orders solidified their position as influential institutional actors in the political and social history of the region.

2.2 he Spiritual Opinion Leader: A Study in Symbolism and Foundation"

The diverse roles undertaken by Sufi orders—educational, religious, social, and even militant—endowed the Sufi sheikh with broad symbolic authority. No longer viewed merely as a spiritual guide, he became a reference point for piety, wisdom, and moral rectitude, serving as an arbiter for both the elite and the common populace alike. This symbolic

influence granted Sufi sheikhs a prominent position within the structures of political and social power, particularly during periods of turmoil or the absence of centralized state authority.

A historical examination of the Sufi movement in the Middle Maghreb reveals that Sufism gradually evolved into one of the region's core religious, spiritual, and cultural foundations. It transcended its initial role as a path of individual devotion to become an active force in socio-political mobilization. This shift is epitomized by the disciples of Abu Madyan, many of whom emerged as influential figures in their communities—not only as Sufi masters and teachers but also as leaders of spiritual and political discourse. Among the most prominent were **Abd al-Salam ibn Mashish (d. 626 AH / 1228 CE)** and his own mentor, **Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili (593–656 AH / 1197–1258 CE)**, who advocated a form of Sufism distinct from elitist philosophical mysticism, emphasizing instead a return to a simplified religious life grounded in the Quran and Sunnah.6

Specialized historical studies note that, in the pre-Ottoman era, the Middle Maghreb was profoundly shaped by the **Shadhiliyya** and **Qadiriyya** orders,7 which became the two primary frameworks for Sufi religiosity in the region. These orders played a pivotal role in reorganizing the religious and social landscape according to the logic of institutionalized Sufism.

3. The Sufi Foundations of the Qadiriyya and Shadhiliyya Orders :the main concepts and contexts

3.1 The Qadiriyya Order in the Central Maghreb: Spread and Influence

The Qadiriyya is widely recognized as one of the most prominent Sufi orders that shaped the spiritual landscape of the Islamic world at large, and the Central Maghreb in particular. This order exerted a profound influence across various social strata, becoming the source of numerous subsequent Sufi movements. The introduction and dissemination of its principles in the Central Maghreb are primarily attributed to **Abu Madyan Shu'ayb**, regarded as the true founder of institutionalized Sufism in the region through his renowned school, whose disciples later propagated his teachings across vast areas of the Islamic world.

The order gained strong symbolic significance due to the stature of its founder, **Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani**, whose scholarly path uniquely combined deep jurisprudential knowledge (encompassing both the fundamentals and branches of religion) with spiritual discipline rooted in the Quran and Sunnah. This synthesis of jurisprudence and Sufism established a moderate doctrinal framework that garnered widespread acceptance among both scholars and common people. Sheikh al-Jilani further connected the spiritual foundations of his order to the methodology of **Abu al-Qasim al-Junayd al-Baghdadi (d. 297 AH)**, a leading figure of Sunni Sufism8, thereby instilling in his followers a disciplined Sufi vision aligned with the creed of the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*)9. This contributed significantly to the order's spread within the conservative milieu of the Central Maghreb.

A pivotal political factor in the Qadiriyya's expansion was the **Ottoman Empire's adoption** of the order and its patronage of its sheikhs and lodges (*zawiyas*), particularly in the Central Maghreb. This institutional support served as a crucial catalyst for the order's influence, enabling it to consolidate its social, religious, and often political presence.

The Qadiriyya is distinguished by a set of educational and ethical principles that form the core of its teachings, reflected both in its direct branches and derivative orders. These principles revolve around five central tenets: Lofty Aspiration (*'uluww al-himma*) -Respect for Sacred Boundaries (*hifz al-hurma*)- Excellence in Service (*husn al-khidma*)-Resolute Will (*nufudh al-'azima*)-Gratitude for Divine Blessings (*ta'zim al-ni'ma*).10

Rooted in the objectives of Sharia, these principles emphasize self-purification, moral excellence, virtuous conduct, gratitude, and righteous deeds in both private and public life.

2.3 The Shadhiliyya Order: Origins, Principles, and Expansion in the Central Maghreb

The Shadhiliyya order stands as one of the largest and most significant Sufi orders in the Islamic world, particularly in North Africa, where it played a pioneering role in shaping the region's spiritual and religious framework. This order traces its lineage to its founder, Sheikh Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili (593-656 AH), whose teachings brought about a qualitative transformation in Sufism by establishing a moderate, popular form of mysticism that balanced spiritual practice with strict adherence to Islamic law.

The Shadhiliyya order is grounded in the fundamental principles of Islamic Sufism, most notably:

- Sincere devotion to God alone
- Constant remembrance (dhikr) in all circumstances
- Spiritual wandering (siyaha) as symbolic of worldly detachment and soul purification, preparing the seeker (salik) for spiritual ascension

The Shadhilis further introduced the principle of spiritual retreat (khalwa), a profound inner experience that refines the soul and may lead to mystical revelation (kashf).11

The educational structure of the Shadhiliyya represents one of its most distinctive characteristics. The relationship between sheikh and disciple (murid) is built upon a spiritual covenant and ethical commitment, forming a constant axis in all Shadhili-derived orders despite variations in traditions and methodologies among different branches.

It is noteworthy that the principles of Sufi orders, including the Shadhiliyya, were not static or isolated from their temporal and social contexts. Rather, they circulated and intertwined among sheikhs and orders, being continually reformulated according to individual spiritual experiences. The Maghrebi orders, particularly in the Central Maghreb, benefited from this dynamic interaction, as Sufi practices drew nourishment from the shared intellectual and spiritual heritage prevalent in the region.

Although some subsequent Sufi orders claimed independent origins detached from any previous roots, the majority acknowledged their symbolic or pedagogical affiliation with the Shadhiliyya. This connection represents an element of continuity that ensured the preservation of institutionalized Sufism within an interactive sphere of influence, operating within a cohesive educational system based on a tripartite structure: the sheikh, the disciple (murid), and the covenant (ahd) - elements that embodied the depth of spiritual and ascetic life in the Maghrebi Sufi experience.

In Sufi tradition, **the sheikh** is considered the central nucleus of the order's hierarchical structure, occupying its summit as the spiritual leader and ultimate authority for disciples. His authority stems from qualifications that include religious knowledge, moral integrity, and his educational role in guiding seekers and helping them attain proximity to God.12

The sheikh's position in Sufi perception extends beyond these aspects to something deeper, being viewed as a medium through which divine power is manifested. According to this conception, he is instrumental in "life and death," "bringing rain," and "warding off calamities." 13This level of veneration places him third in the hierarchy of reverence in sufi ladder 14 after God Almighty and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), based on his designation as "God's saint" (wali Allah), "master of the age" (sahib al-zaman), or "lord of the hour" (mawla al-sa'a) - titles rich with symbolic meaning in Maghrebi Sufi culture. These titles indicate an extension of the sheikh's authority beyond the purely religious domain into temporal power, signifying an expansion of his roles and functions. In addition to his educational and instructional duties, the sheikh increasingly exercised political influence, reflecting a transformation in roles and responsibilities within both religious and social contexts, and highlighting the intersection between spiritual and authoritative dimensions.

Within the Sufi system15, the disciple **(murid)** is defined as the novice seeker who has not yet attained a fixed spiritual state, remaining in a phase of educational and behavioral formation under the sheikh's supervision until reaching a specific spiritual rank that enables him to fulfill a defined role within the order's structure. The murid represents an essential and vital component for achieving affiliation, expansion, and continuity of the order, constituting its human and operational framework.

The murid's importance is also evident as the means through which the order's teachings are disseminated and its promotional scope expanded, whether through attracting new followers or through mobilizational roles in jihad, frontier defense (ribat), or even competition for positions within political authority. Thus, the murid's function transcends individual spiritual dimensions to encompass more organized and theoretical aspects.

The relationship between sheikh and murid is based on the principle of "obedience," founded upon the "covenant" established between them. Sufis portray this obedience through exaggerated symbolic imagery, "comparing the murid's state to a corpse in the hands of its washer," conveying complete submission and total surrender to the sheikh's will. This obedience is incorporated into the educational context as a means of soul purification and refinement, training it in submission to God and cleansing it from impulses of pride and desire.

3.3 The Concept of "Covenant" (al-'Ahd) in Sufism

The "covenant" constitutes one of the fundamental pillars governing the relationship between the Sufi master (sheikh) and disciple (murid) within the mystical tradition. This symbolic and spiritual bond formalizes the hierarchical relationship of allegiance and obedience between the two parties[16]. The concept derives from the Islamic tradition of "bay'ah" (oath of allegiance) - a contractual agreement between a ruler or caliph and his subjects based on principles of listening and obedience, and the delegation of authority over individual and collective affairs. Within this framework, obedience became an established value in both political and religious systems.

Islamic literature indicates that the traditional bay'ah, sealed by handshake, closely resembled a commercial contract between buyer and seller - hence its etymological derivation. Historical precedents appear in Prophetic traditions, including the "Pledge of al-'Aqaba" and the "Pledge of Ridwan" under the tree, where companions pledged their loyalty and obedience to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Ibn Khaldun offers an analytical perspective on this concept's evolution, observing that by his era it had transformed into a symbolic ritual resembling royal homage in Eastern civilizations - manifested through practices like "hand-kissing," "kissing the ground," or "kissing the hem." This shift reflects the transition of bay'ah from its original[17] contractual meaning to a metaphorical ceremony denoting submission, replacing the original handshake that represented the practical aspect of the contract.

In Islamic historical practice, the bay'ah wasn't always directly between ruler and subjects. Typically, it was conducted by proxy through "ahl al-hall wal-'aqd" (the people of loosening and binding) - the elite representatives authorized to make decisions on behalf of the community. Sufism adapted this model to formulate the sheikh-murid relationship within a spiritual and educational context, transforming the covenant into a profound ethical and behavioral commitment. This transcends superficial obedience to encompass complete submission aimed at achieving spiritual purification (tazkiyah) and mystical elevation.

4- 4. The Sufi Practice from the Ribāṭ to the Zāwiya

The *zāwiya* underwent a gradual evolution encompassing its various functions until it reached a level where it became an institution of significant social and political importance in the Maghreb. This study seeks to trace this transformation and analyze its dimensions.

4.1 The Linguistic and Historical Roots of the Concept of *Ribāṭ* in the Central Maghreb

The term *"ribāṭ"* carries a rich semantic depth, with meanings that vary according to context. It can be classified into two main meanings: general and specific. This multiplicity is tied to the historical, social, and linguistic contexts in which the term was used.

Etymologically, *"ribāṭ"* is derived from the trilateral root (*r-b-ṭ*), which conveys the idea of binding or tying, as in the Quranic verse:

"And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of *ribāṭ* (steeds of war)..." (Q 8:60)**.**[18]

In its general sense, the term became associated with the idea of steadfastness and persistence in a matter[19]. Over time, it acquired a more specific meaning referring to *"guarding the frontier"* [20]—that is, residing in border areas for defense and vigilance.

This meaning was further reinforced by Quranic exegesis, such as the interpretation of the verse: "O you who have believed, persevere and endure and *rābiṭū* (remain steadfast)**..."** (Q 3:200)[21],where *"murābaṭa"* was interpreted as waiting for prayer after prayer[22], emphasizing devotion, worship, and spiritual discipline. This added a spiritual dimension alongside its military connotation.

Thus, understanding *"ribāṭ"* cannot be separated from the interpretive contexts surrounding it—whether by jurists who viewed it as *"self-restraint for jihad and guarding,"* or by Sufis who considered it *"a place of worship and spiritual commitment."* This highlights the diverse perspectives on the concept, balancing military and devotional dimensions in the Maghrebi Islamic context.[23]

The linguistic definition of *"ribāṭ"* clarifies its terminological and functional evolution, particularly when examining the historical contexts that shaped its meaning. Approaching this term requires recalling the various interpretations—whether by jurists or Sufis[24]—as well as understanding the hermeneutical dimensions it acquired in Quranic verses.

For jurists, *"ribāṭ"* was understood as *"restraining oneself in the path of God,"* manifesting in jihad or frontier defense, reflecting its military-defensive aspect. In Sufism, however, it took on a spiritual dimension, denoting *"a place dedicated to worship and devotion to God."* This explains the evolution of the *ribāṭ* into a spiritual-educational space where worship and Sufi practices were observed.

Thus, the concept of *ribāṭ* developed to encompass both military and spiritual meanings, depending on interpretive contexts and the positions of different religious schools. This makes it key to understanding the historical transition from the *ribāṭ* to the *zāwiya* as a religious and social institution.

Tracing the historical dimension of *ribāṭs* in the Maghreb—particularly the Central Maghreb—we find that their emergence was closely tied to waves of Islamic conquests, whether in the eastern Islamic world (e.g., the Levant and Egypt, where *"ribāṭs of al-Shām"* or *"thughūr al-Shām"* appeared)[25] or in the western Islamic world, where *ribāṭs* spread along the Maghrebi coasts.

Prominent examples in the western Islamic world include: *Ribāṭ al-Munastīr- Sousse- Sfax- Bizerte - Bône (Annaba)- Cherchell- Marsa al-Maghīla- Arzew- Nekor- Ribāṭ al-Fatḥ*[26]

These landmarks reflect the widespread presence and functional diversity of these institutions in both defense and spirituality. Some studies indicate that these *ribāṭs* reached their peak during the Aghlabid era (800–909 CE), [27]confirming their institutionalized role at the time.

It is worth noting that the concept of *ribāṭ* sometimes overlapped with other terms denoting similar structures in function or symbolism, such as: -*"Masjid" (mosque)- "Maqām al-Walī" (saint's shrine)- "Ḍarīḥ" (mausoleum)*[28]

These were all functional and spiritual extensions of the *ribāṭ* idea. Conversely, some *ribāṭs* bore explicitly military-defensive names, such as: *"Qaṣr" (fort)- "Thaghr" (frontier outpost)- "Maḥras" (guard post)- "Ḥiṣn" (fortress)*

This highlights the diverse dimensions shaping these structures and the evolution of their roles between religious, political, and military functions.

Historical circumstances played a decisive role in determining the names applied to the *ribāṭ* and *rābiṭa*, while preserving their dual role—military and religious—alongside deep spiritual and sacred connotations.[29]

The function of *ribāṭs* in the Maghreb underwent shifts due to sectarian conflicts between the Fatimids and Maliki jurists, leading to a decline in their military role and a shift of *"murābaṭa"* toward Sufism[30]. However, the rising Frankish threat revived the *ribāṭ's* role in jihad and worship, particularly during the Almoravid and Almohad eras. In this context, the *ribāṭ* is understood as a social phenomenon shaped by geographic, economic, and temporal factors.[31]

Thus, the emergence and evolution of the *ribāṭ* can be explained by both subjective and objective conditions, which were subject to change[32]

The coastal *ribāṭs* of the Central Maghreb were dual-function institutions, combining religious education and military preparation, structurally and functionally resembling *zāwiyas*. Their golden age came during the 13th and 14th centuries CE, as foreign threats intensified, turning them into both scholarly centers and defensive strongholds.

Authorities played a key role in supporting *zāwiyas* by allocating high-yield agricultural land to the *murābiṭūn* (those stationed in *ribāṭs*), earning the appreciation and attention of Sufis, as seen in their writings[33]. This support grew with the rise of *zāwiyas*, especially after the collapse of major Maghrebi states and the ascent of the Ottomans, who prioritized Sufi orders due to their role in organizing social and political life. This made *zāwiyas* indispensable partners in their expansionist project in the Central Maghreb.

2.4 The Zawiya: Origin and Function

Following the fall of the Almohad Empire, the Central Maghreb witnessed the decline of traditional *ribats* and the rise of *zawiyas* as central religious institutions for Sufis and *murabitun* (holy warriors), parallel to the *khanqahs* of the Mashriq[34]. This shift raises questions about the nature of the relationship between the two institutions: Was it a more organized evolution? Did it introduce new functions? Or was it merely a continuation of previous roles?

The word *"zawiya"* is derived from the Arabic root (*z-w-y*), which denotes seclusion and retreat.[35] Originally, it referred to a secluded corner in a mosque for worship.[36] As a religious institution, the *zawiya* first appeared in the Islamic East, with Salah ad-Din al-Ayyubi establishing the earliest known example in Egypt under the name *"Khanqah Sa'id al-Su'ada'37"*. The concept varies between a general definition—as a place for sheltering and feeding the needy[38]—and a more specific Maghrebi context, where it functioned as a religious school and a free guesthouse.[39]

Modern studies suggest that the traditional definition of the *ribat* lacks comprehensiveness and precision. This is supported by a text from **Dozy**, who described an individual as *"withdrawn from people, fleeing from them, then becoming ascetic and secluded, residing as a murabit on the seashore 40."* This description reflects a clear functional overlap between the *ribat* and the *zawiya* in terms of isolation, asceticism, and jihad. From this perspective, the *zawiya* can be seen as an institutional evolution of the *ribat*, especially as some *zawiyas* adopted explicit military roles—a function central to the *ribat*. Thus, the *zawiya* was no longer merely a spiritual and educational institution but also took on military responsibilities, reflecting a transformation in its functional structure and adaptation to changing historical and social contexts.[41]

The book *'Unwan al-Diraya* (written between 690–704 AH / 1291–1305 CE) [42]mentions that the **Zawiya of Abu Zakariyya al-Zawawi in Béjaïa** was the first *zawiya* in the Central Maghreb. The emergence of *zawiyas* was a response to the development of urban Sufism, which required a designated space, time, and a community of brethren[43]. With this shift, the *zawiya* became an influential religious, social, and political institution, playing a pivotal role in shaping public life in the Central Maghreb, particularly during the Ottoman era. Religious training at the time was closely tied to Sufi practice, highlighting the *zawiyas'* importance in religious and social organization[44].

By the early 9th century AH (15th century CE), despite political decline, scholars in the Central Maghreb showed increasing interest in Sufi studies. The absence of central authority expanded the roles of Sufi orders beyond educational and social functions into political influence. As Sufis entered the political arena—especially amid rising Christian attacks—the *murabitun* mobilized donations and called for jihad[45]. Various social groups turned to Sufi masters such as **Abd al-Rahman al-Tha'alibi** and **Muhammad al-Sanusi**.

Types of Zawiyas

Zawiyas varied greatly in their origins and development. While some expanded in influence, followers, and functions, others remained limited. Based on these differences, *zawiyas* can be classified into three main types:

1. **Simple Zawiyas**: Typically established through individual initiative, these focused primarily on religious and scholarly activities.

2. **Saint-Based Zawiyas**: Founded by individuals or groups, these zawiyas housed the tomb of a pious saint (*wali*) and quickly evolved into urban centers with significant influence, attracting followers and diverse activities.

3. **Tariqa-Based Zawiyas**: Often built by ruling authorities, these were linked to established Sufi orders and played a role in spreading their teachings.

Political and Social Transformation

From the 14th century onward, North African *zawiyas* underwent a fundamental functional shift, transitioning from purely religious and scholarly institutions to active socio-political entities. The emergence of **"official zawiyas"**—supported by the Hafsids, Zayyanids, and Marinids—aimed to secure popular legitimacy. These *zawiyas* became tools for propagating state ideologies[46]. The **Banu Abd al-Wad** dynasty exemplified this strategic integration by patronizing scholars and Sufis and constructing religious institutions. The **Zawiya of Sheikh Ibrahim al-Tazi in Oran866-H-1462** serves as a notable model of this trend[47].

Academic Debates on the Political Role of Zawiyas

Western scholars specializing in Sufi studies have debated[48] the political role of *zawiyas* through two main theses:

1. **The Integration Thesis**: Argues that *zawiyas* were a primary means of accessing political power.

2. **The Differentiation Thesis**: Suggests that *zawiyas* emerged due to a loss of public trust in existing authorities, leading people to seek alternative sources of material and spiritual security[49].

Both perspectives reinforce the transformation of *zawiyas* into socio-political institutions, alongside the strong presence of Sufi orders in various spheres of social activity.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals how Sufi thought, in both its methodological principles and institutional structures (turuq), has acquired distinct political characteristics in governing public affairs. This transformation has shifted its subject matter, methodology, and core debates from the realm of religious studies to the sociopolitical sphere. Accordingly, we adopted an interdisciplinary approach to examine key anthropological constructs such as the zawiya and ribat as political instruments within functional political systems for shaping public opinion. These operated through spiritual leadership tools, alternating between the covenant (ʿahd) and the master-disciple relationship (muridiyya), all serving to explain the structure of political influence through spiritual channels or what may be termed "spiritual diplomacy." This phenomenon has rendered the Central Maghreb an exceptional case in employing Sufism as spiritual governance for its security and identity preservation, a model that persists to this day.

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