

Egypt's Sufi *Al-Azmiyya*: An Alternative to Salafism?

Michael Barak

Political and religious figures in Egypt are trying to capitalize on the wave of terrorism that has struck Egypt since the Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed in September 2013. While the interim government and General 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi are eliminating the Muslim Brotherhood from Egypt's religious and political sphere, Egypt's Sufi *Al-Azmiyya* Order, led by the Sufi Sheikh Muhammad 'Alaa al-Din Abu al-Azayim, has been trying to position itself as a capable partner to the Egyptian regime's efforts to confront what security officials see as a rising tide of Islamic terrorism.

On November 2-4, 2013, Abu al-Azayim organized an international conference of Sufi sheikhs in Paris on the topic of "The Sufi Role in [Ensuring] Security and Stability in Society." Nineteen leaders of Egyptian Sufi orders attended the conference, as did several sheikhs and members of Sufi orders in Turkey, Europe, and North Africa. At the end of the conference, participants announced the establishment of "The World Federation of Sufi Orders" (*Al-Ittihad al-'Alami lil-Turuq al-Sufiyya*), led by Abu al-Azayim. It also announced the opening of its headquarters in Paris and several branches in various locations throughout the world, and declared that all Federation decisions would be made from the *Al-Azmiyya* Order's offices in Cairo.

According to Abu al-Azayim, the Federation was designed to unite 600 million Sufis from dozens of Sufi orders around the world. It was also created to serve as a model of moderate Islamic faith and the spirit of solidarity in order to prevent the spread of terrorism by Islamist organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi-jihadist organizations. Abu al-Azayim added that he was striving to have the French government recognize the Federation, and to put the



WORLD الاتحاد العالمي للطرق الصوفية
Federation of Sufi Orders

Federation on the road to observer status at the United Nations.¹ At the end of the conference, Abu al-Azayim sent a message to the Egyptian authorities and other Muslim countries explaining that their support for Sufi orders would guarantee their success in the fight against Islamic terrorism: “The Sufis have begun to emerge from their historical, forced self-isolation, and have decided to enter the political, social, economic, and philanthropic arena. [They have done so] in order to not give the extremists the opportunity to spread their poison among society.” One member of the Federation presented the tolerant Sufi faith as an alternative to the threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood, “which spreads like a cancer in cities and villages.”² These sharp attacks on the Muslim Brotherhood led to a failed assassination attempt of Sheikh Abu al-Azayim by several members of the Muslim Brotherhood.³

It may be fair to say that the Al-Azmiyya Order has a natural interest in combating the threat posed by the radicalization of Muslim thought and society. Yet a closer examination of Al-Azmiyya also reveals that beyond the spiritual and ideological aspect, Abu al-Azayim has a real ambition to maximize the order’s political power and enable the Sufi movement to assume a leading role in Egypt’s religious arena, especially in light of the September 2013 ban against the Muslim Brotherhood and the upcoming presidential elections in Egypt.

The Sufi movement is a central mystical movement in Islam known for its moderate and tolerant stream of thought towards the “other.” There are millions of Sufi Muslims around the world, and more than 12 million in Egypt alone. The Al-Azmiyya Order was formed in Cairo in 1893 around Sheikh Muhammad Madi Abu al-Azayim (1869-1937) and was officially established in 1934. Since its establishment it has acquired many followers in Egypt and Sudan, and even in the Western world. Sheikh Abu al-Azayim has served as head of the order since 1994 and, today, the order has approximately one million members in Egypt.

This is not the first time that Abu al-Azayim has made an effort to promote his order to a position of power and influence in Egypt and beyond. His ambition became even more pronounced during the 1990s when he developed a relationship with the former President of Libya, Mu‘ammar al-Qaddafi. In 1995, Abu al-Azayim was appointed the head of the World Sufi Council, an umbrella organization of several dozen Sufi orders from around the world, which was established in Tripoli, Libya, and received funding and sponsorship from Qaddafi. This organization had also been designed to combat the religious

¹ *Al-Ahram*, November 4, 2013; *Al-Islam Watan*, No. 330, December 2013, pp. 4-7; For the website of the Federation, see: <http://www.wfsufi.com>.

² *Al-Ahram*, November 3, 2013.

³ *Al-Fajr*, February 13, 2014.

extremism in Muslim society, but it collapsed with the fall of Qaddafi's regime in 2011.

Abu al-Azayim made another attempt to promote his agenda in 2010 when he sought the leadership of the Supreme Sufi Council in Egypt, a type of umbrella organization designed to oversee the activities of the Sufi orders in Egypt and regulate their relations with the Egyptian government.⁴ However, he lost the coveted appointment to Dr. 'Abd al-Hadi al-Qasaby, head of the Al-Qasabiyya Order, with whom Mubarak had a close relationship. As a result of this appointment, the relationship between al-Azayim and al-Qasaby deteriorated and the two became sworn enemies. In response, al-Azayim established his own Sufi umbrella organization, composed of several Sufi sheikhs, and called on the Sufi Reform Front to resist the political authorities' involvement in Sufi affairs. During the revolution on January 25, 2011, Abu al-Azayim expressed his fury at Mubarak by taking part in the uprising against him.⁵

In September 2011, Abu al-Azayim founded a political party called *Hizb al-Tahrir al-Masri*, which was designed to guarantee Sufi representation in the Egyptian Parliament, especially in response to Salafist parties such as the Al-Nur Party, whose underlying political ideology is anti-Sufi. The strengthening of the Salafist political movement in Egypt led Abu al-Azayim to deepen his ties to Iran. He hoped this maneuver would help him combat anti-Sufi, anti-Shi'i Salafist propaganda. On November 10, 2011, Abu al-Azayim visited Iran along with 11 heads of Egyptian Sufi orders, and requested Iranian financial assistance in order to establish a Sufi satellite channel that would counterbalance the propaganda that was being broadcast on Wahhabi and Salafist channels, and would serve as an advocacy tool to work towards bridging the divide between Shi'i and Sunni groups.⁶

Abu al-Azayim's enemies, especially al-Qasabi, frequently criticized Azayim's ties to Iran and claimed that Azayim was being used as a tool by Iran to "Shi'itize" the Sunni population of Egypt.⁷ In the aftermath of the meteoric rise of Sisi's popularity among the Egyptian public, Abu al-Azayim changed his approach, emphasizing that he has serious disagreements with Iran as a result of Iran's support for the Muslim Brotherhood. This change can be understood, at least on a declarative level, as an attempt to maintain good relations with the Egyptian government and thus preserve the influence and standing of the Al-Azmiyya Order.

⁴ The Supreme Sufi Council was first established in 1895. In 1976, the Egyptian Parliament enacted a law, which is still valid today, designed to regulate relations between the Supreme Sufi Council and Sufi orders, and the Egyptian government.

⁵ *Veto*, December 31, 2013.

⁶ *Ruz Al-Yosef*, November 20, 2011.

⁷ *Al-Watan*, February 4, 2014.

The establishment of the World Federation of Sufi Orders is essentially another effort to promote the Al-Azmiyya Order as a leading force in Egyptian society and in the Sufi world. It also represents a challenge to the political power of the Supreme Sufi Council in Egypt and Al-Azmiyya rival, the Al-Qasabiyya Order. The Federation's Secretary-General was quick to point out that while the Supreme Sufi Council's purview was limited to only Sufis in Egypt, the Federation had won the support of millions of Sufis around the world.⁸ In February 2014, Abu al-Azayim announced his intention to compete for the position of leader of the Supreme Sufi Council in Egypt for the second time in light of al-Qasabi's failure to achieve significant headway in advancing the Sufi movement in Egypt during the last five years.⁹



In the photo, an expression of support by Abu al-Azayim and members of his order for Sisi's moves against the Muslim Brotherhood. The banner reads: "Sufis: Together we will build Egypt. Without violence and without terror."

In conclusion, it is clear that Abu al-Azayim is determined to transform his order into a leading political and social force in Egypt. By preaching a moderate and tolerant version of Islam, he hopes to position his order as a trustworthy ally of the Egyptian government with a common agenda – the fight against terrorism and religious extremism.¹⁰ Since the removal of President Mohammed Morsi's removal from power in July 2013, Abu al-Azayim has emphasized his full support for General Sisi's actions, praised the exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood, and called on the public to support Sisi's presidency. In January 2014, he even held a series of meetings with several influential families in Egypt in order to garner their support for Sisi's presidency. With these measures, Abu al-Azayim hopes that Sisi will show his gratitude by allowing the Sufis, and especially the Al-Azmiyya Order, to play a leading role in shaping religious, political, and social life in Egypt.

Michael Barak is a Junior Researcher at the [Moshe Dayan Center](#) ("MDC") and a doctoral candidate at [Tel Aviv University's Graduate School of History](#) in Middle Eastern and African Studies.

⁸ *Veto*, December 18, 2013.

⁹ *Al-Watan*, February 8, 2014.

¹⁰ *Al-Bawabh*, January 18, 2014, <http://www.albawabhnews.com/322525>.

The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on approximately the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

To republish an article in its entirety or as a derivative work, you must attribute it to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website, <http://www.dayan.org>.

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at
<http://www.dayan.org/tel-aviv-notes>.

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il, with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."